

What is a health coach?

Now that you have signed on to become a health coach at Nutrition Factors, you should be very excited about the important role you will be playing to help your clients achieve success in their weight loss and wellness goals. However, a lot of confusion surrounds what exactly a health coach is supposed to do. The intent of this article is to clarify that.

Your clients will probably look up to you as a mentor, but you need to be more than that. Your efforts can only succeed if your clients also recognize the need to change and are willing to set reasonable goals and then make a commitment to do what it takes to attain them. In order to facilitate these behavior changes, establishing good rapport is essential. You need to be attentive to each client's individual needs, strengths, and vulnerabilities, and tailor your approach accordingly.

Also, just as important as knowing what you can and should be doing as a health coach is knowing what functions you might like to perform but need to let other qualified professionals handle because they are outside your scope of practice. Much like a heart surgeon would not be called upon to perform a liver biopsy, there are certain things that a health coach is not qualified to do.

A collaborative effort between the health coach and the client is essential

Here at Nutrition Factors before any health coach starts working with a given client, we require a signed agreement between the two parties regarding their respective roles and responsibilities. The agreement is to be based on a mutual understanding as to why the health coach is being brought in to help and what kinds of services the health coach will be performing to facilitate the client's progress in achieving and maintaining a healthier weight and lifestyle.

Use your own good communication skills as the catalyst to empower your clients

The American Council on Exercise, which offers a health coach certification program, emphasizes these three ways well trained health coaches can make a difference. <https://www.acefitness.org/education-and-resources/professional/expert-articles/5400/the-role-of-a-health-coach-and-behavior-change-specialist>

The ACE approach, which we endorse, is not about prescribing a set regimen for weight loss or giving clients an explicit set of instructions. It is about helping clients become more proactive in developing healthy eating habits and lifestyle changes.

- Use effective communication skills like asking open-ended questions and listening to and summarizing what the client is saying.
- Rather than tell your clients what they need to do differently, ask them what types of changes they want to make. Then encourage them to develop achievable and measurable goals with which they can monitor their progress along the way and be motivated to continue.

- Encourage clients to recognize and use their own strengths to facilitate successful behavior changes.

Other Things the Health Coach Can and Should Do

Here, more specifically, are five different ways you as a health coach can contribute to your clients' success.

1. Use a client-centered approach.

Make a conscious effort to **be client-centered** both in your language and methodology. Your job is to help your clients establish and implement appropriate wellness goals themselves, not to do it for them. Keeping that in mind will help you avoid possible service focused issues.

2. Give your clients the information they need to make better decisions regarding their health.

The task of setting goals and deciding on a carefully thought out plan of action in order to achieve them rests with the client, not the health coach. However, **knowledge is power**. What the health coach can and should do is **provide educational resources** and ask thought provoking questions that can help the client distinguish realistic, achievable goals from impossible ones and determine a workable plan.

3. Connect your clients to other agencies that can help them.

Recognize when a client has health issues or other problems that other professionals may be better equipped to handle. Depending on individual needs, you could be doing that person a big service by making a referral to an outside organization such as Overeaters Anonymous, the American Diabetes Association, or Assistance for the Handicapped, just to name a few.

4. Empathize with your clients.

Making excuses for gaining excess weight is easy but admitting that that the only way to lose the weight successfully and keep it off is to be willing to change one's own behavior and eating habits takes strength and courage. So, **put yourself in your client's shoes**. When the going gets tough, offer emotional support. The last thing you want is for your client to feel like a failure and quit, which has probably happened multiple times before. So avoid being judgmental. Acknowledge even small accomplishments with praise.

5. Establish a cooperative working relationship with the client's medical professionals.

Nutrition is closely related to every other aspect of a person's health. Not only are many medical problems caused by or exacerbated by poor diet; based on the individual's state of health and already existing medical conditions or food sensitivities, the daily diet may need to be adjusted accordingly.

Furthermore, in the process of losing weight, significant changes could occur in many aspects of bodily functioning, such as blood pressure, glucose level, metabolism, and electrolyte balance, possibly calling for an adjustment in medication. For all of these reasons, anyone needing to lose 10 pounds or more and/or planning to significantly increase the amount of exercise needs to have complete physical checkups and appropriate lab tests both before and during the weight loss process. In addition, the nutrition program needs to stay informed about the dieter's state of health just as that person's medical practitioners need to be on board with the weight loss plan.

As a health coach, you can facilitate your clients being able to get the best possible medical care. You can start by taking your client's medical history and sharing it with the client's doctors, dietitian, personal trainer, and psychologist. As long as you refrain from trying to diagnose or treat any client's medical problems yourself, you are within the bounds of your profession to ask when the last visit to a doctor was and when the next one will be. It is perfectly fine to recommend regular physical checkups, additional checkups to address any new health concerns, and keeping all scheduled medical appointments.

The Five Primary Topics to Cover in Health Coaching Sessions (weight loss, nutrition, Fitness, stress management, general health)

As a health and wellness coach, your job is to view your client's health from a holistic perspective. Yes, your clients want you to help them lose weight, but the discussions you have with them should not only be about weight loss, but also nutrition, fitness, stress management, and general health. Health coaches are in an ideal position to help their clients address the various components of their lives that have kept them from thriving physically, mentally, and spiritually and give them the needed tools to make lasting changes.

Any of the following wellness goals can serve as the basis for a very helpful coaching session.

