

Health Promotion Practitioner

Practical solutions for health enhancement programming

Whatever Happened to Discretion? And why it's more important than ever

I often retreat to the public library to focus on writing. The promise of quiet, uninterrupted time helps me get in a zone. But occasionally, a 20-something salesperson finds their way among the stacks and proceeds to make calls to the office and clients. Excuse me, did I set up my laptop in your office??? I feel a twinge of guilt over tapping on the keyboard and do my best to keep the noise down. But this joker has no problem sharing a business conversation with anyone in earshot, even interrupting the call he's on because "I got a call coming in..." Dude, step outside!

People used to make some effort to keep their personal business personal. Now they go on game shows, reality TV, and YouTube to reveal their most embarrassing, and in some cases scandalous, intimate moments.

Blame It on Paris Hilton

I'm fully aware that I sound like my grandmother when I say things aren't as they used to be. People used to make some effort to keep their personal business personal. Now they go on game shows, reality TV, and YouTube to reveal their most embarrassing, and

in some cases scandalous, intimate moments. As soon as the back wheels of the plane touch down, people flip on their phones: "Hey, what's up? We just landed," then launch into a conversation while everyone within 4 rows listens in (unless, of course, they're having their own non-private conversation).

What It Means for Health Promoters

The unending sludge of private details on celebrities and those seeking their 15 minutes of fame streams at us from all directions — making us numb to it. It's almost as if the new normal is abnormal. In contrast, wellness professionals should have a heightened sense of discretion for 2 reasons:

- *Some people are still mortified.* While voyeurism seems to be the new national pastime, many people are extremely uncomfortable knowing other people's business — let alone sharing intimate details about themselves. The more personal the information, the greater the anxiety and the more challenging the task of actually helping people change behavior to improve health.

- *Lack of discretion can mask deeper problems.* While it's helpful to have clients open up to their health coach, personal trainer, or dietitian, there's also a point where you're out of your element and more advanced professional help is needed.

Continued

Be especially attentive to accompanying emotions that may indicate when a problem exceeds your training.

What to Do

•*Model discretionary behavior.* Dress and act professionally. If in doubt about the limits, err on the conservative side. Save the fashion statement for Saturday night and the intimate conversations for family or close friends. That doesn't mean you have to wear black every day or check your sense of humor at the door. But it does show you've considered what's appropriate and made a conscious decision to act in a manner consistent with your setting, while bolstering credibility.

•*Maintain confidentiality.* It should go without saying, but unfortunately, casual conversations about clients are often aired in meeting rooms and hallways. And while the details may not be particularly revealing, even

mentioning a third party can make a passerby wonder "what do they say about me?" Any discussion about a client should be limited to those who need to know.

•*Request permission.* People usually are willing to tell you anything — without considering the information's potential sensitivity. By seeking permission to ask about their sleep habits, for example, you give them a moment to think over the implications of their response. Interestingly, this approach generally produces a more comprehensive, thoughtful answer which can help guide your recommendations. It also conveys your respect — engendering trust and increasing your chances for long-term success.

Health is personal. And no matter what's going on in the realm of pop culture, wellness professionals will garner greater respect, and ultimately achieve better results, by maintaining professional and personal decorum. 📺



Dean Witherspoon is President of Health Enhancement Systems, a leader in behavior change innovation serving organizations in North America and throughout the world. With 20+ years experience, Dean has served on the Board of the Association for Worksite Health Promotion, spoken at more than 70 conferences, and published hundreds of articles. Before founding Health Enhancement Systems he held health promotion management positions with Kimberly-Clark Corporation, Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas, and The Dow Chemical Company. You can reach Dean at deanw@hesonline.com.