

THE FUTURE OF
HEALTH & FITNESS COACHING

HOW TO TALK TO PEOPLE

SO THEY'RE MORE
LIKELY TO CHANGE

DAY 3





HOW TO TALK TO PEOPLE

So they're more likely to change.

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To get great results with the people who turn to you for advice, it's important to learn how to talk to them in a way that increases their likelihood of change. Master this and you'll become a legit client (or patient) *whisperer*.

When you're first starting out with a client or patient in your practice, their dedication, and the results they get, can feel a little uncertain.

They show up, you “kick their butt” or “overhaul their diet” for a few weeks, then they disappear — no closer to their health and body transformation goals.

You scramble to find another client. They begin.

And the process repeats.

What's wrong?

It's probably not your program.

It's probably not that people are “lazy” or “unmotivated”.

Often, the problem is “coach talk”.

To achieve better, faster, lasting results — and a thriving coaching practice — you have to learn how to talk to people in ways that *help them change*.

(By the way, this applies whether you have paying clients/patients or not. When people come to you for advice, good “coach talk” is paramount.)

If you can't do this now, it's not your fault.

Almost nobody in health, fitness, and wellness learns this skill in school, or through certification programs. The people who are good at it are often either “naturals” or they develop the skill through trial and error over decades.

Don't get discouraged.

There *is* a formula for success.

Learn and practice this formula, and you'll start:

- connecting better with clients and patients,
- keeping those clients and patients longer, and
- getting better results, reliably.

In this lesson, we'll start teaching you this formula.

We'll cover:

- **How to know which coaching style to use.**
- **How you can be a more engaged and active listener.**
- **How you can help people change by changing the way you talk to them.**
- **How you can incorporate this in your coaching... starting *today*.**

Avoiding Awfulness-Based Coaching

The health, fitness, and wellness fields are full of scary-looking, arms-crossed disciplinarian-type coaches: men and women who look like they're more ready to punch you in the face than pick you up when you're down.

Their favorite phrase is “No excuses.”

These types of coaches aren't really meanies.

They're just trying to do the right thing. They genuinely want to help.

If you're working in one of these fields yourself, maybe you've occasionally slipped into this mindset, or gotten it from someone else.

We call it Awfulness-Based Coaching.

Awfulness-Based Coaching is built on the idea that people are broken and have to be fixed.

That they're lazy and weak. That they need a real ass-kicking to be motivated and strong.

This style of coaching focuses on what's *wrong* with the person — and how to purge it.

It hunts down “flaws” and “failures”, and focuses on “fixing” them.

It views good nutrition, movement, and health habits as something people have to be shamed into. It tells people to get into the gym and work off sins. It tells people that they deserve to feel bad.

An awfulness-based coach is a drill sergeant and an unrelenting ass-kicker.

With all the yelling-in-the-face and booting-in-the-butt, folks don't know which direction to run. They just know they need to get away.

Fear of an authority figure — or a constant obsession over fixing what's broken — can motivate some people... but only briefly.

Extreme approaches and drill-sergeant-style coaching *sometimes* produces impressive results in the short term, but they almost never work over the long term.

As human beings, we resist being pressured into new decisions. We resist being told we suck, or are broken (no matter how nicely someone says it).

Coach Hardass may try to use coercion. But along the way, he or she will destroy the change process for the people turning to them for advice.

No evidence shows that feeling bad creates *lasting* behavior changes.

(And honestly... Awfulness-Based Coaching is *exhausting*. Coach Hardasses usually walk around frustrated and annoyed all the time, because almost no one is doing what they want.)

Embracing Awesomeness-Based Coaching

Awesomeness-Based Coaching, on the other hand, believes that people *already* have the skills and abilities to change.

That they're already awesome in some areas of their lives.

That they can use this existing awesomeness to succeed.

This kind of coach helps people find what's fun and joyful in their lives, and then do more of it. They view nutritious eating, movement, and health habits as a path to living life with purpose.

They talk to folks about getting outside to play. About using what they do well in other aspects of their lives to do well here. They talk about feeling good in their bodies and in their lifestyle, not ashamed or exhausted.

