

## Self-Coaching for Optimal Health how to be in your own corner

by Mark Stables

*Have you awakened lately only to feel exhausted? Have you noticed that you can't seem to get as much done throughout the day as you used to? Do you feel that stress has become your new best friend? If you answered 'yes' to any one of these questions, it's time to start taking your health more seriously.*

Everyday, millions of Canadian men wake feeling tired, stressed, unhealthy and overwhelmed. We've all done our best each January, setting new health resolutions. Yet somehow we seem to fail miserably when it comes to implementation. How can it be that nearly 80 per cent of men with resolutions encompassing health and fitness fail by only the eighth week? Is it possible that in striving for quick fixes, instant gratification, and a sense of immediate control over our health, we turn our back on the importance of developing a long-term wellness vision for optimal health, and end up burning ourselves out in the pursuit? We've all been told to "plan the work", then "work the plan". Shouldn't this also hold true for our day-to-day wellness?

### What is WELLNESS?

"Wellness is an active process in which you build awareness, continually select healthy choices, leading to the complete mastery of your physical and mental wellbeing. Optimal wellness is developing mastery over stress, health, fitness, weight and nutrition."

Accountability, adherence and ownership - three buzzwords you may be familiar with. Words that may provide the "magical vehicle" for lasting results: success.

In terms of wellness, success might be decreasing your blood pressure by reducing your stress level, having greater life fulfillment by spending more time with family, having more energy to get work done in the office, or increasing the distance between the pin and your longest drive. According to Dr. James Prochaska, success can be defined by the implementation of sustainable, positive health behaviours. Men are constantly seeking to achieve new heights of success. We *want* to be our best; we

*deserve* to be our best. With the power of self-coaching, we come one step closer.

Are you "ready" for change?

Change may be intimidating and difficult. How do we know if we are ready to replace unhealthy behaviours with new healthy ones? Luckily, Dr. Prochaska developed a Trans-theoretical Model that allows us to determine our "readiness to change". His model involves six stages of change, where each stage represents a process leading to sustainable, long-term change. Once you can identify your starting point, you can decide which actions and behaviours need implementation to successfully move to the next stage, and ultimately closer to your wellness vision.

### Prochaska's Stages of Change

**Precontemplation:** Not even thinking about changing unhealthy behaviours. Not intending to take action in the next six months.

**Contemplation:** Thinking about changing. Intending to change unhealthy behaviours in the next six months.

**Preparation:** Getting ready. Committing to change in the next month.

**Action:** Change is taking place.

**Maintenance:** A goal has been achieved. Individual has successfully changed a behaviour for a minimum of six months and has confidence he can sustain change.

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**Termination:** To determine when you are in the termination stage, research has shown there are at least four criteria:

- *A New Self-Image:* You feel at ease with the relationship between yourself and healthier behaviour. You have a new positive attitude that's not overwhelmed by too much self-confidence.
- *No Temptation in Any Situation:* You don't experience any anxiety or temptation over situations placing you in contact with old behaviours. For example, you go to a restaurant with absolutely no fear of overeating.
- *Solid Self-Efficacy:* A genuine confidence in knowing you will never engage in the problem behaviour again.
- *A Healthier Lifestyle:* You are living a healthier lifestyle to sustain your gains and to encourage new growth — not to overcome your problem.

Now that you've identified which of the above stages you are in, how can self-coaching propel you to the next level?

Self-coaching can change your life by providing powerful results! Coaching yourself is effective because it shifts the accountability and ownership directly onto you. Self-coaching provides lasting health, fitness and wellness results because it focuses on modifying unhealthy lifestyle habits through integrative behavioural and psychological principles, ultimately enhancing self-efficacy.

Once you have assessed where you are today, where you want to be tomorrow (next month, next year), you can design a wellness vision: a blueprint that will enable you to achieve long-term, sustainable results. Once you have created and visualized your future wellness, you can begin the journey to optimal health by setting and achieving small goals using the "S.M.A.R.T." principle. In adopting this principle, the goals you strive for will be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and you will have a Timeframe for completion, further enabling you towards your best-ever level of health.

