

Moving Family and Friends

Help a loved one find a healthy lifestyle by asking the right questions and offering support.

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Okay, we've all got one. It could be a sister, brother, spouse, parent or even a friend.

Everyone knows someone they'd like to see lead a healthier lifestyle or be free of a bad habit. Perhaps you've had friends or family harp on you to eat better, get more sleep, or quit smoking. Hey, it could even be you doing the harping!

For me, it was my sister Rosemary, a 36-year-old, project analyst for the New Brunswick government. Over a period of seven years she would start an exercise program and then stop, start again, stop again, whenever her motivation ran out or she got too busy.

Rosemary, an occasional smoker and about ten pounds overweight, had a nickname in our family – the Gravy Queen. The big joke at family dinners was asking her if she had any food underneath the gravy, which of course she did. My husband teased her for years with his not so tactful comments; she'd counter with a razor sharp retort that would end the discussion.

She'd call me at least once a week and tell me she didn't like what she was seeing or how her neck or back ached.

"So what are you going to do about it?" I'd ask. Every time, she'd shut me down. It seemed that discussing or complaining was fine. But when the discussion turned to developing an action plan, the conversation went south.

Finally, she reluctantly joined a gym and for the next three years she exercised inconsistently. A co-worker tried to keep her on the straight and narrow, cajoling her to go three times per week. But working out just wasn't working out and I was back to receiving a weekly call from her.

So far, I had resisted the urge to go into "coaching mode" with my sister. Hey, surgeons don't operate on family members and I felt the same way about coaching a family member. It's an emotional battlefield. A coach must be agenda-free to be effective and leave all biases at the door.

The Breakthrough Moment

The breakthrough moment came as a surprise to both of us. Rosemary called and we began to talk about the same things once again. Suddenly my resolve to coach her flew out the window!

"Rosemary," I said, "Just what do you want to get from exercising?"

"I want to look and feel better," she replied.

"So, what does that look like for you?" I asked.

"I want to lose about ten pounds and

have more energy."

"You've told me that before. What I'm wondering is what's missing for you?" I said.

"What do you mean?" Rosemary started to sound slightly suspicious. This was not our usual conversation.

"Well, first of all it took you a long time to start exercising. Now you're exercising but not consistently or very enthusiastically. So, I'm wondering what it would take to have you truly committed and excited about reaching your goal."

"Someone else doing the exercising," she shot back and laughed.

"Rosemary, I've noticed that every time we get talking seriously, your sense of humour kicks in and derails the conversation. Let's imagine for a moment that nothing changes. You continue to work-out sporadically and eat anything you want. Tell me what you might look like and feel like in another ten years. Think about which family members you take after and think of relatives 10, 20, or 30 years older to help paint a mental picture."

Rosemary was very quiet for a few

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Forward



minutes and then she said, "I've never thought of that. I can picture myself perfectly and I don't like what I see."

"So what are you willing to change to make sure that picture doesn't become reality?" I asked.

"Well, I never really tried hard when I worked out. I just went to make others and, I guess myself, feel better. I never even broke a sweat during a workout.

"I'm going to change my weight training routine and maybe take some group exercise classes." She sounded excited.

"When are you going to do this?" I wanted a commitment from her to act.

"I'll pick up a class schedule today and find out how to get a new weight training program."

We ended the conversation.

Today, Rosemary is proud of her accomplishments. She says our conversation changed everything for her.

"I lost the ten pounds and feel a lot better. My fiancé and I recently built a house and we cleared the lot ourselves. I carried wood, tossed it into piles, and then stacked it. It felt good to be outside and to work on our property. I think that my fiancé was surprised that I could do what I did. We're getting married in April in Cuba. I'm going to go parasailing, windsurfing, and do anything else that I feel like doing. I don't think I would have even thought of trying all that before. I'm in the best shape I've ever been in and it feels great."

Rosemary is now looking at changing other habits that don't fit with her new active lifestyle.

"If you're going to do it, do it right," says Rosemary. "Get involved with your goals, be committed, set up a buddy system, get a proper program done, and work at it. It will pay off many times over." «

10 Questions to Help Family and Friends Move Forward

- 1 I've noticed that every time I bring up _____, you tend to shut me down. What is it about _____ that bothers you?
- 2 What would you think about this five years from now?
- 3 How would you explain this to yourself?
- 4 How does this fit with what's most important to you?
- 5 If you knew that you could succeed, how would you begin?
- 6 What do you really want for yourself?
- 7 What have you tried before?
- 8 What are your options?
- 9 What support do you need?
- 10 What resources do you need to make this happen?

These questions can have real impact when asked from a place of support and non-judgment. The key is to ask, explore, and give the person space to answer. Never nag. Nagging lets people justify their positions and raises their defenses.

Be aware that not all people are ready to change. Offer kind and gentle encouragement; leave articles or information on healthy living in places where they might find them. The best way to encourage someone you love to get active and be healthy is to be a good role model yourself.

"Without involvement, there is no commitment. Mark it down, asterisk it, circle it, underline it."

STEVEN COVEY