

Creating a Healthy Balance

How a new lifestyle-change program is helping Y members lose weight and lead healthier lives.

By Ann Glora



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Obesity in the U.S. is still on the rise. The statistics are mounting as quickly as our waistlines are expanding, and the diseases associated with obesity are taking more lives than ever before. In response, Americans spend billions of dollars each year on weight loss products, fitness center memberships, liposuction and gastric bypass surgery. Meanwhile the food and drug industries spend even more

money trying to tempt us with “magic” foods, drugs and diet books. High-fat, low-fat, no-fat, no-carb, low-carb, no-sugar, high-protein, fat burners, appetite suppressants – you name it, Americans have tried it. And yet we’re still getting fatter.

Even the best-trained fitness professionals can have a difficult time leading their clients through the healthy lifestyle minefield. They’re bombarded by an enormous volume of weight-loss programs, supplements, fad foods and diet books based on conflicting “scientific findings.” When faced with so much misinformation, encouraging weight management can seem like an uphill climb. But is the cause lost? Maybe not.

Creating a Personalized Nutrition Program

At the Hyde Park Family YMCA in Hyde Park, MA, the fitness staff had always worked to encourage proper nutrition for members, but – like fitness professionals everywhere – they had a hard time offering the combination of overall guidance and specific help that many members seemed to need. They felt they needed a program that addressed the whole lifestyle and total wellness of the member – and definitely a program that encompassed both nutrition *and* exercise. The Y’s fitness staff found an important part of what they were looking for in the *Nutrition for Professionals* course offered by Lifestyle Management Associates (LMA) of West Roxbury, MA.

LMA founder, Jane Pentz has a Ph.D. in nutritional biochemistry from Tufts University, with a minor in exercise physiology, and is a member of the American College of Sports Medicine. Pentz says she developed the nutrition program specifically for health and fitness professionals while working as a nutritionist in a large fitness facility. She noticed that its members frequently turned to personal trainers, not professional nutrition staff, for nutrition advice. She recognized the closeness of the member/trainer relationship, and that members involved personal trainers in their total health, not just exercise. The problem was that many trainers lacked formal nutrition education. This raised possible ethical and, in some cases, legal issues, for the organizations that employed them.

Pentz’s program allows health and fitness professionals to provide nutrition services safely and legally. The program provides sound, safe, and scientific nutritional information for fitness professionals to impart to their clients, while adhering to all state licensure laws and the American Dietetic Association guidelines.

In March 2004, I took Pentz’ course to learn more about nutrition. I was impressed by how easy it was to include this information in my Y programming. I contacted Pentz, and together we developed Healthy Balance.

Healthy Balance combines elements of the Y’s Personal Fitness Program (which targets sedentary individuals) with LMA’s philosophy of true, long-term, lifestyle changes, rather than short-term, radical dieting. It also takes place in a group setting to provide members with peer humor, support and understanding. Healthy Balance combines nutritional counseling, menu planning, exercise and stress reduction techniques. It is a “wellness program” that addresses the health of the mind, body and spirit. Healthy Balance is designed to fit into an eight-week session, and includes eight weekly group classes and three individual appointments.

Participants receive the following:

- An exercise program that includes cardiovascular, strength, and flexibility training designed to fit into their weekly schedule.
- A menu plan that is easy to follow and makes room for individual tastes. Diet analysis computer software and nutrition journals are used to encourage healthy eating habits.
- A better understanding of the stressful situations in their lives and ways to control or eliminate this stress.

Why Healthy Balance Works

Key components that make Healthy Balance successful include informational workshops, commitment from the client, family participation, lifestyle changes, a small group setting and a committed staff.

Informational meetings. Informational workshops are offered to the community to introduce the program and determine an individual’s readiness for change. Each attendee completes an extensive questionnaire that includes a lifestyle history (medical, exercise, eating patterns, etc.) and a Willingness to Change profile developed for the program. Attendees are chosen for the program if the profile indicates that they are ready to make lifestyle changes. Individuals that indicate (through the profile) that they are not ready to make lifestyle changes are counseled on why they weren’t accepted and about necessary changes that need to be made to be included in future programs. Alternative courses of action are also discussed. This may seem harsh, but encouraging people to participate in the program who aren’t ready to make changes in their lifestyle sets them up for failure.