### Tips for Effective Self-Coaching

1. In coaching yourself to wellness, begin by identifying where you are now. Where is your current health? Describe your health in detail, paying attention to anything that is not optimal. How do you feel about your health at present?
2. What would you like to change about your health today? What goals can you develop to improve your health? What does your optimal health "look like"; can you describe it using all five senses?
3. Once you have identified where you presently are, and where you want to be in the future, you can see and describe the "gap" that exists. Define what specifically is missing in your health, and how you feel this gap can be bridged. If behaviours, attitudes, and habits need to be changed, identify them and write them down. How will the accomplishment of these

goals change your life? Are there any obstacles that may prevent you from achieving your goals?

4. Explore personal strengths and successes. What positive health behaviours have you been successful at implementing and sustaining in the past? How did you accomplish these successes? What did you learn from recent successes that you could apply to new goals?
5. Is it possible to apply the skills, techniques and strengths from former goal-achievements in bridging the gap that exists in your current health goals? If your new goals require a different strategy for success, what might it look like? Which behaviours would you like to implement successfully in three-month's time?

Five step summary for self-coaching toward optimal health:

1. Assess readiness to change
2. Define your wellness vision
3. Develop three-month behavioural goals
4. Set weekly goals
5. Re-evaluate successes and develop new goals

### Wellness Planning Through the Years...

#### Wellness in Your 30's:

##### *An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure*

In your 30's, you are challenged with increased responsibilities and less time. Life "happens", and all of a sudden you may be faced with a family and a mortgage, alongside a demanding profession. During your 30's, it is important to counter physical and mental decline through prevention. In your 30's, you should focus your energy on maintaining strength, building endurance and forming healthy behaviours that will assist you in later years. Your 30's are opportune years to implement healthy eating habits.

#### Sample Goals

Weekly: Eat 9-12 servings of fruit and vegetables 5 days a week.

Monthly: Decrease caffeine consumption from 3 to 2 cups of coffee a day.

Yearly: Complete 10 km run in under 45 minutes.

#### Wellness in Your 40's:

##### *Take Control*

You thought your 20's went fast! You wake up one morning and suddenly you're 40. In your 40's you will definitely notice when you've neglected your body. In your 20's and 30's you were able to take your body for granted (to some degree). Now in your 40's you may have even more unhealthy behaviours to change, especially if you've remained sedentary for some time. There is a good chance that in your 40's you'll have established yourself in your career, leading to more disposable time. Being

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more efficient at time-management, you'll now find more time to devote to physical fitness and the development of your "wellness vision". This means getting back into the enjoyable health-club routine you may have been forced to leave out in your 30's. Other health issues that may arise in your 40's that warrant bigger changes may include such things as hypertension, high cholesterol and weight-gain. Stress, sleep-deprivation, and poor eating habits will start to take their toll on energy levels in your 40's.

### Sample Goals

- Weekly: Increase water consumption to 2.5 litres, six days a week.
- Monthly: Increase resistance-training sessions from 2, to 3 times weekly.
- Yearly: Decrease fat mass by 20 pounds.

### Wellness in Your 50's and Beyond

You've reached middle age. At 50, you may have already begun to experience decreased bone mass (osteoporosis), and your joints may need some extra care (arthritis). So hopefully you've looked after your body over the years. Aging men also begin to experience diminished strength, endurance and lean body mass.

### Sample Goals

- Weekly: Complete 3 cardiovascular sessions on an elliptical trainer, lasting 35 minutes.
- Monthly: Work with a personal fitness trainer 8 times, focusing



- on increasing bone mass.
- Yearly: Increase subjective energy level from 4 to 8 out of 10.

Now that you have explored the art of self-coaching, you have the framework necessary to develop a long-term wellness strategy and reach your goals. The ultimate goal is to increase your ability to manage and sustain your own health, and lead a fulfilling life where you are in the driver's seat. Seeking the advice of a lifestyle or wellness coach, taking courses on health and life management, or networking with individuals who have a similar goal in mind, can be effective tools for those who feel they require additional support when designing a wellness vision and a plan to get there.

Now that you understand the self-coaching process you will be able to get a jump on 2005 by developing your long-term health and wellness vision. Identify which stage of readiness you're in and clearly define manageable goals that are realistic, specific, measurable and have a timeframe. You have all the tools you need to design your plan and seek out the support you require, if necessary for you, to get a good start on your new healthier life. You can feel confident that implementing self-coaching will pull you one step closer to your optimal health! ■

### REFERENCES

1. Prochaska, J. O., J. C. Norcross, et al. (1994). Changing for Good. NY, William Morrow and Company, Inc.