

# The Role of Health Coaches in Helping Patients Make Health-Related Decisions and Modify Their Behavior: Experiences from a Clinical Trial

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The objective of health and wellness coaching is to provide patients with active participation in their self-management built on their personal goals and willingness to change through a patient-centered intervention. By changing health behavior, health coaching helps users improve their self-care.

**Aim:** The purpose of this study is to examine how coaches support participants and to understand the elements that contribute to engagement and success.

**Methods:** A qualitative-descriptive design was used to gather insights from health coaches participating in semi-structured interviews. As a convenience sample, participants in a health coaching program in Al Khobar, Saudi Arabia were recruited. Five health coaches participated in the study, giving a clear picture of their experiences. Those who work at Al Khobar primary health care centers or have recently started working there. Data was collected between September 15 and November 15, 2023.

**Results:** Among the study participants, two were diploma nurses, two had a bachelor's degree, and one had a master's degree. They are all female nurses. The majority of health coach stated that they had worked with their patients for 2 years or more. Based on our analysis, we identified five themes: Availability, Trusting relationship, Personal support, Decision support, and Bridging.

**Conclusion:** It has been found that availability and continuity of communication with patients are key characteristics of a successful coaching relationship, as is a strong relationship based on mutual trust and respect for patient confidentiality. Furthermore, coaches support patients' decision-making and bridge the gap between them and their clinicians by providing personalized and supportive care.

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## Keywords

Behavior change, Health coaching.

## Introduction

As an allied health profession, health coaches are among the fastest-growing [1]. A recent focus has been on integrating, patient-centered essential care, emphasizing on activating the patient, training, commitment, and supporting self-managing. In all these areas, health coaches are involved [2]. The goal of a coach is to help patients recognize objectives, develop strategies to make effects and implement those modifications. Health coaches can be registered specialists involving nurses, and physical counselors [3].

The objective of health and wellness coaching is to provide patients with active participation in their self-management built on their personal goals and willingness to change through a patient-centered intervention [4,5]. By changing health behavior, health coaching helps users improve their self-care [6]. The profession of health and wellness coaching (HWC) is quite novel [7]. In addition to improving self-efficacy, these strategies have been shown to increase clinical practice results and sustain interactive change through various behavioral and population settings [8,9]. Increasing numbers of healthcare workers are collaborating with other healthcare professionals, requiring standards of stability, safety, and quality for the public [10].

Although healthcare professionals agree that medication adherence behavior must be modified with a combination of more effort, time, and adjusted strategies, there is consideration on how to accomplish this. Historically, patient training has existed as the first line of defense when it comes to improving adherence [11]. Despite this, mounting evidence indicates that knowledge alone will not improve self-management behaviors [12]. A study found a negative correlation connecting diabetes awareness and compliance, suggesting that patients with less diabetes knowledge may be more likely to take their medication [13]. Both caregivers and patients, when asked about what helps to make better adherence, respond that educational resources would be helpful [14]. A lifestyle behavior skill, however, is an important predictor of treatment adherence. According to one study, together adherence and encouragement were facilitated by the patient activities [12]. There are a variety of behavior skills, including how to implement a program into the routine, take medication according to the situation, obtain aid, and self-strengthen in the long run. Adherence was not affected by motivation alone. If patients lack fundamental behavior skills, even highly motivated patients might not adhere to a treatment plan. A structured intervention is needed to promote personalized applicable strategies to a various context, according to the literature [15].

As a behavior change intervention, health coaching has proved to be effective. Within a learning that is deliberate and tailored, health coaching empowers individuals to achieve their own goals. Coaches have extensive knowledge about health matters and diverse healthcare resources, nevertheless, they have non-medical proficiency; their specialty is motivating clients and developing

individualized behavior change strategies [16]. A key difference between health coaches and other approaches is that they are coached to involve patients throughout the entire behavior change process, rather than only at the beginning and at the end [10].

## Aim

This study aims to investigate how coaches provide support to participants, along with elements that may contribute to engagement and outcomes.

## Methods

Health coaches were interviewed in focus groups and individually to gain better recognition of how they work with clients. From September 15 to November 15, 2023, data was collected.

## Study design

An interpretive qualitative-descriptive design was used to obtain insights from health coaches. Health coaches participated in semi structured interviews.

## Setting and participants

Participants in a health coaching program in Al Khobar, Saudi Arabia were recruited as a convenience sample. During the data collection process, interviews were considered to be the most applicable method for this study [17].

