

# How to Maximize Motivation for Healthy Living

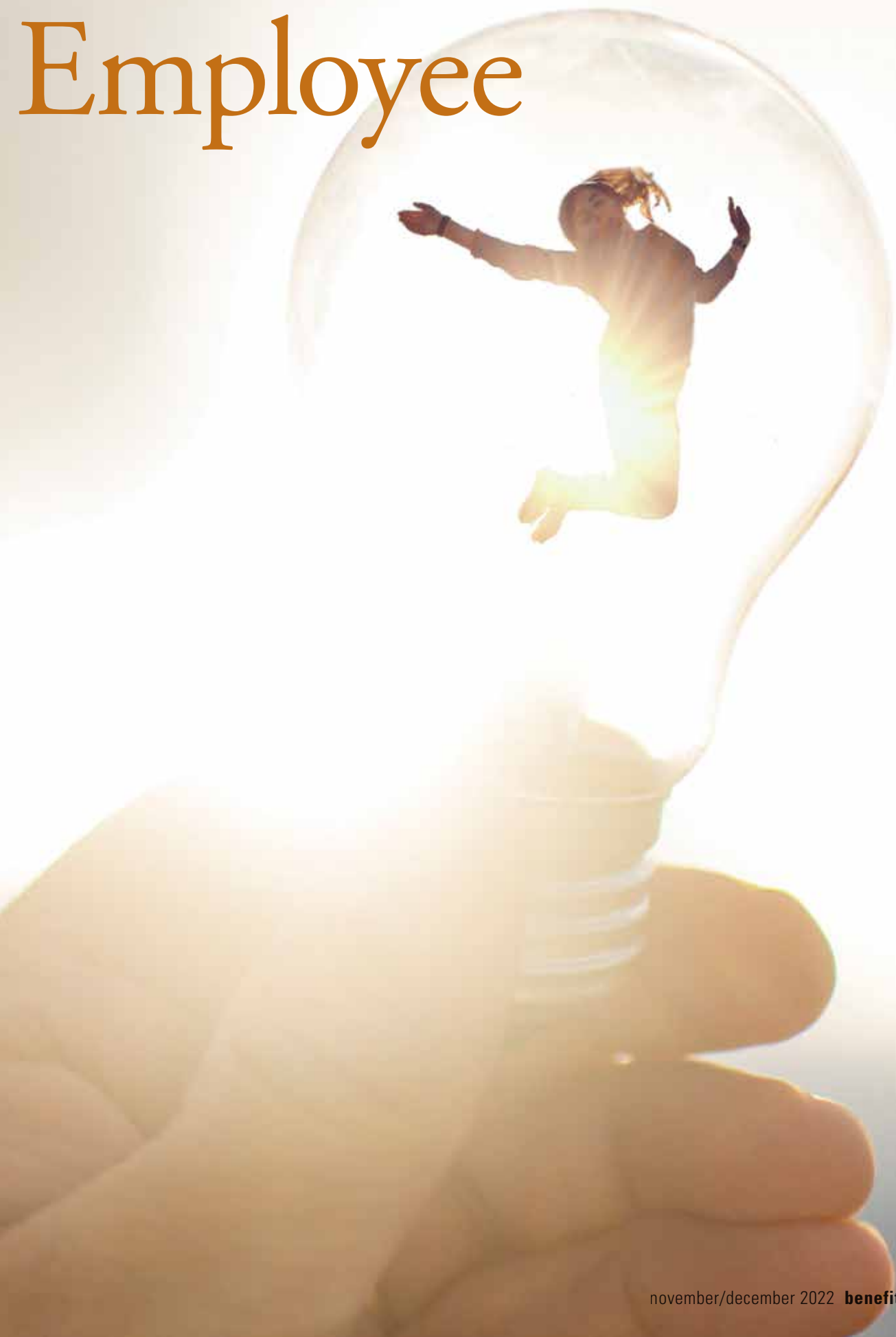
by | **Jessica Grossmeier, Ph.D.**

Financial incentives only go so far when it comes to encouraging workers to adopt healthy behaviors such as eating better or exercising more. A more effective strategy may be to tap into intrinsic motivators to help employees not only start but sustain those healthy habits.

