

The Future of Health Clubs May Lie in Lifestyle Coaching

Nov 29, 2016 [Anthony Dominic, Content Producer](#) | *Club Industry*

Fitness industry professionals are increasingly adopting holistic coaching techniques to better meet the demands of their clients, enhance the offerings of their clubs and attract the deconditioned market with a broader approach to their health and wellness challenges.



Experts agree the most important aspect of lifestyle coaching is effective communication. Coaches must not only be good listeners, but they must step off the proverbial pedestal and demystify the client's pathway toward their goals. (Photo by Thinkstock.)

When does a trend become more than a trend?

In the fitness industry, it's when a philosophical shift takes hold, permanently altering the way in which health clubs operate. At the ground level, this means the client-trainer relationship. And many specialists at the industry's top certifying bodies say the success of this relationship is no longer measurable by time spent in the gym alone.

In today's fast-paced landscape, clients face more distractions than ever, thereby pressuring health club operators to deliver results. Increasingly, club owners and staff must foster positive, long-term behavior shifts for their clients—changes that take seed during a client's hour in the gym and blossom during the other 23 hours of the day. In this analogy, the lifestyle coach has emerged as the gardener.

Simply put, a lifestyle coach is a goals-oriented trainer who has adopted a holistic approach to shape his or her client's diet, habits and general mindset, generally with training and certifications that help them do so. Lifestyle coaches, also called health coaches or **wellness coaches**, should not be confused with personal trainers, who typically do not offer an entirely holistic regimen. Lifestyle coaches must be able to wear many hats—counselor, nutritionist, motivational speaker—that transcend preconceived notions of health club trainers. In fact, shattering negative stereotypes is part of being an effective lifestyle coach, said [Tony Books Avilez](#), a collegiate faculty leader and presenter with [World Instructor Training Schools \(W.I.T.S.\)](#).

MORE ARTICLES ON HEALTH COACHES

[Wellness Coaching Is on the Rise](#)

[Embracing Wellness Coaching in Your Clubs](#)

[Six Steps for Implementing a Successful Coaching Program in Your Fitness Facility](#)

"This person is not just your 10:30 client," Avilez said about clients of lifestyle coaches. "This person comes in with stresses, challenges, abilities. Everyone has their own style of learning and stages of behavioral change, and you have to use techniques that will be amenable to those changes. ... The workout itself is just a part of the process now."

W.I.T.S., [like many of its peers](#), offers an online lifestyle coaching certification. Individuals must earn the certification by taking a self-paced, nine-hour course divided into three major modules that include instructional videos and quizzes. The most significant lesson, Avilez said, is "experiential listening."

"This is how to listen for questions, how to empathize with the client—using those techniques to allow the client to come to their own conclusion," he said. "We may be assisting the client to navigate a behavioral shift, but it is the client's shift."

Self-awareness is another area of focus in the W.I.T.S. program. Coaches must be aware of their own body language and word choice, Avilez said. This is especially key when providing the client with feedback.

Getting at the Heart to Set Goals

For lifestyle coaches, the practical application of such lessons starts with goal setting. Instead of assuming a client will achieve progress through a number of workouts, a lifestyle coach must work with the client to establish major, long-reaching outcomes.

"If my goal is to improve my life, then let's determine how we go about it," Avilez said. "Let the workout be an aspect of that."

Difficult questions are an inevitable part of establishing major life goals with a client. At Houston-based [Avenu Fitness](#), Lifestyle Engineer Ben MacMillan onboards new clients with a "lifestyle session." It's a relaxed interview of sorts, often conducted at the club's in-house kitchen or offsite at a coffee shop. This takes place before the client ever touches workout equipment.

“From that first point of contact, we want to get across the idea of who we are and that we want to help them with everything, not just a 30-minute session three or four times a week,” MacMillan said. “We’re there for the long haul, and that has to be communicated right at the get-go.”

In order to address potentially awkward areas of concern—unhealthy sleep patterns, stress levels, dietary habits and more—MacMillan opens up himself. As a lifestyle coach, the idea is to step off a preconceived “pedestal of perfection,” he said.

“In college, I weighed 240 pounds and wore size 40 pants,” MacMillan said. “I talk about that. It makes me relatable for guys. For some of the women, moms, that I meet, I talk to them about their kids and the importance of making healthy choices.”

Lifestyle coaching is a proactive measure for clubs, W.I.T.S. faculty member Lisandra Cuadrado said. It helps to answer “why” questions every coach faces. Why do clients make poor choices? Why do they suddenly stop attending sessions?

“The trainer has to say I want to be a part of what you're doing inside and outside the gym,” Cuadrado said. “They have 23 hours to reverse what you did in the gym. ... There's an accountability factor, and the client will see that if the trainer cares about them, beyond making a sale for commission.”