An awesomeness-based coach is a guide, not an authoritarian or expert.

When people are hesitant, the coach empowers by helping them find their superpowers and leveraging them to achieve health and fitness success.

You don't want people scared of you. You don't want them to feel like you're constantly judging them unacceptable, inadequate, weak, or broken.

You want them to feel like you're on their team.

You want them to feel like working with you is a celebration of health and fitness. You want them to feel stronger when they're with you.

And the best place to start is with how you use language, ask questions, and provoke gentle self-discovery.

Unlike Awfulness-Based Coaching, Awesomeness-Based Coaching feels great.

It feels exciting. It feels inspiring. It feels energizing.

You are a team and you celebrate successes and joys together. Even better, people get great results, and they stick with you. That feels great too.

If you want to be an effective coach, here's how to start: Listen and learn.

As a coach, you want to help people:

- become aware of what they are doing, thinking, and feeling,
- examine and analyze their habits and behaviors,
- explore what's holding them back, and
- try some new and better choices.

You also want to help them discover their *own* existing strengths, resources, abilities, and problem-solving talents, which they can then use to help and motivate *themselves*.

One of the simplest ways to do that is just asking the right kinds of questions.

Exploring questions:

Open-ended questions help people explore options, values, and possible outcomes, without judgement. They also help the coach learn more about what matters to the person.

- “What things are most important to you? How does your exercise and eating fit into this?”
- “What sorts of things would you like to accomplish in your life?”
- “What would you like to see change?”
- “If things were better with your eating/exercise, what would be different?”
- “What have you already tried? What worked/didn’t work?”

Imagining questions:

Imagination (yes, just like in kindergarten) helps folks visualize a new way of living and acting.

- “Imagine you can X [*your goal*]. Describe your experience.”
- “Imagine you are already doing more of X. What would that feel like?”
- “Imagine that you have the body and health you desire. What did it take for you to achieve it?”
- “If you weren’t constrained by reality — let’s imagine for a minute that absolutely anything is possible — what might you...?”

Solution-focused questions:

Solution-focused language emphasizes how people *have already succeeded* and helps them expand the awesome.

- “In the past, when were you successful with this, even just a little bit?”
- “How could we do more of that?”
- “Where in your life have you been successful with something like this?”
- “Did you learn any lessons that we can apply here?”
- Where is the problem *not* happening? When are things even a little bit better?

Statements that sense into problems:

Non-confrontational, reflective observations and intuitions help folks explore a problem and feel understood, without fear of judgement.

- “I get the sense that you may be struggling with...”
- “It seems to me like you’re feeling...”

Statements that evoke speculation:

Open-ended, speculative statements get people thinking and responding to possible choices.

- “I wonder what it would be like if you...”
- “I wonder if we could try...”
- “I’m curious about whether...”

Questions that evoke change talk:

With these kinds of questions, you get the person talking about change on their own terms.

- “In what ways does this concern you?”
- “If you decided to make a change, what makes you think you could do it?”
- “How would you like things to be different?”
- “How would things be better if you changed?”
- “What concerns you now about your current exercise and eating patterns?”

Questions that assess readiness:

If a person isn't ready, willing, and able to change, they won't change — no matter how awesome you are as a coach. So, assess their readiness with these kinds of questions (and recognize that sometimes, they may not be ready... yet).

- “If you decided to change, on a scale of 1-10, how confident are you that you could change, when 1 represents not at all confident and 10 equals extremely confident?”
- “If you wanted to change, what would be the tiniest possible step toward that? The *absolute smallest*, easiest thing you could try?”
- “Tell me what else is going on for you right now, in your life. What else do you have on your plate besides this? Let's get a sense of what you're working with.”

Questions that help plan next steps:

These are questions that have folks generate their own solutions as opposed to you telling them what to do next.

- “So, given all this, what do you think you will do next?”
- “What’s next for you?”
- “If nothing changes, what do you see happening in five years?”
- “If you decide to change, what will it be like?”
- “How would you like things to be different?”

Careful advice-giving:

These are ways of giving advice without assuming you have permission (and without it feeling like you’re pushing an agenda).

