THE 5 BIGGEST

Myths About Health Coaching

And the truth about its critical role in the future of medicine
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BY CHRIS KRESSER

The stunning rise of chronic disease, and the devastating risks it poses—to all of us—can’t be overstated. Consider that:

- **Chronic disease affects one out of two Americans** and causes seven of 10 deaths in the United States.¹
- **50 million Americans (approximately one in six) have an autoimmune disease** (more than cancer and heart disease combined).²
- **Chronic disease will generate $47 trillion in healthcare costs** globally by 2030 if the epidemic is unchecked.³ That’s more than the annual GDP of the six largest economies in the world.

How can this be stopped? How can we possibly turn this dark tide of chronic disease?

As I explain in detail in my book *Unconventional Medicine*, our healthcare system is broken. The traditional disease-centered approach to medicine cannot address the epidemic of chronic illness because it wasn’t designed to do that.

**The answer to the healthcare crisis isn’t just more conventional doctors.**

According to the CDC, the top five behaviors for preventing or addressing the symptoms of chronic disease include not smoking, getting regular physical activity, consuming moderate amounts of alcohol or none at all, maintaining a normal body weight, and obtaining daily sufficient sleep. Yet as of 2013, only 6.3 percent of Americans engage in all five of these health-promoting behaviors.⁴

What we need are the people who provide that vital (and missing) layer of support to help patients make lasting diet, lifestyle, and behavior changes, cope with stress, and provide moral and emotional support.

**What we need are health coaches.**
Thinking of becoming a coach?
If you’re reading this, chances are you work as a coach—or are considering it. You might be:

A SKILLED OR SEASONED HEALTH COACH WHO WANTS MORE ANSWERS
Certified or not, you’re a gifted and passionate communicator and coach, and you’d love to understand more about the complex chronic conditions your clients are facing or how to better personalize their diets.

A FAN OF FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE, CURIOUS ABOUT COACHING
Perhaps you’ve read a lot about, and even experienced (or witnessed), the effects of Functional Medicine and/or ancestral diet and lifestyle—and you’re passionate about sharing that insight with others.

What you’d like to have is a clearer idea of what coaching is or should be as a profession. And while you are familiar with the issues driving chronic disease, you can’t help but feel that there are some holes in your own knowledge that keep you from offering better support and advice.

A PATIENT ADVOCATE AND BUDDING COACH WITH AN APPETITE FOR MORE
You’ve been curious about the coaching profession for a while—either because you know someone who does it or have received coaching yourself. You may have even survived a health crisis (or supported a family member through one) and recognize that not only is coaching something you would love doing, but it’s also pretty important. You also wonder if this will be a viable career, and if so, how that all works.

Wherever you are on your own coaching career path, you’re committed and passionate about reinventing healthcare, reversing chronic disease, and optimizing human potential, and you want to support this movement however you can.

This is great news.
Beware the coaching myths!

No matter how excited and eager you are to really do this, here’s what happens: doubts set in. Myths and misguided advice distort the role of coaching, and your perception of it. You’re told on the one hand that you can make a mint being a health coach and on the other that it’s not a sustainable career.

If I told you every myth about coaching, we’d be here all day and into tomorrow. So what I’ve done here is select the most rampant and damaging myths about the coaching profession, so that you can start to see it for what it is and can be—and what role you can play in it.

Let’s bust some myths!

**MYTH #1: A COACH IS NOT AS IMPORTANT TO PATIENTS AS A LICENSED PRACTITIONER.**

*Truth: More doctors do not equal better health.*

The key to major shifts in the state of health doesn’t lie in a prescription, but in behavioral changes. And a doctor’s diagnosis isn’t enough to help a patient change behavior. You know this: information rarely sees a patient through the often challenging work of changing lifestyle behaviors.

This is the coach’s job.

I believe that health coaches, nutritionists, and allied healthcare providers will play just as big a role—if not a greater one—as doctors and other licensed clinicians in ushering in the future of medicine.

This belief evolved out of my experience as the co-director of a large, interdisciplinary Functional Medicine clinic (*California Center for Functional Medicine*, or CCFM), my observation of current trends in both conventional and Functional Medicine, and my research on the growing challenges our healthcare system is facing.