POPULAR NOW

[Franchised Fitness Studio Design Isn't as Cookie Cutter as You May Think](#)

[The Cost of Building a New Fitness Facility](#)

[The Components of a Good Fitness Assessment](#)

Avilez, also the owner of New York City-based personal training studio [The Body House](#), said a “lifestyle touch” can distinguish studios from larger, less-expensive chains.

Avilez charges clients \$100 for an initial health assessment, followed by \$150 per individual session with him. This compares to \$199 for The Body House's most-expensive “Intensity” training camp, which covers three sessions per week over a four-week period. Justifying the value of the former is essential; in Avilez's case, he can point clients to his eight industry certifications, including corrective exercise specialist through the [National Academy of Sports Medicine \(NASM\)](#) and medical exercise specialist through the [American Academy of Health, Fitness & Rehab Professionals \(AAHFRP\)](#).

When it comes to lifestyle coaching, he said his own training and certification background is part of a two-way street of accountability with clients.

“The client doesn’t care how much you know until they know how much you care,” Avilez said. “With a more comprehensive outlook, you can offer a greater level of service with a greater personal touch.”

This kind of approach defines Avenu, where clients can access an in-house kitchen, complete with cooking classes and routine food drops from local provisioners. MacMillan studied exercise and sports science in college and later received a strength and conditioning specialist certification through the [National Strength and Conditioning Association \(NSCA\)](#)—but it was a life-changing reading of [Michael Pollan's "The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals"](#) that inspired and continues to inform his efforts as a lifestyle coach, he said.

Investments such as the kitchen have paid dividends for Avenu, as clients are able to experience the practical application of their lifestyle lessons, MacMillan said. This, too, goes back to Avilez's two-way street of accountability. Passion, expert certifications and diversified offerings all tell clients, especially [time-constrained Millennials](#), that “we've prepared ourselves to offer real value in what we do,” MacMillan said. The philosophy also pays off for the club: when last measured, Avenu's retention rate was above 93 percent.

“It’s all about having that ability to connect through a different medium from training,” MacMillan said. “Being able to bring in food bloggers and chefs and change the discussion of health and fitness. It’s a different way to have the same conversation. We want to get people back to good sleep habits and [a healthy relationship with food](#). Exercise is a bonus, the cherry on top, if we’re trying to structure the perfect sundae.”

Reaching the Deconditioned

In addition to these benefits, lifestyle coaching is a potential means of motivating the country’s largely inactive population, said Anthony Wall, director of professional education at the [American Council on Exercise \(ACE\)](#). Recent studies have found more than [50 percent of healthy adults](#) and [78 percent of healthy children](#) do not meet recommended exercise guidelines. Effectively trained lifestyle coaches have the ability to disrupt the status quo of “keeping fit people fit,” Wall said.

“We have an inactivity crisis,” he said, “and the vast number of people who suffer [from obesity] are not your regular gym-goers. ACE wants to equip fitness professionals to meet them in their environments. ... You don’t have to be in a fitness facility, you don’t have to have weights, to affect someone’s lifestyle.

“It’s about [the client] being comfortable, accepting where they are and what they’re going to do—like walking down the stairs or parking their car a little further away.”

ACE offers 10 specialty programs intended to supplement its general fitness certifications. Several of these, such as its behavior change certification, fall under the lifestyle umbrella and can be completed through a 25-hour online course. The final hour of the course is a live training experience, where trainees engage via video with master trainers in a virtual group setting.

“You use the skills you’ve learned on how to coach somebody,” Wall said. “You actually have the opportunity to sit down and start having that talk.”

Most importantly, lifestyle training helps fitness professionals to empathize with clients, Avilez said. When a client walks through the door for the first time, a lifestyle coach can identify those who have endured a series of failures up until that point—diets, workout fads, etc. And a holistic training approach can ensure this new relationship will not be another letdown. This is as vital for the coach and the club as it is for the client.

MacMillan said lifestyle coaching, and health clubs generally, represent the "new health care" in the United States. The fusion of the worlds of "fitness" and "wellness," he said, makes the adoption of lifestyle coaching tactics not only natural but an essential component of the long-term survival of health clubs.

"The first myth is the more [clients] go at it from a training perspective, the better the results will be," he said. "That we should fix our problems with exercise. But why not spin the conversation to, 'Are you happy?' Because if you're stressed or sick and tired of feeling like you're chasing something that might be unrealistic, we absolutely have to take a different approach."

Dozens of certifying bodies offer relevant training programs for fitness professionals interested in expanding their lifestyle coaching skill set. Others not previously mentioned in this article include [The Genavix Wellness Network](#), the [American College of Sports Medicine \(ACSM\)](#), the [IDEA Health & Fitness Association](#), the [National Exercise Trainers Association \(NETA\)](#) and the [American Academy of Sports Dietitians and Nutritionists \(AASDN\)](#).