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Effective Education in Health and Nutrition

Healthy eating. Good health.

Today's consumers are more interested in improving or protecting their health through diet. However, change is not always easy and entrenched behaviours and misinformation can create barriers and challenges. Research indicates that behaviour change is a necessary part of making the switch to a healthy lifestyle and even small lifestyle changes can improve overall health.

Health and nutrition educators can be instrumental in promoting the principles of a healthy lifestyle, by empowering consumers to make lifestyle changes. Increased self-confidence and motivation are key. As a follow-up to the April 2002 seminar 'Balanced Advice On... The Opportunities and Challenges That Face Nutrition Education', this issue of Health Views summarizes the techniques that can help maximize the effectiveness of lifestyle counselling and promote successful behaviour change.

The Basics of Learning:

Ensure the information makes **sense**.

Give information in a way that has **meaning**.

Provide opportunities for **practicing** a new skill or concept.

Give **feedback** on the practice session.

How People Learn Best

As educators, before we can teach we must first understand how people learn. Learning must be engaging and active because that's how the brain processes and stores new data for easy retrieval, says Pam August of the Teaching and Learning Centre, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT).

No matter their age or stage in life, people don't learn well if they are stressed, tired, hungry, angry or sad. Emotional concerns are the biggest hurdle to learning and must be addressed before health and nutrition changes can occur. People learn best when they are happy and personally motivated.

There are four specific approaches that facilitate brain power and all are active, says August: sense, meaning, practice and feedback.

Make it Meaningful!

When teaching, make new information relevant to the client's experiences in everyday life. Learning will be truly memorable when the material makes sense and has value for the learner.

Some people will need customized approaches when learning new information. For example, talking to a young athlete about hockey – weekly practices, the coach and position played – may be enough to jumpstart an enthusiasm towards learning how to use *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating* to have more energy and improve his game.

Be Active!

The brain learns actively and the more active the process, the more effective people's retention, says August. Practicing a new behaviour or skill will result in stronger, more permanent results. Present information in small, manageable packages and provide hands-on activities where clients can use the new information. People need the opportunity to practice what they are learning. Practice and feedback work together to reinforce learning connections in the brain so that new information or a new skill is easier to access, says August. Practice with feedback is an essential link!

First and Last Impressions!

Start and finish with the most important information, says August. Looking at the primacy and recency effects of learning, people remember best what they hear first, and second best, what they hear last.

Yourself as an Educator

Understanding client relationships and how you deliver nutrition education is an important part of effectively promoting a healthy lifestyle change.

Ask yourself what relationship building means to you? Do your clients feel you really understand them? It is critical to develop relationships with your clients as soon as possible. That means you should understand their education level, life struggles and emotions. As well, find out what is truly going on in their lives and whom they depend on for emotional support. Sharing some personal information with clients also helps establish a comfortable environment. Clients are more likely to learn and implement behaviour change if they trust and respect you.

As professionals, we are trained to give advice. Traditionally, we identify a client's problem and give advice on how to resolve it, but often we fail to request or hear the client feedback (1). It is important to remember that people learn in diverse ways and through their experiences. Remain flexible – let your clients tell you what they need to know and use this information to build a stronger platform for learning.

Build strategies to overcome barriers to learning. Recognize actual barriers versus perceived. Actual barriers are more easily overcome than perceived barriers. For example, swallowing difficulties is an actual barrier that can be overcome with a soft/easy-to-chew diet. Whereas, refusing to acknowledge high blood cholesterol levels as a risk for heart disease is a perceived barrier to reducing fast food consumption.

Recognizing how you personally handle new learning situations will help you to be a more effective educator. Work, family, self-efficacy and previous successes or failures may be potential barriers to learning. Furthermore, most people do not perceive failure as part of the learning process. We should also let people experience relapse, as this is part of a positive learning experience.

Primacy:
*we remember best
what we hear first*

Recency:
*we remember second
best what we hear last.*

Being an Effective Educator

Traditional educational approaches, such as lectures or one-on-one sessions, are based on authoritarian teaching styles and are still commonly used. However, these passive forms of learning have been shown to be insufficient in eliciting behaviour change (2).

Our role as educators is to facilitate, not dictate, learning. Facilitated discussion within one-on-one or group sessions, is an interactive form of education where learners share problems, provide input and express experiences through active discussion (3). Our role shifts here, from directive leadership to supportive leadership.

To incorporate a facilitated approach to health and nutrition education, we must tailor the message and content to our client's values, experiences, knowledge and problems (4). This allows our clients to become equal partners with us, enhancing the capacity to work together to resolve problems.