- “Would it be okay if I shared some of my experiences with you?”
- “In my work with clients/patients, I’ve found that...”

Use the 80 / 20 rule.

Notice how we’ve given you over 25 ways to actively listen, and only 2 ways to talk about what you think.

You should try to spend about 80-90% of your time listening, understanding, observing and exploring, and only about 10-20% of your time guiding, directing, and offering information.

How might this look in a real situation?

Scenario 1: Use a “change talk wedge”.

1. Validate and affirm the opposite of what they should be doing.

When someone is expressing ambivalence about change, you might start by reflecting on why they might NOT change. (Yeah, it sounds weird.)

You might say something like:

“Wow, it really sounds like you have a lot on your plate. I can see how it’s tough to schedule exercise time.”

Or:

“I know it can be hard to resist those homemade brownies. They’re so good.”

Note: Be sincere here. Genuinely empathize. Sarcasm usually backfires and creates hostility.

2. Then wait.

After validating and affirming the opposite, be quiet.

Don’t be afraid to open up the space and let them fall into it. No rush. Be patient, empathetic, and attentive.

Let the person speak first.

This will feel like forever, but might only be a couple of seconds.

3. Listen for “change talk”.

When folks do start talking, they’ll often start telling you why they should change their behaviors.

Client:

“Yeah, I know I do have a lot going on. But I really should do XYZ. I know I would feel better.”

Or:

“Honestly, I don’t think I really need three brownies. I’d probably be happy with just one.”

4. Drive the wedge into that “change talk” opening.

Once you hear them suggesting change on their own, you’re getting somewhere.

Using their language, reflect and imply (but don’t push) a next action. Focus on concrete to-dos.

You:

“It sounds like maybe you think you’d feel better if you did XYZ?”

Or:

“It sounds like maybe 1 brownie would be enough for you?”

Position this in the form of a question. Look inquisitive.

You're simply reciting what they just said, as if to make sure you heard them right.

5. Wait again.

Stay quiet.

Wait for the person to speak again.

Listen for further change talk.

6. Repeat as needed.

Keep wiggling the “change wedge” in farther and farther, slowly. Go at their speed.

And, once you feel like they're ready for a next action, you can go there by asking them:

“So, given all this, what do you think you'll do next?”

But not too fast. Let them arrive there at their own speed.

Scenario 2: Use “the continuum”.

You can use this *after* listening for change talk. But be sure you understand the situation *first*.

With this strategy, have people imagine a spectrum or continuum of behaviors from worse (i.e. eating fast food for every single meal) to better (i.e. replacing just one fast food meal today with good quality protein and vegetables).

Then:

1. Help them move a “notch”.

Highlight the benefits of doing so.

Coach:

“OK, so it sounds like you want to do X (i.e. eat less fast food). But going all the way to Y (i.e. eating no fast food) feels like too much, which makes sense. What if you could just move a tiny, tiny bit towards Y instead of all the way? What could you do that would be X+1 (i.e. eating one non-fast food meal tomorrow)?”

Now, scale back as needed.

Coach:

“X+2 (i.e. eating no fast food tomorrow) is awesome — we’ll get to that. But what about X+1 instead? That seems even more manageable.”

2. Follow up with a strategy for *immediate* execution.

Since X+1 will be something they proposed, you can validate that it’s a good idea. And then turn it into a next step.

Coach:

“X+1 sounds like a great idea! How are you going to make that happen today? And how can I help?”

3. Once an action is assigned, book a follow up.

Now that you’ve agreed on the action plan, make sure there’s some

accountability built in.

Coach:

“OK, text me tomorrow to tell me how you did with X+1. If you try another option, send me a photo! I’d love to see what you chose.”

Scenario 3: Ask “crazy questions”.

If a person is struggling with change, you can also ask a few questions they may not expect.

1. Listen, validate, affirm.

Preface with “I know this is wacky but...”

Coach:

“It sounds like *[reiterate what they just said about their understanding of what they’d like to change]*.

“OK, I’m going to ask you two crazy questions, and I know this is going to sound really weird, but just humor me...”