Creating a detailed and comprehensive description of the research observation is the goal of the qualitative research framework. The study involved seven health coaches, which gave a clear picture of the experiences of health coaches. Those who were working or had newly worked at Al Khobar primary health care centers. Allied health professionals, such as medical assistants, served as health coaches and completed a four-month training program that included learning to be attentive and non-judgmental communication, supporting self-managing, social and emotional well-being, assisting with lifestyle changes, educating patients about conditions that are chronic, including compliance with medication, navigating the clinic, and locating public resources.

The principal investigator planned seven individual interviews by telephone "Zoom meetings". Approximately one hour was required. Two participants did not complete the interview, so only five completed it. The study's advisory board reviewed and revised question guides developed based on the study's goals and used by interviewers. In order to improve the clarity and flow of question guides, experts tested them. From September to November 2023, interviews were conducted.

Analyzing qualitative data was based on thematic analysis. After data collection is complete, final coding is performed. To ensure high reliability, multiple audio recorders were used, and independent native Saudi Arabian speakers transcribed the recordings to text. According to the study survey, the subsequent data was collected about the coaches: gender; year of birth; and educational background. Additionally, previous experience in providing health behavior change support, previous experience

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providing care to people, and the ability to provide coaching in a language other than Arabic.

The discussion was guided by a semi-structured interview guide. Coaches were asked about their experiences relating to behavior change support as part of their coaching role, as well as factors that may affect the effectiveness of their services.

### **Ethical approval**

Eastern Health Cluster IRB and AL Khobar Governmental Hospital IRB approved the present study protocol and informed consent documents. IRB Protocol No: NUR-01 approved on 14-9-2023. As part of the review, an internal audit was conducted to ensure compliance with the study protocol, guidelines, and good clinical practices. Before data collection, all participants verbally consented and confirmed their consent. In this study, participants were free to leave the study at any time with no cause or consequence.

### **Results**

We identified seven health coaches in Al Khobar, at the 7 clinic sites, 5 (71.4%) were interviewed; and completed the interview. As for the remaining two, they didn't respond to the study invitation. Among the study participants, two were diploma nurses, two had a bachelor's degree, and one had a master's degree. They are all female nurses. The majority of health coach stated that they had worked with their patients for 2 years or more.

### **Themes Identified**

As a result of our analysis, we identified the following five themes: **Availability, Trusting relationship, Personal support, Decision support, and Bridging.**

#### **Theme 1: Availability of Health Coaches to Patients**

Health coaches' availability, including frequency of contact, duration of the relationship, and accessibility were considered important factors in creating an effective support relationship. As one coach stated, "I made a clear plan for my clients to contact me, but sometimes I contact them more. "Another coach reported that "I put a schedule for being available for my clients as we can use social media like WhatsApp and phone calls". Another coach said "The patient must make an appointment if my presence is needed during official working hours. He makes a reservation by logging into the appointment system himself. On some days, I like to follow up with them, and they follow up with me more. According to the behavior of some patients, hospital visits are not repeated as appointed. We can contact this patient through a private WhatsApp number for follow-up, so they can reach out to me directly."

#### **Theme 2: Establishing a Trusting Relationship**

Providing support to the patient by the coach is based on a positive relationship based on trust. Patients who trust their health coaches are more likely to be honest, ask questions, and express doubts or disagreements. In the words of a coach, "Upon meeting a patient, I welcome them and introduce myself and my job description. As much as possible, I ensure that he

feels that I am concerned about everything he says and that all information he shares is kept private."

Typically, patients share information about their medications or health status with their health coaches because of trust. Health coaches were aware of the confidentiality of information as another one mentioned, "To maintain confidence and credibility in treatment, we must set an achievable goal for treatment. Patients seem to be more confident when we boost their self-esteem and confidence in their ability to overcome difficulties. We can also show interest in their condition by periodically asking about them."

Another coach mentioned the vacation schedule as "For vacation schedule, I would prefer to notify them before vacation. I would arrange my vacation at the beginning of the year and let them know. This is better than having them be shocked and lose confidence in me."

### **Theme 3: Personal support**

The importance of personal support from coaches was frequently noted by patients and coaches. Providing personal support for patients means valuing them so they can take control of their health by making decisions and taking actions. Patients required personal support in order to overcome emotional barriers and make changes.

Providing personal support to patients is also crucial to setting goals and making changes, as one coach stated. "Participating in group meetings with others who have similar conditions and motivating them." Another coach mentioned "I assist the patient in making the best treatment decisions. Follow-up on his condition and constant communication with him support his psychological well-being. Support comes mostly from being patient with the patient's decisions and encouraging a spirit of resolve and perseverance in them."

Another coach stated "In order to gain confidence, a health coach needs to invest time and effort. A patient's confidence depends on patience, avoiding mistakes, and professionalism in treatment."