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# Employee



**M**ost employees want to live healthier lives, and information abounds on how to eat healthy, start an exercise program and get better sleep. And yet, many struggle to achieve or sustain healthy habits. According to statistics curated by University of Scranton researchers, 92% of people who set New Year's resolutions fail to achieve their goals.<sup>1</sup> Many employers offer well-being programs and resources to employees to support a healthy lifestyle, but a 2021 Gartner survey found that only 23-32% (participation varied by program type) of employees are taking advantage of the offerings.<sup>2</sup>

How should employers, health plans and providers of wellness services respond to these trends? What can they do to increase employee engagement in available programs and resources?

Increasing awareness and breaking down barriers to access are two important strategies, but it's also important to address employee motivation to pursue a healthy lifestyle. Many employers rely on financial incentives to encourage employee participation, but substantial research suggests this is most effective for simple, one-and-done kinds of behaviors—for example, participating in a survey, getting a preventive exam or flu shot, or participating in an on-site biometric screening.<sup>3</sup>



### Why, What, How and Who

To help employees identify their strongest intrinsic motivators, employers should provide guidance that reveals the most compelling why, what, how and who in their lives.

- **What's their why?** Guidance can help employees shift their mindsets from rational, logical reasons for health behaviors to more emotional and feeling-based reasons.
- **What matters most?** This is about naming what in life is most important to them or their life purpose.
- **How do they want to show up?** Connecting employees with their core values helps them think about how they go about their daily activities and set intentions for how they show up as their best selves.
- **Who matters most?** Identifying the life roles and relationships that are most important can help employees reframe healthy living as a way to contribute to or strengthen those roles or relationships.

Sustained behavior change requires organizations to draw from behavior change science to tap into intrinsic motivators. This is more challenging than extrinsic motivators like financial incentives because intrinsic motivation comes from within an individual. How can organizations maximize employee motivation for healthy living by raising intrinsic motivation?

### What Is Motivation?

First, it's important to understand how motivation works. Motivation is the reason that people behave in certain ways, encompassing many different forces (biological, emotional, social and cognitive). It can initiate, guide and maintain goal-oriented behaviors. The good news is that motivation can be influenced and changed. It starts by guiding employees to reframe their reason or mindset about the health behavior they are trying to change.

To maximize employee motivation, especially intrinsic motivation, which is linked most strongly to sustained behavior change, employees first need help identifying their why, what, how and who. This can be done as part of well-being program communications, intervention programs or individual coaching. Campaigns can also be created that encourage employees to share their intrinsic motivators with one another in the form of testimonials or storytelling. The sidebar "Why, What, How and Who" summarizes the strongest intrinsic motivators.

### What's Their Why?

University of Michigan researcher Michelle Segar, Ph.D., suggests that employers guide employees to reconsider why they think they should pursue a specific behavior, putting the reasons into two categories: those that are helpful and those that are less helpful. She calls these the right or wrong whys.<sup>4</sup>

- **Wrong whys:**
  - Come from outside of ourselves. We think we should do them because someone else tells us to.
  - Are abstract or clinical, like health consequences or future biometric screening values
  - Feel like a burden or something we "should" do, a chore.
- **Right whys:**
  - Come from inside of us and focus on what we enjoy. The behavior is associated with a specific reward or positive feeling.

- Are framed in terms of something that we want or desire deep down
- Are associated with more immediate happiness, like a gift we give to ourselves.

When health behaviors are associated with the wrong whys and employees fail to achieve their healthy living goals, this reinforces the negative meaning associated with the behavior, which can lead to lower confidence and belief in their ability to change their behavior. Segar's research suggests that employers help employees develop a different mindset about the specific behaviors tied to their healthy living goals.<sup>5,6</sup>

*Key point:* It's important for those offering programs to focus less on future-oriented, clinical health outcomes (e.g., weight management or diabetes prevention) and focus more on the immediate benefits that employees experience when doing the health behavior (e.g., more energy or a sense of accomplishment or mastery). This is especially important as part of program communications and branding, which often emphasize weight loss, chronic condition management and clinical outcomes. Employees who are participating in programs also need help shifting from rational, logical reasons for healthy eating and exercise behaviors to more emotional and feeling-based reasons. Self-reflection exercises can be incorporated into intervention programs, and health coaches can guide participants through a similar process to identify more motivational reasons (right whys) to sustain a healthy lifestyle.