Required commitment. All participants sign a “Responsibility Clause,” indicating that they understand that success or failure rests with them. Individuals are asked to move toward a healthier lifestyle by making small lifestyle changes each week. Participants take an active role in customizing their menu plans and exercise regimen. This signed “contract” helps to ensure that they at least try.

Individual accountability is monitored throughout the program.

Family participation. Family participation is strongly encouraged. Family members are invited to the first meeting and are presented with the "10 Commandments for Family Members," which are guidelines family members use to help participants succeed. Family support is important, and has a direct effect on success.

LifestyLe alterations. Healthy Balance is not a diet, but rather a program centered on educating participants on how to make small, healthy lifestyle changes in incremental steps. Extremes such as caloric restriction, elimination of food groups, etc., are not sustainable, and can lead to frustration and failure. Healthy Balance explains the pitfalls of these programs, and offers a safe alternative. This reduces the failure rate, because the small changes in diet and exercise are slowly introduced.

SmaLL groups. The small group setting (limited to 10 participants per eight-week session) provides peer support throughout the program. And, the one-on-one sessions provide opportunities for participants to ask questions that they may not be comfortable asking in a group setting. This combination allows the participants to customize the program to suit their own schedule and lifestyle.

Dedicated staff. Participating YMCAs have a nutrition manager on staff overseeing the entire program. Healthy Balance instructors are certified personal trainers, certified nutrition specialists and trained Healthy Balance group instructors. They are supported by a sports dietitian (through LMA), and are provided with an instructor manual and participant handouts.

Pilot Program Results

Provided with an outline of the course, Kelley Rice, vice president of external affairs of the Greater Boston Association, commissioned a six-week pilot study. Completed in the fall of 2004, it provided invaluable information for future programs. Two groups of 10 participants from two Greater Boston, Mass., YMCAs (Hyde Park YMCA and West Roxbury YMCA) were chosen from their completed questionnaires.

Participants were asked to set six goals and objectives, attend six classes, meet privately with an instructor, keep nutrition/exercise journals, and make healthy changes in their eating patterns, stress levels and exercise routines. The outcome measure was an exit survey centered on initial goals, using the SMART rule for setting realistic goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time Bound).

- 90 percent of participants completed the program.
- 85 percent were YMCA members.
- 100 percent of non-members (plus two additional family members) became members.
- 33 percent attained or surpassed all of their goals.
- 20 percent achieved most of their goals.
- 47 percent achieved some of their goals.
- When asked if they were provided with the tools

necessary to make lifestyle changes, 80 percent said yes,

and 20 percent said mostly. No one said that they were not provided with the tools necessary to make lifestyle changes.

Results of the pilot program clearly indicate that the YMCA Healthy Balance program is a viable, successful lifestyle-changing program. The pilot program did indicate that six weeks was not enough time to impart all of the information. Extending the program to eight weeks allows for more personal attention and group interaction. Healthy Balance was also shown to be a viable program for attracting new members and generating revenue.

Moving Forward

Many YMCAs and independent nutrition manager consultants have expressed interest in Healthy Balance. Healthy Balance is now an ongoing program at Hyde Park YMCA, West Roxbury YMCA, the Rye, N.Y., YMCA and the Port Orange, Fla., YMCA, and will soon be initiated by several other YMCAs.

West Roxbury YMCA added new memberships each time the program was run. "When [I was] first approached with the idea for Healthy Balance, I was pleased that we were going to be offering a program that encompassed nutritional education, fitness consultation and lifestyle changes," says Sarah Nathans, executive director of Hyde Park YMCA. "What I didn't anticipate was how this program would make such a difference in people's lives. We have had staff and long-time members finally achieve long-sought-after health and wellness goals."

The Rye YMCA instituted a similar program in January 2005. According to Charles Clute, fitness director, "We began our program in January, and by mid-April, we had increased our income by almost \$10,000. Participants in the program are making lifestyle changes and seeing results. Testimonials from members indicate that the program exceeds their expectations and all have made significant lifestyle changes. Dietitian support has been very instrumental in our providing such a successful program."

The YMCA of Port Orange instituted Healthy Balance this spring. It reports that, "Among the reported results of the first group are positive energy changes; craving reductions; more organized, productive home and business lives; and a better understanding of how to grocery shop, prepare meals and eat on a schedule that minimizes hunger and allows for more thoughtful eating."

Making a Difference

Is the answer to weight-loss problems lost? Absolutely not. Healthy Balance, however, is making a difference.

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