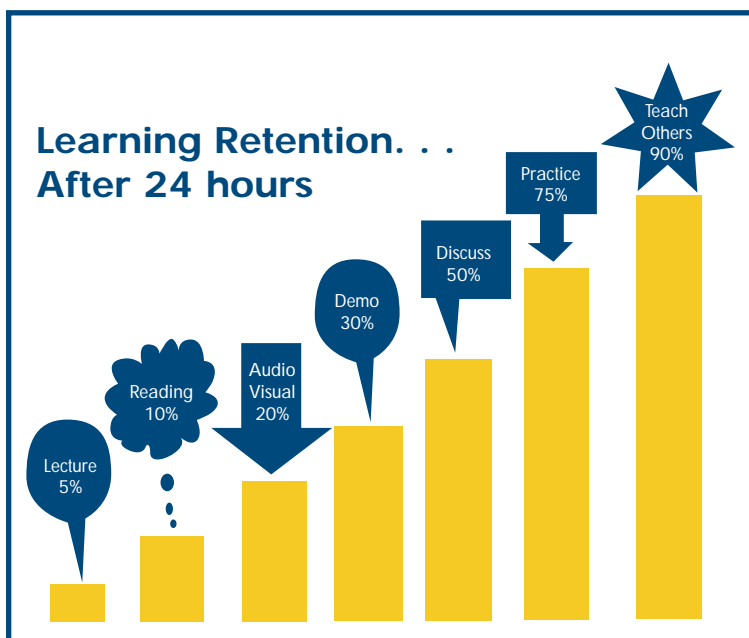
Research from the Stages of Change Model indicates that decisional balance (pros versus cons) is an important indicator for moving individuals from precontemplation to action (5,6). Precontemplators tend to have more cons than pros. Shifting the decisional balance so pros outweigh the

cons is important, as this is the turning point at which people make a commitment to change behaviour (5).

Work with your clients to make a list of perceived pros and cons of a new behaviour change. Review the list and offer several options for achieving change. Find out what motivates them to learn and make change. Many factors can motivate change, including medical threats, needs, fears, peer pressure and desired success.

Temptation and relapse will always be issues for clients as they make new health and food choices. Self-efficacy is an individual's confidence in their ability to achieve the desired behaviour change (7). Unlike decisional balance, which is sensitive to early stages of change, self-efficacy is more sensitive to later stages of change (5). Self-efficacy increases progressively along the stages of change; therefore, providing opportunities for clients to practice and to receive feedback is important for building client confidence in maintaining healthful food choices.

With effective education strategies, we can help clients understand the principles of healthy eating and a healthy lifestyle. Positive and practical messages that meet clients needs will help them follow a more balanced diet and enjoy new eating patterns.



Key References

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Tips to Facilitate Learning

Build a strong relationship

- Establish client trust and respect.
- Ask clients to talk about themselves.
- Find out if anything new has happened during the past month.
- Listen to what your client has to say.
- Address their needs and concerns.

Recognize different learning styles

- Be flexible in your educational approaches.
- Identify actual versus perceived barriers.
- Facilitate learning, do not dictate.

Communicate

- Avoid turning into the “lecturer”.
- Let clients tell you what they need to know.
- Start and finish with the most important information.
- Encourage clients to reflect and learn from their behaviours.

Use several approaches

- Provide different ways for clients to actively interact with information.
- Work in three 20-minute sessions, instead of one 60-minute session.
- Allow opportunities for practice.
- Give homework after each session.

The Enjoyment Factor

- Make the sessions enjoyable.
- Be fun to be with. Fun is contagious. If you enjoy the sessions, so will your clients.

It's more than Pork on your Fork!

Alberta Pork's web site has a new look. It is designed to deliver information to consumers, producers and to food and health professionals. Our homepage offers three gateways of information:

- **Quality Food** – everything you ever wanted to know about pork.
- **Producer and Industry Information** – current information, news and resources for producers and industry.
- **General Information** – for the general public on the pork industry and our practices.

Click on **Quality Food** and you will enter the world of pork. Here you will find links to Cooking and Handling, Health and Nutrition, Health Check, Pork for Kids, Contests, Retailers and Processors, Professional Chef Centre, What's New and Contact Us.

The Health and Nutrition section provides information on healthy eating and pork, current publications and resources, which can be ordered on-line.

Plus more than 175 recipes are just a click away! Our new searchable database allows you to search for recipes by pork cut, ingredient, category and preparation method. Nutritional information per serving is provided for each recipe as well.

Alberta Pork is proudly delivering quality food in a prosperous and sustainable environment. We work to provide information on industry changes and resource development to continual monitoring and improvement of farming practices. Alberta Pork strives for continued growth in the future.

Visit us today at www.albertapork.ca

Comments, questions and suggestions are welcomed.

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