Take, for instance, my experience as co-director of CCFM. We have many patients with chronic, complex diseases who are not sick enough for the hospital but are too sick for the standard episodic model of care where they only see a licensed practitioner once every two to three months for half an hour.

Yes, a licensed practitioner is the one who helps patients understand their chronic illness. A doctor or nurse is the one to request diagnostic tests, analyze blood panels, and put the puzzle pieces together to see the whole picture of a patient’s health.

Their job is to name the disease and the cure, and that job is foundational.

But practitioners are not in the best position to help patients make the critical lifestyle changes that would dramatically shift their health.
As a coach, you spend more time with the patient, walking them through ways to make behavioral changes last, and you are often specifically trained in techniques like:

- **Habit formation and reversal.** Since only 6 percent of people engage in the top five health behaviors, reversing bad habits like smoking and forming new habits like eating well and getting enough sleep are the key to reversing chronic disease.

- **Motivational interviewing,** which encourages patients to link new behavior changes to their deepest needs and goals (for example: “I will change my diet and lifestyle because I want to live to see my grandchildren get married”).

- **Techniques inspired by positive psychology,** which uses the patient’s strengths, rather than their weaknesses, to make behavior changes.

A good health coach doesn’t just tell people what to do. She helps them discover their own motivation and strategy for change, develop their own plan and goals, and stick to those commitments.

So whether you’ve gone so far as to look into certification, or have even done some coaching yourself, chances are you’re hungry for more education, more strategies, and more tools. The best coaches are! What you don’t need is medical or technical training.

Coaches have their own skill set, and it doesn’t require or, frankly, permit them to practice medicine. Leave that to the practitioners—so that you can focus on how to become a better, more effective coach.

What you do need, however, is a framework that allows you to see how all of this works together—so that you can bring all your skills to bear in ways that are not only most effective, but more fulfilling for you as a coach.

**BOTTOM LINE:** If behavior change is the most important step we can take to prevent and reverse chronic disease (it is), and health coaches are best positioned to support people in making behavior change (they are), it follows that health coaches are the missing link to solving the chronic disease epidemic.
Studies consistently find that health coaches improve patient outcomes and patient satisfaction. One systematic review concluded that health coaching was effective for patients with cancer, diabetes, obesity, and heart disease. These are some of the top chronic diseases plaguing our nation. Can you imagine how much healthier we would be as a population if everyone was able to see a health coach once a week?

**MYTH #2: YOU HAVE TO BE A MEDICAL EXPERT.**

*Truth: Clients don’t need a coach who knows it all. They need a coach who knows them.*

There’s a rampant (and wrongheaded) idea that a health coach is an expert on all things health. That he or she will tell you precisely what to do, and because they are the “expert,” you will listen and do what they say—and better health will transpire.

If only it were that easy! Then we wouldn’t need people at all—just magazine articles and blogs. But reading articles isn’t where the rubber meets the road of real and sustainable health.

Now, make no mistake, a health coach is expert in what she does and has mastery of her skill set. But this idea that you have to be a medical expert is not true. I say this because there’s this persistent and flawed image of the health coach as an advice-touting expert who has all the answers. What’s far more valuable is a coach who knows the best questions to ask.

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My point is, the future of medicine and your role in it does not depend on your ability to dispense advice. This myth puts the patient in the role of “receiver” of information, instead of an actor on her own behalf—and it can make a coach feel he doesn’t have what it takes to do the job well, when nothing could be further from the truth.

Yes, for many clients, this is all new—and yes, they’ll have questions, and quite frankly, doubts about whether any actions they take can make a difference. Clients have grown up being told that someone smarter or better simply administers health, and unlearning this, while relearning the idea of being stewards of their own health, is either too good to be true, or totally terrifying.
But the true priority of a coach is to empower people to discover their own goals, solutions, and strategies, not to give advice or “teach.” Simply telling clients to do it isn’t going to magically change their behavior.

And even if it does work temporarily, it sends the message that the coach is in charge, holds the power, and is responsible for the success or failure of the intervention.

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Your clients need you to coach them to become the hero of their own health. Using motivational interviewing techniques such as expressing empathy, asking powerful questions, and listening reflectively helps them increase their self-awareness and self-efficacy. You help them build their own capacity to meet challenges and become their own “change agent.”

And what makes it possible for coaches to help their clients thrive? The strength of the relationship between them. The coach’s superpower relies heavily on developing rapport, gaining trust, and building strong relationships.

