

Health Promotion Practitioner

Practical solutions for health enhancement programming

Think Big for Big Results

Cutting down on fast food, taking the stairs, having fewer sodas... for years this has been the health promoter's mantra: little changes add up. But is it really easier to make little changes? And, alone, do they really work?

It's true that moderate increases in activity spread out over the day have a positive impact on health. The media and national health experts play off this fact, encouraging Americans to do housework with vigor and watch the benefits pile up. Dr. Phil and other quasi-expert celebrities continue to suggest we park our cars a bit farther from the entrance (can't we come up with another idea?) to get healthy.

If prompting people to do these little things actually resulted in more action, we would be all for it, but the fact is it doesn't. Thinking a little change is all that's needed probably further deludes people, so they believe getting up to change the channel rather than using the remote means they're getting their exercise for the day.

How many of your clients have lost weight, stuck to an exercise program, quit smoking, or reduced stress through only little changes? Most people who change successfully have made big changes — they started walking for 30 minutes *every* night after dinner, *stopped* snacking while watching TV, made *substantial* differences at home or work to alleviate stress, threw out all their junk food so they could start eating right, or *swore off* fast-food drive-thrus.

In reality, it's the people who make big, substantial

changes in habits who also end up doing the little things. Success at big changes perpetuates and sustains smaller changes to maintain health improvements.

Debunking the Myth for Good

It's a myth that little changes are easier than big changes. Why? Because small changes are too close to old habits. The well-meaning though misguided belief that if you have to "give up just a little" you won't feel deprived is especially destructive; you're still giving up something significant psychologically, but not gaining much for your trouble. With big changes, you're also giving up something, but you're much more likely to see the fruits of your labor — which reinforces your commitment to keep going. Success reinforces positive behavior.

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So although small changes may seem easier at first, they're actually more difficult to maintain in the long run, and don't achieve lasting results.

For better health habits to be long lasting, they need to be big. For people to feel they're actually accomplishing something, they need to take a big step outside their comfort zone, not just slip a toe over the line. In fact, encouraging people just to make little changes may actually set them up for failure.

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Being Direct

In addition to the authority we assign to doctors, their lifestyle advice often carries more weight than a health educator's because they're direct: "You need to quit drinking... start exercising... lose weight." Contrast that with the typical wellness approach: "Limit alcoholic beverages to 2 a day... walk around the block at lunch... cut down on the fat and watch your portion sizes."

If you really want to serve your clients, don't shy away from big change recommendations. And don't try to convince them that little changes alone will produce big results; they won't. By getting them to *think* big you give them a chance to *accomplish* something big and feel good about themselves... a chance to look in the mirror, say "I did it!" and have that mean something to them. 🏆



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