

Lessons From Health Coaching...

The Essential Reading List, Part Two



...by **Paul Terry** and **David Anderson**

In our Part One of an essential reading list for health coaches/health promoters, we invited readers to offer input on our final top 10 list of those whose research and writing have been instrumental in shaping and informing our field. Now we can see why so many “best of” lists are the top 50 or top 100 — it’s really hard to narrow our favorites to 10.

It was interesting that none of you landed on the same recommendations, which underscores the wonderful diversity of experts. Nevertheless, we loved your ideas... and congratulations to those of you who suggested an author now in our top 10. Based on your affirmations, we’re staying with our first 5:

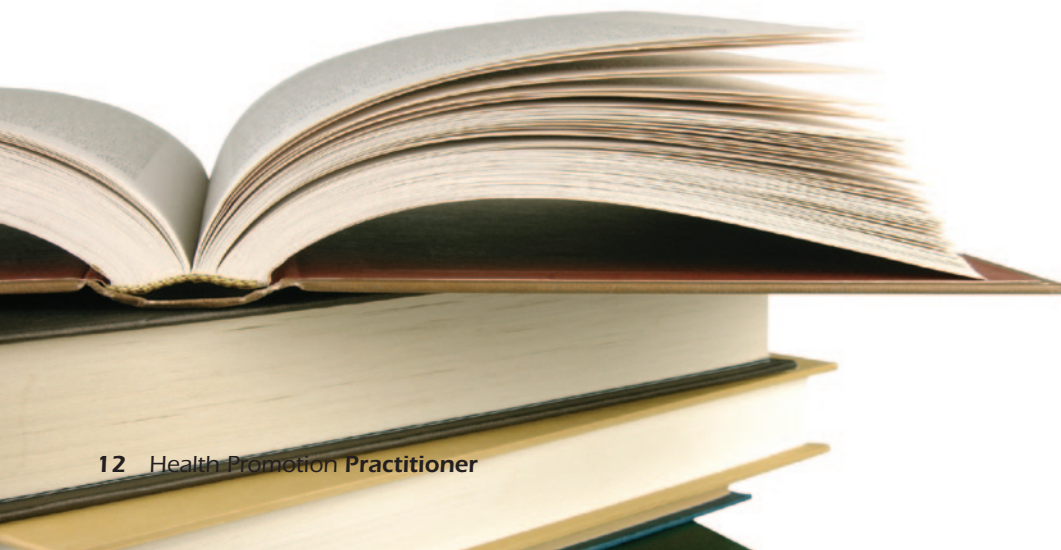
- **Albert Bandura**
- **James Prochaska and colleagues**
- **William Miller and Stephen Rollnick**
- **Martin Seligman**
- **Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein.**

We described the seminal contributions of these authors in our last column. Now we turn to the difficult part. Based on your input and our grueling debate (why is it that anytime Paul and David are in the same room, we’re told it feels grueling?), here are the next 5 to round out our 10 all-time most important contributors.

- **Aaron Beck.** The idea that past is prologue has had a powerful pull on psychologists over the past century. Beck’s studies unlocked a vibrant approach to counseling; it challenged assumptions that analysis of demons from the distant past produced much of use for getting on with a better life. Instead, working primarily with depression, he found a surprising pattern in people; they tended to evaluate their *current* life circumstances negatively. These somewhat random, usually lackluster and “automatic thoughts” are most often directed inward (getting down on ourselves), but are also aimed indiscriminately at the world or at our futures. Beck’s “cognitive therapy” has become a mainstay of effective health coaching.

Identifying and reframing these irrationally negative thoughts to be more realistic and positive is a key step in sustaining constructive action. If you’re looking for a direct translation of Beck’s principles to help clients change habits, you may want to forgo his influential *Cognitive Therapy of Depression* (Guilford Press, 1979) and instead go directly to his daughter **Judith Beck’s** book *The Beck Diet Solution* (Reed Elsevier, 2010). Yes, Aaron’s progeny is also a world-renowned expert in cognitive behavioral therapy; her book is touted as being the first to apply proven benefits of cognitive therapy to weight management. It’s like “an extended therapy session with a diet coach... that will change the way you think about diets and weight loss.”

