



BUSINESS



New Layer of Care

Consider integrating health and wellness coaching into your practice to improve patient compliance and outcomes

By Linda Gogl, PT, DPT

Health care providers now practice in a rapidly changing landscape. To remain successful and profitable as a business and practitioner in America as the ground shifts beneath our feet, we are forced to navigate through uncharted waters manning the helm as best we can and attempting to “stay steady as she goes.”

Payer reforms have changed and continue to change how health care is delivered and reimbursed—rewarding organizations that can deliver better patient-level results while often treating a greater volume. Much of this has been driven by the climbing cost of health care and has prompted a new model of delivering care with a focus on timely results. Health care providers are now held accountable for practice outcomes and will be reimbursed according to efficiency and skills in producing those outcomes.¹

Evidence is abundant in the area of medical noncompliance and its effects on patient outcomes. The cost of medical noncompliance or nonadherence is in the

billions annually.^{2,5} This can be as simple as not filling a prescription,³ not following a home exercise program instruction, or, to a greater extreme, a lifestyle of high-risk health behaviors leading to a multitude of co-morbidities. Successful patient outcomes are correlated with education, experience, and skill of the provider. It is also well known that even with the highest level of skill and expertise, outcomes are at risk due to patient noncompliance.⁴

Research strongly suggests that medical noncompliance is 80% behavioral.^{3,4} A new and evolving practice model includes integrating the behavioral mechanism into achieving health care interventions and goals.^{6,7} This is strongly supported by the research within the behavioral science and lifestyle medicine field, as well as within the Affordable Care Act.⁸ Health and wellness coaching is noted within the Affordable Care Act (ACA), as well as the National Prevention Strategy (NPS), as a component not only in prevention and wellness but also in rehabilitation and management of chronic illness and lifestyle diseases.⁹

The ACA and NPS also recommends cross-training health care providers with the skills of professional health and wellness coaching to reduce noncompliance and health care costs.⁶ The World Health Organization emphasizes the need for “empowering health professionals” with an “adherence counseling toolkit” adaptable to different socioeconomic settings. Such training needs to simultaneously address three topics: knowledge (information on adherence), thinking (the clinical decision-making process), and action (behavioral tools for health professionals).²

ABOUT *the Business of PT Series*

This Series takes PPS’s best business content and highlights relevant points for all types of business-minded physical therapists from brick-and-mortar private practice owners to solo and hybrid practitioners, non-clinical PTs to next-generation PTs. Find your customized considerations on the last page.

The orthodox medical model in health care today is to “prescribe and treat” or “educate and implore.” The prevailing mindset is to provide an assessment of a patient’s health or wellness and then “tell them what to do.” As treatment-oriented professionals, we cultivated a model of belief that knowledge was the golden answer and that providing our patients with the education they were lacking would motivate them into action. It was thought this would then induce them to pursue wellness and to make any lifestyle changes required for a healthy life or to comply with a prescribed treatment program.^{6,7} As physical therapists, we are acutely aware of the astonishing lack of compliance for wellness and rehabilitation. This is evidenced by the volume of research

highlighting poor compliance in following a simple home exercise program, as well as completion of an episode of care. For many patients this has not been an effective model.¹⁰

Successful outcomes are a combination of skilled treatment and behavioral management.

Numerous peer-reviewed studies demonstrate that practitioners proficient in their respective health care field, as well as in validated health coaching approaches—routinely deliver significantly better patient-level results than practitioners who are not.^{11,13,15,16,18,20-23} While physical therapy-specific skills are of primary importance to the physical therapy profession research now recognizes that successful outcomes are a combination of skilled treatment and behavioral management.

Health care is evolving to an integrated model out of necessity. Current professional trends have noted the transition of health care providers, including physical therapy, into prevention and wellness with primary focuses in the areas of obesity, metabolic syndrome, diabetes, heart disease, degenerative diseases, which are strongly correlated with high behavioral components and lifestyle. Lifestyle Medicine suggests that expertise in a field of health care specialty combined with training and competency in the coaching skills for behavioral change not only sharpens the practitioner’s tools but bridges the gap between “prescribe and treat” and patient outcomes.²⁴⁻²⁶

Health and wellness coaches assist patients in achieving successful lifestyle changes and thereby improvements in patient compliance and outcomes. Coaches utilize a systematic process, based on behavioral change psychology, human motivation, health promotion, and professional coaching competencies. Coaching skills motivate

patients to make the behavioral changes needed to support compliance, improve outcomes, and live healthier lives.¹²

Currently, Health and wellness coaches are being incorporated into clinics, medical networks, hospitals, disease management companies, employee assistance programs, wellness programs, fitness centers, insurance companies, and within private companies and organizations. Health and wellness coaching in wellness programs is now considered best practice.^{14,17}

Practicing coaches range from independent health and wellness coaches to those who “wear two hats” of health care practitioner and coach. In addition, many universities are including health and wellness certification programs within their health care curriculum.

As health care professionals we now face the twofold challenge of promoting prevention and wellness while also being part of the treatment solution. The people we serve span the entire continuum from those with severe health challenges to all who aspire for peak performance. As we zero in on the behavioral nature of health, it allows us an opportunity to serve our patients better. As health care professionals we are uniquely qualified to be the bridge between the orthodox medical model and the behavioral change approach that promotes improved patient compliance and outcomes. As the ACA’s vision moves the nation’s model of care from “sick care” to “well care,” the physical therapy profession can be a strong player and greatly benefit by incorporating many opportunities available within the new integrated approach that is now becoming the new model of care.

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Things to Consider

Traditional PT Clinic Owners

- Even with the highest level of provider skill and expertise, outcomes are at risk due to patient noncompliance. Health and wellness coaching can help patients have a more successful rehabilitation.
- Research now recognizes that successful outcomes are a combination of skilled treatment and behavioral management, supporting the case for incorporating health and wellness coaching into your private practice.
- Where can you incorporate patient wellness education into your practice? Identify points at which you can engage patients in wellness coaching and education that might improve their outcomes.

Solo/Hybrid PT Practitioners

- Use wellness coaching to keep clients on the schedule and to keep them healthy beyond the rehab phase.
- How can you ensure that patients understand the importance of adherence? Psychological motivation questionnaires may be effective to help you sell exactly what a person's individual goals are. They may not be motivated to resolve their knee pain and lose weight but if we can get them to play baseball with their kids again, they'll come back for treatment.
- A strong health and wellness coaching practice has the potential for partnership with other companies and organizations. Build your health and wellness coaching practice with an eye on future potential partnerships.

Next-Gen PTs

- A key challenge for PTs is a lack of compliance to wellness and rehabilitation. Patient outcomes are affected by the PTs skill and knowledge: practitioners proficient in their field and validated health coaching approaches routinely deliver significantly better patient-level results than practitioners who are not.
- Today's PTs serve dual roles as both treatment providers and promoters of prevention and wellness. Connecting with patients to modify behaviors that are detrimental to their health is a key component of effective care.
- Understanding that health and wellness coaching tends to focus on obesity, metabolic syndrome, diabetes, heart disease, and degenerative diseases, consider whether any of these focus areas are of interest to you and start building your knowledge base now.

Non-Clinical PTs

- PT private practices that incorporate health and wellness coaching may be seen as doing more to promote prevention and wellness.
- Diversifying a PT private practice to include health and wellness coaching introduces a synergistic business that aligns with the services already being provided.
- Get started with health and wellness coaching by identifying areas for patient education where the practice can address or help improve patient adherence to the rehabilitation program.

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