### **Theme 4: Decision support**

Providing decision support included identifying options, creating action plans, identifying and overcoming obstacles, locating resources, and providing reminders. As a result of giving this support, coaches permitted clients to make more informed decisions. Coaches identified options and made suggestions, but the patient needed to make his or her own decision. As one coach put it, "Patients determine the goals of the treatment plan, and this makes them more likely to support their decisions, and I assist them in doing so. The patient's decision is often supported by coaches' optimism about the plan's success. Supporting the patient's decision by urging him to be patient is important. My role was to support him as the decision-maker, and I did so as an observer."

Another coach stated, "It is important to provide the patient with

sufficient and complete information about his condition so that his decision is based on complete knowledge." Another coach added, "The patient needs to be taught that he is the decision maker and responsible for the plan's success or failure. It is crucial for him to realize when he says I need this, I refuse this, or this is hindering my progress."

Another opinion from a coach, "A discussion of the pros and cons of the patient's decision will help him feel that I support his decision and increase his likelihood of making the right choice." "In order to support the patient's decision, I listen to him carefully, discuss the positives and negatives, and ask him about his goals and objectives. My questions tend to be neutral and I paraphrase his answers most of the time. A health coach can assist the client in making his decision by monitoring his condition himself, documenting his achievements, documenting his failures, and personalizing his plan based on the data he has."

### **Theme 5: Creating a bridge connecting patients and clinicians**

In the final theme, providing support for patient decisions is the role of coaches and clinicians. The goal was to improve patient perception and interaction with the clinician, help the patient identify and ask questions of the clinician, provide support amongst appointments, and reduce the patient's fear and anxiety around office visits. By bridging the gap between patient and health care provider, health coaches believe they engage patients in a more active role in their health care. One of them stated, "Health coaches play an important role as intermediaries between patients and doctors. This allows the health coaches to add a greater understanding of how to help the patient and when to alert them to dangers." Another mentioned, "There are times when we need to alert the doctor that something is wrong with this patient. In most cases, we closely monitor the medication consultations provided by the doctor and ensure that the patient follows them."

### **Discussion**

As part of this study, we examined coaches' experiences, ways of supporting participants, and engagement and outcome factors related to health coaching. Based on our analysis, we created a thematic analysis that describes how health coaches and patients work together to achieve results.

The findings of our study revealed that developing a positive relationship with a health coach means being available, including frequency of contact, duration of the relationship, and availability of the coach. Health coaches' emphasis on the significant role of coach availability in the relationship.

The systematic review study done about the effects of health coaching on adult patients with chronic diseases found that availability of the coach should be face to face and online also. The study reported that to increase adherence motivation, face-to-face coaching after discharge from the health sector and telephone coaching sessions are recommended [18]. Other studies found that a cost-effective way to support behavioral health changes for

patients is to facilitate their access to their providers [19,20].

Regarding patient decision support and patient support, our study findings revealed that patient support and patient decision support were crucial and emphasized by the health coaches. Other studies support our findings. These studies reported that phone support for long-term situations has possible benefits for self-efficacy, health behavior, and health status because it can gradually improve patients' skills and tailor support to the individual patient's needs [21,22]. Another study found that, coaches provide education, emotional, and practical support, but not medical advice. Adherence to this role is evaluated in testing and direct observation, and is reinforced by coaching supervisors.

Among Filipino patients, a qualitative study of community health workers (CHWs) helped them change their behaviors by fostering trust and rapport, facilitating social support and helping them adopt healthy behaviors, and highlighting the importance of a partnership between CHWs and patients [23]. Concerning maintaining a good relationship with the patient's clinician as a bridge between health care workers and patients. In our study, In general, coaches work with patients to achieve goals that align with their care plans, a role that clinicians appreciate it. Recent research found that coaches support education, emotional support, and real advice, but not medical advice. It examined how primary care clinicians' perceptions of patient care are affected by health coaches. Health coaches are believed to improve patient care through four key activities. In addition to developing a rapport with patients over time and working with them between medical visits, health coaches assist patients in navigating the health care system, (b) bridge communication gaps between clinicians and patients, (c) provide self-management support to patients, and (d) act as a point of contact for patients [24].

### **Conclusion**

Our findings indicate that availability and continuity of communication with patients are key characteristics of successful coaching, a strong relationship based on mutual trust and respecting the confidentiality of patient information, providing personal as well as supporting patients' decision-making and bridging the gap between them and their clinicians. The fact that all groups mentioned these aspects of health coaching is encouraging. Health coaches can benefit from these themes when they are trained and supported.

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