Don’t get me wrong. There are many skills that a health coach needs in order to be effective. And a strong grounding in a functional approach to health and wellness is nonnegotiable in helping patients make the best behavior changes for their health.

But no skill or piece of knowledge is as important as the capacity to build a strong relationship with clients. That is the specialty and the genius of the skilled health coach—not absolute health content expertise.

BOTTOM LINE: There is a time and a place for the health coach to assume the “expert” role. But the default should always be the client-centered approach because it is by far the best way to support lasting change. If you are drawn to being an expert, health coaching may not be the right fit for you.
Studies have consistently shown that the client–coach relationship is the fundamental driver of positive outcomes. For example, a study in the psychology literature found that the coaching relationship was more important to patient success than the particular treatment method (medication, talk therapy, etc.). Another study in the coaching world found that the quality of the client–coach relationship is the best predictor of client success.

**MYTH #3: NUTRITION OR DIETITIAN TRAINING IS ALL YOU NEED TO BECOME AN EFFECTIVE HEALTH COACH.**

**Truth: Coaching and nutrition training are two very different things. (You need both.)**

Lots of people assume, incorrectly, that being a dietitian makes you a great coach. Or, that you need to be trained as a dietitian to work as a health coach.

Neither of these things is true.

Fact is, we need both nutritionists and health coaches to reverse the tide of chronic disease. But they are neither interchangeable terms nor a package deal. And you do not need to be trained as a dietitian to become an effective and successful health coach.

First, let’s clarify our terms.

Dietitians and nutritionists are both trained to deliver advice and customized recommendations about—you guessed it—nutrition. The difference is a matter of legal restriction: You don’t need any specific certification to call yourself a nutritionist (the title alone doesn’t connote any particular level of education), whereas registered dietitians, or RDs, are registered with the Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR), the governing body for RDs. In other words, you can only call yourself an RD if you have been granted this title by the CDR.

Training can vary tremendously. Registered dietitians (RDs) and certified nutrition specialists (CNSs) have completed undergraduate and postgraduate training, along with hundreds or thousands of hours of internship. On the other end of the spectrum, someone might receive only a handful of hours of training and still refer to herself as a nutritionist because that title is not heavily regulated in the United States.

A health coach, on the other hand, is trained in a range of other critical skills that enable her to support clients that have nothing to do with nutrition. These skills include motivational interviewing, initiating and managing difficult conversations, and drawing on the techniques of...
positive psychology. The ultimate goal for a coach is to boost her clients’ capacity to meet their own challenges and become their own “change agent.”

Different clients need different kinds of support. For example, when the client is struggling with ambivalence or obstacles standing in the way of change, a health coach would be more appropriate. There are other situations, such as when a patient is already committed to adopting a healthy diet but needs help working out the details, when a nutritionist or dietitian would be best.

This is why I believe that the most effective health coaches are also trained in nutrition, and the most effective dietitians and nutritionists are also trained in health coaching.

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I believe this so strongly that I make sure I train coaches this way. While I don’t certify nutritionists or dietitians in my ADAPT Health Coach Training Program, I do teach you how to use the principles of an ancestral diet and lifestyle to lay the foundation of health. So even if you have an extensive background in nutrition, we think it’s critical to have a focused training in nutrition that’s effective in setting this foundation, versus a survey of lots of other diets and approaches that don’t work. The ancestral perspective (genetically aligned, species-appropriate diet and lifestyle) helps practitioners and clients correct the mismatch between our genes and our diet and lifestyle, which is the driving factor behind the modern epidemic of chronic disease.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Ancestral nutrition principles and core health coaching skills are the “secret sauce” when it comes to helping people transform their diet, lifestyle, and behavior. While practitioners can’t usually play both of these interdependent and crucial roles, coaches are the missing link.

**MYTH 4: YOU CAN LEARN TO COACH BY WATCHING VIDEOS ON YOUTUBE.**

**Truth:** Coaching is a practice, not a personality trait—and requires active, engaged training and practice.

As we’ve established, you need more than a few magazines and a Google search to understand how to make and maintain successful behavior. Clients need connection, empathy, accountability, and support.

