

Respecting the **Life Cycle** of **Ambivalence**

Lessons from **health coaching**

Overcoming ambivalence is central to making healthy habit changes. Being of 2 minds about making changes is so common that experienced coaches become very astute at “developing discrepancies.” That is, we encourage participants to explore the gap between what they say they value and how they actually behave, and we get under the covers about why they want to do something different and what is holding them back. Then we urge them to present us with the case — *their* case — for why a change would be beneficial to themselves or others.

Often we see how ability to wrestle with ambivalence and eventually pin it down is the key to making change. But what becomes of their ambivalence after they’ve successfully established new and healthier patterns? Coaches too often underestimate the insidious and enduring burden of ambivalence. Not only is it likely to continue after a successful habit change, but those feelings also may intensify. Consider this interaction between Kae and a participant we’ll call Ken.



...by Paul Terry and Kae Mayer

Paul Terry, PhD

Kae Mayer, Health Coach



Kae: It’s been 6 months since you’ve quit smoking. That’s fantastic. You’ve been doing great! We find this is an important milestone for ex-smokers. Relapse isn’t uncommon around this time, so let’s review what’s working well so far and consider tactics to continue as a nonsmoker.



Ken: Thanks, Kae; I’ll admit to being plenty proud of my progress. It’s interesting that you refer to me as a nonsmoker. I don’t mind telling you that I don’t think of myself as a nonsmoker. In fact, I tell my smoker friends that I’m still a smoker who’s decided to stop smoking.



Kae: As always, Ken, you are very self-aware, and that serves you well. Can you say more about why you tell your friends you still identify as a smoker?



Ken: I suppose the simple truth is that I don’t want to come across as condescending or superior because I’ve managed to quit.



Kae: I’m interested that you call this the “simple truth.” Does that mean there’s a harder truth behind not wanting to identify as a nonsmoker?




Ken: *(lengthy pause)* Yes, much harder. I’ve thought about this a lot. I’m confident I can handle the smoking triggers that being with my smoking friends set off. The part that I hope gets easier eventually is the perception smokers have about me... that I’ve given up something I really still would rather be doing. I feel I haven’t changed at all when it comes to exercising my own free will. I’m as free to return to smoking as I am free to decide not to smoke. I resent anyone suggesting I’m not an independent decision maker. That’s why I pushed back when you called me a “nonsmoker.” The label makes me cringe.

Realizing the depth of ambivalence and the poignancy behind worries about his self-image and reputation with smokers in his life was an important next step in Ken's ability to sustain a smoke-free lifestyle. It's quite possible that he can stay tobacco free without abandoning his identity as an independent thinker. What would make this more difficult, though, is if Kae had ignored his needs for affirmation as a free thinker — or worse, insisted that being labeled a "nonsmoker" was Ken's ultimate goal.

Here's an analogy for your consideration. Surveys about immigration indicate that most American-born respondents believe immigrants come to our country because we are the greatest nation. We also assume immigrants are eager to leave behind their countries and cultures in deference to this land of opportunity. We're only marginally correct. Immigrants do, indeed, come for the opportunity, but they rarely wish to leave anything behind. In fact, it's because they love their countries that they come to America, send back as much as of their earnings as possible, and when asked, usually identify as natives of their homelands who've chosen to live here.

How often do we forget to ask participants (metaphorically speaking) where they're originally from and whether they miss it? Many of our weight management participants grew up overweight and have self-images — often comfortable and positive — of their overweight former selves. In addition, how often are we creating space for participants to reflect on what they liked about their former habits?

Remember to ask how participants' memories are affecting their ability to stay the course given their current choices. To be sure, most successful participants are happy with their decisions and even giddy about their accomplishments in finding their new selves and practicing healthier lifestyles. But we need to stay mindful that taking on a new life doesn't mean rejecting native roots. In fact, the less we allow them time to discuss it, the more they may yearn for a return visit. 

How to have a Winning Health Promotion Internship Program

While we generally think about internships as a learning opportunity with advantages for students, budget cuts paired with a tough economy have increased the benefit of capable, entry-level workers to employers and schools. The health promotion field is a great match for this type of *win-win-win* relationship:

- Wellness departments are often understaffed and underfunded these days
- Students need real-life experience to complete their educational development
- Colleges/universities gain important interaction with businesses and communities.

To benefit schools as well as worksites and students¹, the activities should be structured to:

- Meet a real need in the organization, community, or population served
- Develop civic responsibility
- Offer career exploration².

Regardless of format, all experiential learning (EL) activities — such as internships, practicums, field experiences, cooperative education, apprenticeships, and service learning — have common attributes.



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Sallie M. Scovill, PhD

School of Health
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UWSP Reflections

The University of Wisconsin Stevens Point School of Health Promotion and Human Development meets these objectives in their well developed internship and field study program. Students not only work directly for the UWSP employee wellness program but also contribute and gain experience in the surrounding community, state, as well as nationally through internships and field work. Examples follow:

- UWSP health promotion students organize and run the annual campus breast cancer walk to benefit Susan G. Komen for the Cure.
- Practicum students on campus write the UWSP employee wellness letter, do onsite blood pressure checks at several University buildings, and serve as coaches/personal trainers for employees who opt into these add-on programs.
- In the community, UWSP students are wellness coaches for participants in the Community Weight Race (sponsored by Ministry of Health Care), fitness trainers at Sentry

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