### What Matters Most?

A second way to fuel employee motivation for healthy living is to help them link their health behaviors to what matters most to them. This begins by guiding them to think about their purpose. Purpose is what helps employees answer life's big questions: What am I living for? What matters most?

A strong sense of purpose is linked to a longer, healthier life. A 2014 study shows that people with a strong life purpose are more likely to get biometric health screenings and preventive exams.<sup>7</sup> This means they are more proactive about their health. But what about sustained behavior change for more complicated behaviors like healthy eating? A more recent 2021 study followed nearly 14,000 older adults for a four-year period, finding that those who had a strong life purpose at the start of the study were less likely to become sedentary as they got older.<sup>8</sup> A similar study supported this finding and linked stronger life purpose to fewer sleep problems and less weight gain as participants aged.<sup>9</sup>

## takeaways

- Many workers struggle to achieve or sustain healthy habits, and less than a third of workers take advantage of well-being programs and resources offered by their employer.
- Employers may have more success in helping employees achieve and sustain healthy behaviors by developing wellness strategies that tap into intrinsic motivators.
- To maximize intrinsic motivation, employees need help identifying why they should pursue a specific behavior, their purpose and values, and what relationships will benefit from improved behavior.
- When considering why they should pursue a specific behavior, reasons that are associated with a specific reward or positive feeling are preferable to those that are abstract or clinical like health consequences.
- Values-affirmation exercises help employees identify their top values and guide them to reflect on how their healthy behavior choices can help them live out those values.

Cortland Dahl, Ph.D., a scientist and chief contemplation officer at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, asserts that purpose is a skill that people can learn and practice connecting with in the midst of their busy lives. While purpose is about identifying what is important, it's less about what people are actually doing at work or in life and more about their perspective about what they're doing—in other words, how they think about the meaning of the activity. This can apply to studying for a test, working in a factory, folding laundry or eating healthy. For example, an employee working in a manufacturing plant that produces medical tape may focus on how the medical tape will help patients heal faster and, as a result, find more meaning in their work.

*Key point:* Helping employees identify their sense of purpose can drive motivation. Self-reflection exercises, purpose-development apps and other activities can be incorporated into behavior change programs and individual health coaching. It can take just a few minutes a day to strengthen one's sense of purpose, and there are numerous approaches that well-being programs can use to help participants identify and connect their purpose to their health behaviors. Victor Strecher, Ph.D., author of *Life on Purpose*,<sup>10</sup> suggests guiding individuals through a series of questions: What matters most to you? Who relies on you? Who inspires you? What causes do you care about? What are you most grateful for? How do

## learn more

### Education

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you want to be remembered? What gets you out of bed in the morning? The answers to such questions inform a stated purpose, and this is a strong driver of motivation to live a healthier life.

### How Do They Want to Show Up?

Values are highly related to purpose, but they focus less on what people aspire to do and more on how they go about achieving it. Activating the power of values for behavior change starts by identifying one's core values.

Research shows that when people reflect on their values, it activates brain processes that make them more open to behavior change.<sup>11</sup> Behavior change programs that incorporate values-affirmation exercises have been demonstrated to increase intervention effectiveness.

Values affirmation involves guiding individuals through the process of thinking, writing or talking about their core values before introducing them to messages or content about health behavior change. In one study, researchers had participants complete a journaling exercise guiding them to reflect on their values before introducing a challenge to their willpower (exposure to unhealthy foods). Those who completed the values-affirmation exercise ate fewer unhealthy foods than a comparison group who journaled about their daily routine.<sup>12</sup>

Creating values-based habits can help employees align health behaviors with their values.<sup>13</sup> To create values-based habits, employees can be guided to identify their top values. There are many different lists of values readily available in books and online. Employers can ask employees to pick just one value and reflect on what it looks like to live that value out in their everyday life. Then they can consider how investing in one health behavior can help them live out their value and turn that connection into a set of values-based habits:

routines they can incorporate into everyday life that allow them to live out their values.