- Losing weight
- Quitting smoking
- Reducing stress
- Improving interpersonal relationships and your own self-image
- Eating better and more mindfully
- Achieving better work-life balance
- Increasing life satisfaction
- Setting personal goals and following through
- Stretching your mind to adjust your perception of yourself
- Prioritizing self-care
- Balancing wellness with a busy schedule
- Erasing negative thinking and substituting a positive mindset

As a certified wellness coach, you're in a great position to serve as an accountability partner for your clients. From day 1 and for as long as they're in the program, you can offer them inspiration and guidance. But also assure them that you will still be in their corner to encourage

them when they feel like giving up. With a wellness coach at one's side, setbacks are temporary, not permanent.

What a Health Coach Cannot Do and Should Not Attempt to Do

Fulfilling your role as a certified health coach by following the above guidelines can go a long way towards maximizing your clients' chances of success. However, of equal importance is being thoroughly knowledgeable about and willing to recognize what you are not allowed to do.

All of the following functions are **outside the scope** of what a health coach can legally do.

- Perform therapy
- Assess nutritional needs
- Plan specific menus
- Recommend, prescribe, or sell nutritional supplements
- Assign specific exercises
- Evaluate lab results
- Make any medical or mental health diagnoses or prescribe treatment
- Engage in any other practices or activities in which the health coach lacks the proper training or credentials as stipulated by professional standards or law.

Refraining from doing what is clearly outside the scope of a health coach's duties is extremely important. Engaging in such practices and actions could place a client's health and safety in jeopardy as well as result in disciplinary action and litigation being taken against the coach.

Nutrition Factors takes strict adherence to appropriate professional conduct on the part of all health coaches very seriously and will not tolerate any infractions.

A Health Coach is Not the Same as a Dietitian

We also want you to know that you are part of a team of professionals, each of whom brings different skills, background, and expertise to the table. Many people might think the terms health coach and dietitian are interchangeable, but they are not. That is why at Nutrition Factors, every health coach is assigned to work under the direction of a registered dietitian.

As a health coach, you can act as a guide to making good food choices and adopting a healthy lifestyle. But what you cannot do is prepare actual menus for your clients to follow.

Thus, for example, you can show a client how to use the Grid Diet, but you cannot choose the specific foods for each meal. In fact, many states have specific regulations regarding who is legally authorized to prepare individualized menu plans.

A Health Coach is Not Qualified to Diagnose or Treat Medical Conditions or Psychological Problems Either

As for any coexisting medical conditions or psychological problems, a health coach can offer general guidelines pertaining to healthy eating and lifestyle. However, dispensing medical advice, diagnosing disorders, and prescribing or administering treatment for a perceived medical or psychological problem are clearly outside the scope of what a health coach is allowed to do.

It is imperative for all health coaches to recognize their limitations and wherever appropriate, refer a client to a duly qualified licensed physician, mental health professional, or other member of the medical profession who is best equipped to address the problem.

Know and Abide by the Specific Laws in Your State and Those of Your Clients

While the above guidelines apply to all health coaches, some individual states have their own specific regulations with regard to what is and outside the legal domain of a health coach. Some states are more restrictive than others. Therefore, it is your responsibility to understand the licensure laws of your state and not offer any services outside the scope of practice for health coaches in your state. However, your best recourse is to have a clear understanding not only of your own state's laws, but also the laws in your clients' states. If you are serving clients in different states from your own, you are responsible for knowing and abiding by the laws applicable to health coaches in each of those states, too.

For ultimate protection, seek legal counsel.

As a start, here is map from the Center for Nutrition Advocacy which allows you to see at a glance the legal parameters for health-related professionals in each state. <http://www.nutritionadvocacy.org/laws-state> However, we cannot emphasize too strongly that you should use this information as a guide and not as a substitute for legal counsel.

Another excellent way to protect yourself is to include a lawyer approved disclaimer on your website, client agreement forms, social media, and other marketing material. The purpose of the disclaimer is to clarify for your clients what your services will and will not include and provide legal protection against breach of contract. However, we strongly advise you to consult a lawyer familiar with the health coaching field to make sure the disclaimer is worded correctly and is legally binding.

You should also obtain legal assistance in drawing up the personalized written agreement forms between yourself and each of your clients. A single standardized agreement form for all clients will not suffice. Since each client brings a different set of problems and needs to the table, the agreement between the two of you needs to reflect those individual differences, as they relate to your role as a health coach.

Summary and Conclusion

Research studies have clearly shown that having a health coach can be very beneficial in facilitating behavior changes conducive to a healthier lifestyle. Given that the United States is now experiencing an epidemic of obesity, diabetes, and other diseases related to poor nutrition and physical inactivity, health coaches can play a vital role in helping to combat the problem.

However, you need other qualified professionals who are part of the same team to help you. Here at Nutrition Factors, in addition to requiring you to work with and report to the experienced registered dietitian assigned to you, we are putting other valuable resources at your disposal. We have partnered with a personal trainer and with a carefully selected group of physicians to whom you can refer a client who might be able to benefit from their services.

We encourage you to utilize this network of professionals available to you. There is no better way to have a positive impact on your clients' health than for qualified individuals from different professions to be working together while staying within the scope of each contributor's individual training, experience, and credentials.

Unfortunately, there is no single nationally accepted definition of what the job of health coach entails. This means that the best we can do here is provide helpful guidelines. The scope of practice for a health coach ultimately depends on the states where the person is working and their statewide policies and regulations.