So how would you expect to learn how to coach people from watching a few YouTube videos? You can’t. Health coaching is a valuable and nuanced profession. Watching videos or reading a book, even three or four, might teach you some key concepts and a few strategies to try. But that’s not how you learn to work with real people whose health and well-being is on the line.
Let’s say, for instance, that you wanted to learn to play basketball. You could read about the sport, learn the rules, and even watch a lot of it on TV. You might be able to hold your own in a discussion about the sport, but that doesn’t mean you can play.

If you want to be a good player, you have to develop and practice your skills. You have to learn to handle the ball, pass, shoot, and play both defense and offense. And then, you have to put all those skills into practice in an actual game, where there are a thousand moving parts. Hours of practice only shooting free throws won’t be all that helpful.

The same goes for health coaching: You become skilled through hands-on practice. You practice the craft. Lectures and videos give you information—and then you apply the knowledge of ancestral nutrition principles and coaching strategies, such as mindfulness, positive psychology, and motivational interviewing.

With your clients, you practice building positive, ongoing relationships, which is the essence of effective health coaching. And you learn how to do that through the coaching of seasoned mentors who build a relationship with you.

I have always argued that the credibility and authority of health coaches will continue to grow, with one important caveat—that the health coaching profession creates and maintains a high standard of training and competence.

Right now, anyone can call themselves a health coach, and any educational institution can call itself a health coach training program. It’s the Wild West out there! And a lack of standards means that poorly trained people represent themselves as “health coaches”—and this can harm the profession. I’ve already seen this happen.

If we want health coaches to be taken seriously and given the respect and credibility they deserve, we need to establish and maintain guidelines for how they should be trained, the skills they should acquire, and how they should operate in their practice.

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Fortunately, there are two organizations that have taken the lead in defining a globally recognized standard for coaches: the International Coaching Federation (ICF) and the International Consortium of Health and Wellness Coaches (ICHWC).
Both have clearly established the skills, competencies, and standards of conduct that a coach should possess. But ICHWC is especially relevant for health coaches, due to its focus on that niche.

The ICHWC has also formed a partnership with the National Board of Medical Examiners, with the goal of setting standards for foundational competencies for health coaches. Health coaches who attend an ICHWC-approved program will gain important credibility in the marketplace and will likely be more attractive to potential employers and private clients.

To that end, we crafted the year-long ADAPT Health Coach Training Program to include mentor coaches, practical application activities, and a full six months of practicum (50 coaching sessions) where you master core coaching skills with actual clients. Not only are these sessions crucial for acquiring competency, but they’re also a prerequisite to sit for the Health & Wellness Coach Certifying Examination.

The ADAPT program is based on the latest research in learning theory to ensure that you absorb and retain as much as possible no matter your learning style or how busy you are. This is the kind of experiential learning that turns information into action—the kind that prevents and reverses chronic illness. This is how you become a coach of the highest level.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Health coaching is a craft. You develop the skills over time, with practice and seasoned mentors who coach you. Lectures and videos you watch online can give you information, but they can’t turn you into an effective health coach.

**MYTH #5: TRAINING TO BE A COACH IS TOO EXPENSIVE, AND YOU CAN’T MAKE MONEY DOING IT.**

**Truth:** Health coaching is a business—which means it requires time, attention, and resources. It also has a replicable model that offers a path to success.

Anything worth doing requires an investment of some sort, whether you want to learn to scuba dive, code websites … or become a trained health coach. This myth presumes that the investment in learning to become a coach is exorbitant, or lacks an ROI. Not true.

Now, if you wanted to become a plastic surgeon, you would know going in that the investment in that training is a considerable one—but given the industry standard, you also have an idea of what you can earn.

Coaching, however, is a new and emerging career path, and because there is no single governing body for health coaches, and no single standard for what it costs to work with one, it’s easy to see the training as expensive and the job as unsustainable.

This myth is so damaging because it’s built on a false belief that health coaching doesn’t deserve formal training; you can just be a health coach if you have some solid communication skills and a
decent sense of what’s healthy. This is a degradation of a skillful profession with a nonnegotiable place in the future of healthcare.

The myth also degrades the people drawn to the profession by assuming that if you have some natural talent for health coaching, you don’t need training. You can simply “wing it.” The logical conclusion is that only people who are totally clueless about health coaching need to pony up the money so they can get a lick of credibility.