*Key point:* Organizations should look for ways to incorporate values-affirmation techniques into health behavior change programs and individual coaching. These programs help employees identify their top values and guide them to reflect on how their healthy behavior choices can help them live out their values. For example, during a warm-up to a walk or while preparing dinner, they might reflect on how the walk or healthy eating will give them more energy to help their kids with their homework. Promotional messaging about healthy living programs can also prompt employees to think about how they want to show up in their lives. What does it look like to be their best selves, and what contributes to helping them be their best selves? Well-being program content and coaches can help connect the dots between the healthy lifestyle the program focuses on and how it can help them be their best selves. For example, daily meditation can help people be less reactive and more kind, which can help them live out a value of serving others.

### Who Matters Most?

Relationships are linked to mindset, purpose and values because relationships are what matter most in many people's lives. There are multiple ways to reinforce health behaviors by linking them to important relationships.

For employees in caregiving, health services, customer service or leadership roles, the focus is often on what others need from them rather than on what they need to do for themselves. It can be hard to prioritize self-care when there are so many other priorities competing for attention. The key to activating motivation to prioritize self-care is to help employees consider how prioritizing their own self-care will help them better serve others.

Research shows that linking self-care behaviors to a desire to serve others works. A 2011 study found that health care workers' handwashing behavior improved when the signage over the handwashing station was changed from a focus on protecting themselves from catching diseases to a focus on protecting patients from catching diseases.<sup>14</sup> The study demonstrates that altruism is a stronger motivator than risk aversion, and the same strategy can be applied to help employees prioritize their self-care. For example, it's not uncommon for a parent to skip a workout at the gym because they feel guilty about taking time away from their children. Helping the par-

ent reframe the time away as a means to help them be a more patient and energized parent can help them overcome the barrier of a mindset framing it as self-serving indulgence. Another example frames the health behavior as a support or a role model for others. Those who make time for self-care serve as role models for children, spouses, co-workers and neighbors. This is especially helpful for employees in leadership roles, who might not realize the outsized influence their behavior has on team members or direct reports.

*Key point:* Employees who prioritize their relationships and life roles may find more motivation by linking their health behaviors to stronger relationships. This is especially true for individuals in service industries or leaders committed to service. Employers can start by helping them identify the most important relationships in their lives and then have them consider how a health behavior can contribute to a stronger relationship. The connection might come from the immediate benefits produced by completing the health behavior or by serving as a role model to support others in their health journey.

### Translating Research Into Practice

Here are some specific ways that employers and wellness program providers have incorporated the evidence-based concepts discussed in this article into practice.

#### 1. Create a “what’s your why” campaign.

- Identify a mechanism for employees to share a health behavior of focus and their strongest “right why” for the health behavior. Some employers have put up bulletin boards in break rooms or leveraged an employee social media group on the company’s internal communications platform.
- Encourage employees to name one health behavior they are focusing on and share their “why.” It’s necessary to orient employees to the basics of identifying the “right why” based on the research discussed in this section.

#### 2. Incorporate self-reflection exercises about one’s purpose and values into health behavior change programs and coaching.

- Questions about life purpose include: What matters most to you? Who relies on you? Who inspires you? What causes do you care about? What are you most grateful for? How do you want to be remembered? What gets you out of bed in the morning?

- Questions about values include: What does it look like to be the best version of yourself? What beliefs or principles are most important to you and guide your decisions in life? Many lists are available online, but some common values include honesty, kindness, appreciation, empathy, generosity, humility and compassion.
- Help employees consider how a specific health behavior might support them in living out their purpose and values. For example, eating healthy and being physically active provide more energy to live out one’s purpose. Practicing mindfulness meditation can help people respond to life’s challenges with more patience, compassion and kindness.

#### 3. Build peer support and relationship building into well-being programs and coaching.

- Guide employees to think about the relationships that are most important to them.
- Encourage employees to consider how taking care of one’s health contributes to being a positive role

bio



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model for others, creates support for oneself and others to live a healthy life while enhancing relationships, or contributes to better performance in a life role (e.g., better parent, sibling, neighbor, co-worker, spouse/partner).

- Guide employees to create a mindset that emphasizes the role of the health behavior to support the goal of stronger relationships with others.

## Conclusion

It's easy for employees to let go of healthy living goals in the face of daily challenges. By helping them to link their health behaviors to the most important why, what, who or how, employers can maximize their motivation, making lasting behavior change more likely. 🎯

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