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Helping friends find better health

It's not always easy to facilitate positive health behavioral changes in others, but it can be done. *by Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: My friend Anne has diabetes, heart disease and gum disease. She understands that they are all related to her bad habits (poor diet, lack of exercise and smoking). I want to help her turn things around but I know she doesn't want another lecture—she already feels shamed by her doctors. Is there any way I can help?

A: Yes you can! We can each make a difference in the life of a friend, whether it's helping her lose that nagging ten pounds or saving her life. Try practicing the art of *facilitation*. It's about helping her get attached to a better outcome and map her own journey to get from here to there.

Your question reminds me of the quote from Dr. Rachael Naomi Remen in the book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*:

“A *healer* is *any person* who can see another person's wholeness (wellness) better than they can at any given moment.”

Notice the shift from seeing her brokenness (sickness) to seeing her wellness.

Future-focus is the key. Here's how: Accept (briefly) Anne's complaints of the past, honor her present conditions, since that's her starting point, and guide her into a vivid description of her desired outcome. *Curiosity* is the key. Be an ask-it-all, not a know-it-all! Ask how she'd like to feel/look/be? Then STAY curious, digging deeper into the possibilities. Ask how her energy would be if...? What would change about her life if...? How would others experience her differently if...? What would this mean for her personal relationships? What else might she want to accomplish if....?

Once Anne gets attached to a future vision she will be ready to form realistic strategies that she can commit to. It is only during this process phase that how-to advice will be helpful. Really try to wait until she has exhausted her own ideas—and remember to ask permission to give advice. Finally, challenge her to verbalize every little commitment. Lifestyle change is usually an evolution not a revolution.

This facilitation model is exactly opposite of most traditional health care models that preach behavior change. If we focus on behavior change without changing the belief system we often stimulate short-term compliance but not long-term commitment.

In fact, the entire premise in our health care system has historically focused on access-to-care for the sick, instead of addressing wellness—helping people get healthier for a lifetime. Knowing that, be careful to select health care partners (physicians, dentists, therapists and friends) whose values and beliefs around health align with yours.