2. Ask your questions.

“What’s GOOD about X behavior *[where X behavior is the problem behavior they want to change]*? In other words, what purpose does it serve in your life? How does it help you?”

“What is BAD about changing? In other words, what would you lose or give up if you got rid of X?”

3. Normalize and empathize.

You can begin by normalizing and empathizing with the unwanted behavior first, using the seemingly weird technique of first arguing (slightly) in favor of not changing.

Coach:

“Wow, yeah, it sounds like there’s lots going on there for you. I think we’d all want a few cookies in that situation!”

Not always, but the client’s natural response will often be the opposite.

Client:

“Yeah, but I really should find a better way to deal with this...”

Hey lookee here! They proposed change, not the coach!

4. Allow space/time to grieve the loss of the status quo.

Coach:

“Well, tell you what. There’s no rush to do this. When you’re ready, why don’t you try...”

- ...moving one “notch” along the continuum?
- ...doing the behavior you proposed?
- ...thinking about how you could more effectively live the values you describe?

5. But don't let them off the hook.

Follow up in a few days as needed.

Scenario 4: Have them propose their own solution.

1. Affirm, validate, “hear”, normalize.

Coach:

“Yes, I hear you and understand what you’re thinking/feeling/experiencing, and it’s quite normal. Lots of people go through this.”

2. Ask leading, rhetorical questions.

This isn't a dialogue invitation; it's a “tell yourself what to do” question.

Coach:

“It sounds like you already have a good sense of what some of the key issues are. Knowing this, if you were the coach, what would you recommend?”

In other words: How would you, the client/patient, solve your own problem?

3. Rank confidence.

After they've proposed a solution, have them rank their own confidence in doing the solution.

Coach:

“That’s a great solution, I really like it. Just wondering... on a scale of 0 to 10, zero being ‘no way I can do that every day’, and 10 being ‘of course I can do that every day’, how confident do you feel about X?”

4. Affirm and book follow up.

If they rank 9 or 10 out of 10, tell them you think they’ve come up with a good solution and then ask them to check back in a few days to share their success.

If not, work on shrinking the next action to something they’re confident they can do every day for the next few days. The continuum exercise above is a good approach for this.

What to do next: Some tips from Precision Nutrition

As you can see, in all of these scenarios, the coach’s job is not to play all-knowing expert. (This goes for anyone trying to help others — like friends and family — eat better, too.) Instead:

Awesomeness-based coaches are confident, supportive guides and change facilitators.

A good coach helps folks propose their own solutions — solutions that line up with *their* values, and that they genuinely believe they can do. Solutions they’re ready, willing, and able to commit to, today.

And this all begins with language.

1. Recognize where you need to grow.

Ask yourself how much time you actually spend...

- actively listening to people (versus interrupting or waiting for them to finish so you can talk next)?
- exploring their perspective and trying to understand their point of view (versus assuming you know what they need)?
- asking them to generate their own potential solutions or next actions first (versus just giving them advice right away)?
- asking them what they think they could realistically try (versus just giving them instructions to follow)?

How could you move one notch along the continuum toward client/patient-centered, awesomeness-based coaching?

What's *your* "X+1"?

2. Practice using some of the questions and ideas in this article.

Now you have a few sentences and phrases that are proven to help you connect with folks and unlock their potential. Tuck them in your back pocket and start using them when new opportunities present themselves.

After each session, make notes on how it's going:

- What changes are you seeing in how they communicate with you?
- What seemed to resonate most?
- What really got them talking and opening up?
- What do you want to talk about in your next session, and — most importantly — how?

By practicing and documenting results, over time you will develop the communication skills of a successful, thriving coach.

3. Observe a coach you respect.

Practicing on your own as often as you can is essential.

But just as with athletics, in order to be the best, you probably need a coach. Working with an expert coach will fast-track your development. So ask to sit in on a couple sessions a month, and buy your mentor a coffee afterward so you can ask follow-up questions about how they communicate effectively with their clients or patients.

Ask them to share stories. Ask for advice on how to talk to a client or patient who's struggling, but who you really want to help.

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