Can you see how belittling and cruel this myth is? The point of coaching education and training is to apply your innate ability in ways that have the best results, as part of a deeply meaningful and urgent cause.

Think of someone who is innately athletic and agile. Unless that athlete works with someone who can shape her talent and show her how to apply it to a specific sport, she will not succeed in any measurable way. Same goes for a health coach.

There are techniques you learn as a trained coach, such as how to:

- Pay attention to facial expressions, body language, and other nonverbal cues
- Ask powerful, open-ended questions and know how to respond to them
- Create connection and rapport
- Help your clients identify character strengths that they can leverage to create successful change
- Guide clients to discover their own motivation, strategies, and resources for change

Health coaching is an excellent opportunity for those who want to help reinvent the healthcare system but aren’t necessarily science savvy or ready to spend four or more years in intensive graduate school.

Health coaching education and training are both real and important. But is this a sustainable career path?

For every person who says you can’t earn much as a health coach, there’s another person (often selling coach certifications of their own), who promises the sun, moon, and stars and swears up and down that you can make scads of money like that.

I’m dubious of anyone who promises you can make money quickly doing anything—especially in a people business that requires first and foremost the ability to form and sustain relationships and trust. We’re not selling widgets here. This is not a get-rich-quick scheme. And anyone who tries to tell you it’s fast or easy? That person is not someone I trust.
So is there a proven path to success? Absolutely.

Health coaching is a business, and like any other business, it requires sound and proven practice, measurable results, and a clear path and business model. As part of my ADAPT Health Coach Training Program, I teach and train extensively not only on the soft skills and subtle art of coaching, but also on the hard skills that every business owner needs, including:

- A framework for approaching your coaching business
- A business model and understanding of how this works
- A professional development and marketing track
- A plan for partnering with other healthcare providers

Part of being your own boss as a health coach means that there isn’t someone else to set it all up for you—you not only do the fun and fulfilling work of coaching, but also the job of sharing, promoting, and marketing the work you do. I know some people shrink at the idea of self-promotion, but trust me, this too is a must-have skill. And you don’t have to be a snake-oil salesperson to do it right and well.

**BOTTOM LINE: A career in health coaching, as with any career, requires an investment of time and resources. But it’s not an investment you make willy-nilly, without knowing the potential for success. If you run your coaching practice like a business, using sound and proven practices, there’s no doubt in my mind that you can make this a sustainable career.**

**Take Your Place in the Future of Healthcare**

Being a trained coach gives you the skills you need to be a success, and the credibility too—plus a powerful platform for building a coaching practice that’s as fulfilling for you as it is for your clients.

How do I know it can work as a business? Because, as with any business, you need demand. And you’ve got that in spades.

The world is in such dire and aching need for support, empathy, connection, and the ability to make sustainable, self-directed lifestyle changes that even if you wanted to help all the people who need it, you couldn’t.

I strongly believe that if you follow sound business practices and make a consistent and thorough effort to establish and grow your business, you can have great results and a thriving career as a health coach.

Are you going to be a millionaire overnight? Not a chance. But it’s extremely rare that anyone would be, in any profession. And my guess is that that’s not why you’re doing this to begin with. You’re doing it, or even considering it, because of the passion you have for health and wellness,
and for helping others achieve it by reversing and preventing chronic disease. And for revolutionizing healthcare as we know it.

If you lay a strong coaching foundation and work hard to skillfully, mindfully, and effectively tap the huge demand for health coaches, you will be in business a long time—and play a critical role in the future of healthcare.

Imagine watching people go from sick and miserable to healthy and thriving—and knowing you played a role in helping that person take action. Experiencing a sense of purpose in the work you do. Making a real difference.

Remember, this isn’t just about improving someone else’s life, but your own, as well. Invest in a skill that serves you as a professional, and as a person. It’s not a short win. It’s the long game—one in which you get to emerge the winner simply because you’re engaged, body and mind, in revolutionizing health and wellness for real people and improving your own sense of well-being, while making you a more capable, empathetic, mature person.

While I fully believe coaches must be trained with a critical skill set, those skills don’t just benefit coaches who make a living doing it; these are, I believe, the skills that make us more human. Having a vision for what a better life looks like and being able to inspire yourself and others to make it real is about as worthwhile a goal as I’ve ever heard. And there’s no question in my mind you can do it.

– Chris Kresser
References