- **Leon Festinger.** An approach often used in motivational interviewing is what Miller and Rollnick describe as “developing discrepancies.” We shine a light on those all too common client tendencies to suggest they value one thing, then describe ways of living that indicate their actions are at odds with their words. Why is it important that we catch those discrepancies? Because we’re playing to Festinger’s theory of “cognitive dissonance,” which offers elegant insight into how to build a head of psychological steam for countering inconsistencies between words and deeds. The tension that arises when an individual becomes aware of a conflict between their beliefs and their actions can, when guided carefully, become the fuel to reframe thinking. And, according to Festinger, clarity of beliefs will



foster more congruent behavior. “Propinquity,” another Festinger idea, holds that we associate ourselves with many potential negative influencers simply because they’re near us. Propinquity is also an essential coaching concept as we assess the barriers our clients are trying to overcome.

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- **Scott Meier and Susan Davis.** We promised some practical readings for handy tips and practice guides. Meier and Davis came to our list through Dean Witherspoon, producer and editor of the *Practitioner*. Dean views their book, *The Elements of Counseling*, as “a classic I recommend whenever someone wants to enhance their coaching skills... with an approach that is practical and timeless.” It’s modeled after *The Elements of Style* (a classic writing guide) in using a how-to format, with overviews of counseling theory and examples for putting it into day-to-day practice. We also commend **Rick Botelho**, a practicing physician, who wrote *Motivational Practice: Promoting Healthy Habits and Self-care of Chronic Disease*. His writing, which integrates concepts from most of our other top 10 list members into a practical guide, has great examples and how-to tips on supporting sustainable health habit change.
- **BF Skinner.** We freely acknowledge how polarizing Skinner can be among psychologists who felt his social engineering concepts and broad extrapolation from behavioral

experiments with pigeons to complex human activities had run amok. Still, what other scholar recast the debate about the balance of power between nurture and nature more provocatively? Rather than defend his contributions, particularly in his framing of stimulus controls and contingencies of reinforcement, we’ll commend a side of his writing you may not be familiar with. Consider reading *The Technology of Teaching* and evaluate his recommendations in the context of coaching/health promotion. Skinner’s core arguments were that teachers fail when they rely on explaining things rather than starting where the student is. He further derides the usual use of aversive techniques rather than positive reinforcement for simple, measurable progress. His recommendations were spot on for better adjusting client goals to ensure success, break down tasks, and move from simple to more complex health practices gradually and steadily.

- **Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler.** What happens when dense, interconnected social clusters exert their influence? The obesity epidemic and other such challenges to healthy living are a function of friends... and friends of friends... and friends of friends — according to Christakis and Fowler. Their research and writings are at the heart of health coaching because they remind us of the powerful tug that complex networks will have on clients as soon as their goals are set. Reading *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives* will remind you to ask about the influence of siblings and friends, who eats with them, how many of their colleagues exercise, and who they enlist as co-conspirators in bucking the pressure from everyday surroundings. For example, Christakis’s research shows that those with obese friends are 45% more likely to also be

or to become obese (www.wjh.harvard.edu/soc/faculty/christakis). We also commend **Dan Pink** (*Drive*) as well as **Edward L. Deci** and **Richard M. Ryan** (*Self-Determination Theory*) as authors in this category. They all discuss evaluating our surroundings, being conscious of cues, and assessing how the use or misuse of extrinsic rewards is affecting — and potentially reducing — our intrinsic motivations. (www.danpink.com and www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/publications_browse.php).

All right, you’ve likely noticed we’ve fudged plenty — our top 10 list borders on 20 authors because we haven’t been willing (or were we unable?) to resist interjecting a few others who’ve led the way. We’re lucky to work in a field that embraces such an eclectic and multidisciplinary group of thought leaders.

Thanks for sharing your ideas on our blog. Keep them coming — we’ll borrow more from your thinking in columns ahead.

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29

