

# Lessons From Health Coaching... Pursuing Health and Performance

Health coaching has critical moments of truth, where life preempts health goals.



...by **Paul Terry**

Chris is a client in his 50s with a penchant for drama and a self-described “bizarre weakness for anything with too much sugar.” Living with a “wife on a high pedestal” and cholesterol at a similar elevated state, Chris and his beloved are empty nesters — with a renewed interest in recreation, greater disposable income for eating out, and “more time for getting into trouble.”

Having Chris as a long-term client has taught me about several levels of ambivalence related to changing health habits. There’s the garden variety I hear from many clients, with statements like “I kind of want to stop smoking, but I kind of want to keep smoking.” Then there is Chris: “I’m going to summit this weekend if it kills me and, by the way, if I do make it to the top, Paul, I’m toasting you with 2 or 3 Snickers bars!”

In motivational interviewing terms, I often find myself using “amplified reflections” with Chris. That is, when he asserts one of his grand claims to being a pitiable victim of life’s temptations, I call him on it by exaggerating in kind. “So Chris, it seems like losing weight is hopeless in your case. Do you think we should just throw in the towel?” Inevitably, he reassesses his values and revisits his reasons. Chris loves his work, loves his family, and wants to be as present and engaged with both as possible.

This gallant struggle between a penchant for life’s guilty pleasures and a realization that his health is linked to overcoming such temptations reminds

me of author E.B. White’s elegant insight: “If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

Building Chris’s confidence that his efforts would indeed pay off in more capacity for work and the things he loves is part of what I need to do to keep him investing in his health. Similarly, building employer’s confidence that sponsoring wellness services will pay them back in improved employee performance is part of what *we* need to do to keep them investing in employee health. Both for Chris and our clients, connecting health and performance is critical to maintain interest.

Recent research published by StayWell offers a new perspective on the essential relationship between health and productivity. We reported on a “normal impairment factor” — employees with...

- No lifestyle-related health risks have 3%-4% — about 9 days/year — lost productivity due to health problems
- An average number of health risks lose more than twice that much productivity — 21 days/year
- The most health risks have ^ more lost productivity than those with none.\*

Similar to related research, our study also identified back pain as a leading culprit in limiting productivity.

And, as StayWell research on the role of mental health and healthcare costs reveals, stress and depression are top drivers of lost productivity as well.

And that’s where my coaching with Chris transcends our typical discussions and goals. His mental resilience and zeal for existence make him a success in countless ways: a great marriage, a love of climbing, a passion for his work. It’s true that if Chris could lose weight by turning a “bizarre weakness” into an occasional lapse, he’d likely have more energy for other things he loves. Still, Chris compensates with a life that soars. He may want to avert confronting his weaknesses, but he uses our coaching time as well as anyone to build on strengths.

So it’s with a light touch that we try to manage Chris’s health threats. After all, his is a life he defines as endless in opportunity. So I’ve determined that he’s not a candidate for admonishment about his health practices; indeed, few people are. Instead, I work during every encounter to earn his trust and respect so that he’ll solicit my input. When he does, I share this conviction: being healthier will better support his devotion to a full life and give him more quality time to pursue it.

I can tell the only thing stronger than his resistance to this notion is his willingness to reflect on it. And what more could a health coach ask for?

*Paul Terry, PhD*



\* Riedel, J., Grossmeier, J., Hauglund-Howieson, L., Buraglio, C., Anderson, D.R., Terry, P.E., “Use of a Normal Impairment Factor in Quantifying Avoidable Productivity Loss Because of Poor Health.” *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, Vol. 51, No.3, March 2009.