

Health People takes a team approach to weight loss

When trying to lose weight is a constant struggle, it can be easy to feel judged. Advice from others who don't know what you're facing simply doesn't apply, leading to frustration and self-doubt.



Chris Norwood and Health People understand. That's why the South Bronx community group uses peer-to-peer education to fight diabetes, encourage weight loss, and offer support.

"People feel comfortable here, they don't feel judged," Norwood said.

"They're talking to people who understand what they face."

Health People's 14 community health educators were recruited from the area and can point to personal experience as evidence that the program works. One educator, who weighed 378 pounds, lost 108 pounds and cut her blood sugar half within three years of undergoing the diabetes self-management course offered by the group.

"We don't diet, we lose weight," Norwood said. "The experience is too common of people going on major diets, losing weight for two to three months, giving up, and gaining back more than they lost."

"We have slow and steady weight loss."

The Health People program is based on the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) National Diabetes Prevention Program for pre-diabetics and the Diabetes Self-Management Program developed at Stanford University. The educators all went through a multi-week training program, with some receiving specialized training.



Your Health and Wellness Awareness Program

Steps to success

The steps Health People's educators use to lead others to success include:



An action plan: These are realistic actions that can be taken this week to control weight. This could include exercise, reducing food portions, or reading labels.



Looking for exercise: Participants are urged to take advantage of inexpensive and convenient exercise options. A half-hour walk five times a week, an exercise session at home with family members, or low-cost programs at community centers are all options.



Eating right: The educators stress the importance of reading labels, keeping healthy snacks handy, and learning about portion control. They also talk about how replacing fatty foods with fruits, vegetables, and other healthier options can help a person feel full while taking in fewer calories.



Stress reduction: Relaxing can help maintain a healthy mindset. Suggestions include listening to music or meditative prompts, taking a walk, or reading a book.



Support: The educators encourage participants to be part of a support group that meets regularly. This can include family members, friends, or neighbors who share ideas for staying on track.



Celebration: The steps that have been taken each week to improve health can be written down, shared with the support group, and read by the participant to underscore the steps that are being taken to improve health.

More than 1,000 people have enrolled in the group's courses that build healthy eating, exercise, and goal setting skills. They're geared toward providing those who are at risk for diabetes, or who have been diagnosed with diabetes, with the skills they need to improve their health.



The team approach helps members break down barriers to good health. If getting exercise is a problem, a group might plan to walk together. If a group member is having a difficult time finding healthy food, others can provide tips on where the farmer's markets are.

The program also clears up the misperception that a great deal of weight needs to be lost in order for a person's health to improve.

"People become overwhelmed, thinking 'If I don't lose pounds and pounds and pounds it's not going to help,'" Norwood said. "That's not the case."

The CDC notes that losing even a small amount of weight and getting regular physical activity can help a person with pre-diabetes lower the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

The peer-to-peer aspect of Health People brings a supportive and practical side to weight loss, and could also be used in a workplace environment, Norwood said.

"It's very hard to do these things alone," she said. "But where you can put a group together – if it's at work, church, or your community center – you'll do much better."