

Lessons From Health Coaching... Successful Losers Are Not the Biggest Losers



...by **Paul Terry**

I had a strong negative reaction when I first heard of the TV show, “The Biggest Loser.” This feeling was triggered by the disrespectful program name (the Oxford dictionary says double entendres are used to “convey an indelicate meaning”), where those fighting to lose weight are cast as losers of another kind as well. Besides, why would anyone want to watch clinically obese people struggle through a physical and emotional boot camp? I was obviously wrong to question the appeal of this form of entertainment. What’s more, some health coaches and health promotion practitioners have clients who find it both an inspiring and effective strategy — at least for short-term weight loss.

Now I have even bigger misgivings about the program. Isn’t this a counter-productive message to broadcast to the nation? If many are finding inspiration from extreme and rapid weight loss, shouldn’t we worry that they’ll feel ambivalent when we’re coaching them to take a gradual, more sustainable pace? How can the time, support, and resources most people are able to bring to their weight management efforts ever compete with the focused and relentless drill sergeants these big losers are subjected to — with the world watching as their support system?

This is not a “reality” show. Reality, when it comes to weight management, is that many lose weight multiple times and ultimately gain it back, struggle to identify sources of support

in a hostile cultural context, and may not even have access to safe outdoor environments or fresh fruits and vegetables.

My StayWell colleagues and I recently completed a health coaching study for weight loss where we tested whether 5 or fewer sessions could enable people to achieve a moderate, sustainable weight loss. With most adults gaining 1-2 pounds/year, our conviction is that maintaining weight or losing a modest amount and keeping it off may be the best population health approach. In reviewing the few other credible clinical or workplace-based weight management programs, we noted that high levels of weight loss (15-20 pounds) required extraordinarily intensive interventions: 25-50 interactions each year. Even then we found only 2 studies reported sustaining a 15+ pound weight loss for over 1 year; only 1 study showed weight loss maintenance for over 2 years.

“Beware of programs that share data only about those who finish their program, successful losers, or worse, their biggest losers.”

Our StayWell study* found:

- 48% of those who completed the program lost an average of nearly 15 pounds. However, including participants who were not successful or did not complete the program in the analysis brought the average to 2 pounds.
- 40%+ of those who lost weight lost more than 5% of their baseline weight — a level that can produce clinically significant improvements in vital measures like blood pressure or cholesterol.
- Our most successful losers made the greatest progress in physical activity and reported the most improvements in eating fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Bariatric surgery has been performed long enough now that clinicians are seeing patients relapse into obesity, overcoming the constraints of their shrunken stomachs because they’re unable to defy daily temptations. As Simone French (a top obesity researcher at the University of Minnesota) often says, the nation’s willpower hasn’t changed in the past 20 years. What has changed dramatically is the fat, sodium, and sugar content in our food supply – and the marketing strategies promoting these unhealthy foods. Though our research and that of others show coaching programs can support weight management goals, our studies also make this clear: without a commensurate investment in changing food as well as workplace policies and

“Even the most extreme approaches to weight loss cannot ward off the counter punch of our “obesogenic” culture.”

culture, even successful losers continue to fight an uphill battle.

Changing society’s diet will take a grand social movement. A common theme in numerous quotes from Martin Luther King is that our collective silence in the face of bad policy is worse than bad policy itself. He deemed a lack of protest as a latent form of cooperation with wrong doers.

It’s not enough that coaches and practitioners challenge the premise of a “reality” show that projects false hope. Our greater duty is speaking out against the social and environmental forces that created this reality show in the first place. Perhaps there will be a “biggest loser’s reunion” show someday. My hope is that the inspiration will come from those who transformed themselves because they changed the world around them. I’ve no doubt that the successful losers won’t have been the biggest losers. They will be the individuals who persevered in multiple modest daily eating and activity changes, with the support of a friendly environment.

Paul Terry, PhD



* A population-based study of weight management at the workplace. Presented at the 20th Annual Art and Science of Health Promotion Conference. Hilton Head SC, 2010. Paul Terry and Erin Seaverson.

Delivering on Your Promise

In our desire to be all things to all people, wellness coordinators often over-promise: *Participate in our programs and you’ll get healthy in no time. Getting fit is easy and fun. Eat right and avoid illness!* You get the idea.

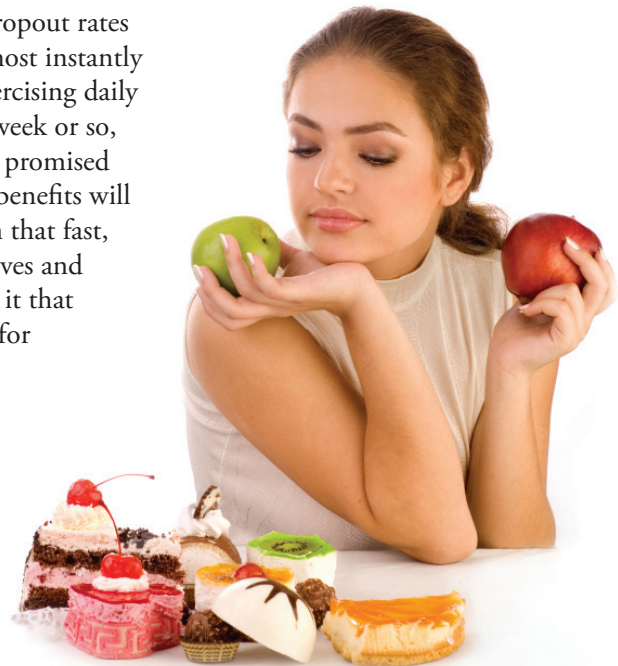
We toss out the benefits like they’re as effortless to acquire as candy at the checkout. It’s seldom the case. More often than not, changing habits ingrained over years or decades is grueling — requiring constant vigilance, a supportive environment, and the will to be different tomorrow than you are today. But that’s a hard message to deliver, and many practitioners have come to the conclusion that soft-pedaling or ignoring the hard stuff can somehow help magically transform people if we can just get them started.

Here’s what happens (and high dropout rates confirm it): participants learn almost instantly that changing eating habits or exercising daily is tough. They stick with it for a week or so, hoping “it’s just me” and that the promised ease of changing and/or tangible benefits will kick in. But it just doesn’t happen that fast, so they begin to question themselves and your wellness program... making it that much harder to bring them back for another attempt at change.

Promise the Truth

Giving people the straight scoop is so out of the ordinary from the daily barrage of half-truths and spin-controlled news/ads that you can actually break through the clutter with pure, unadulterated facts. Here are some truths to share with your clients:

- *We can improve the quality and probably the length of our life by living healthfully*
- *Changing health behaviors is hard and requires big changes*
- *The benefits don’t accrue for months or years*
- *The longer you wait to start a healthy lifestyle, the more difficult it gets*
- *It’s easy to slip back into unhealthy behaviors*
- *Your health is your responsibility — not your doctor’s, employer’s, or wellness coordinator’s.*



Your job as health promoter is to deliver on your promise — by having the resources in place to support individuals committed to improving their health.