

# Integrative Medicine Strategies for Changing Health Behaviors

## Support for Primary Care



Ruth Q. Wolever, PhD<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Karen L. Caldwell, PhD<sup>c</sup>,  
Lindsey C. McKernan, PhD<sup>b,d</sup>, Marni G. Hillinger, MD<sup>d</sup>

### KEYWORDS

• Primary care • Lifestyle • Behavior change • Health coach • Integrative medicine

### KEY POINTS

- Integrative Medicine approaches are particularly useful to support lifestyle change.
- Addressing behavior change from a holistic perspective allows for success in an area in which the patient has intrinsic motivation. Success breeds further success.
- Sustainable behavior change is quite complex and lengthy; it requires much more than education and advice. Neither the primary care provider nor the individual patient should expect to carry the full burden alone.
- The primary care provider has a key role in health behavior change, namely catalyzing change, educating and linking to available resources, and supporting the patient in the background while health coaches or others guide the change process in the foreground.
- Stress undermines behavior change; stress must be addressed first or at least simultaneously to enact sustainable behavior change.

### NEED FOR LIFESTYLE CHANGE

An estimated 86% of US health care expenses are related to chronic diseases: type II diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and obesity, driven by unhealthy lifestyles.<sup>1,2</sup> Prevention and mitigation of these diseases involve cultivation of health through daily lifestyle

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Disclosure: See last page of article.

<sup>a</sup> Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at Vanderbilt, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Vanderbilt University School of Nursing, 3401 West End Avenue, Suite 380, Nashville, TN 37203, USA; <sup>b</sup> Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, TN, USA; <sup>c</sup> Department of Human Development and Psychological Counseling, Appalachian State University, 151 College Street, Boone, NC 28608, USA; <sup>d</sup> Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at Vanderbilt, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, 3401 West End Avenue, Suite 380, Nashville, TN 37203, USA

\* Corresponding author. 12 Hopewell Drive, Durham, NC 27705.

E-mail address: [ruth.wolever@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:ruth.wolever@vanderbilt.edu)

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behaviors, including adequate intake of fruits, vegetables, and healthy dietary fat sources, regular exercise, moderate (if any) alcohol use, and no use of tobacco. Unfortunately, less than 10% of US adults consistently engage in these behaviors.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the rising burden of stress complicates and undermines attempts to change lifestyle.<sup>4</sup> Because the need to manage stress is so central to successful behavior change, stress should also be considered a key target in lifestyle change, along with nutrition, physical activity, substance management, and sleep. Although most providers are fully aware of both the scientific and the fiscal case for promoting health behaviors, they are typically not trained in behavior change beyond the provision of education and recommendations. In addition, the burgeoning requirements for primary care practice make it unrealistic to expect primary care providers to manage the complexities of behavior change without team-based approaches.

### ROLE OF PRIMARY CARE IN LIFESTYLE CHANGE

Given the burgeoning need to improve health behaviors, federal initiatives to promote healthy lifestyle and disease prevention have enacted the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010), and new prevention models are slowly emerging.<sup>5</sup> Primary care must take a vital role in supporting health behaviors. Patients expect to receive behavioral counseling from their primary care providers,<sup>6</sup> and they respect and value their guidance.<sup>7</sup> In addition, primary care is built on a relationship over time, and relationship-based care provides the strongest motivator for sustainable behavior change.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, although the focus on prevention is growing, acute care still drives health care reimbursement, and hence, delivery.<sup>9</sup> Until system reforms allow adequate time and reimbursement for primary care providers to move the focus to prevention, primary care providers need a manageable, defined role in lifestyle change, easy-to-implement strategies, and evidence-based resources to provide patients.

Primary care providers play an enormously important role in the health behavior change process, but it is not fair or realistic to expect them to hold the whole process. Providers would do well to shift their expectations to a more realistic stance by identifying a patient's current stage in the change process for a specific behavior and targeting a single step forward rather than a total overhaul in patient behavior: "the goal for a single encounter is a shift from the grandiose to the realistic."<sup>10</sup> Given the enormity of the need for behavior change, and the lack of time and expertise on the part of most primary care providers, the authors suggest a particular role for primary care providers that is seminal: (1) to serve as a catalyst, priming the patient for change<sup>11,12</sup>; (2) to educate and point the patient to appropriate resources for additional guidance and hands-on support; and (3) to provide an umbrella of ongoing encouragement throughout the long journey of change while patients work more intensely with health coaches or allied health providers. In order to provide ongoing encouragement, clinicians must understand that behavior change is highly complex and not understood by many in the medical system. Patients become overwhelmed when presented with the end goal (eg, "you need to lose 40 pounds," "you need to exercise aerobically for 30 minutes at least 5 times per week). The primary care provider would do well to get patients headed in the right direction, taking small steps with *any* lifestyle goal that interests them (often stress management is first) and experiencing small successes to build self-efficacy. Sample open-ended questions to introduce lifestyle concepts and catalyze change are provided in **Box 1**. Providers can then refer to well-trained health coaches to support/guide the entire process of behavior change and to

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