

Stanford's Weight Management: Building The Foundation (WMBF)

Overview

Stanford's Weight Management: Building a Foundation (WMBF) is for individuals who wish to make a lifestyle change, usually in the areas of weight management, increased physical activity, improved nutrition, or stress reduction. It is 12 weeks in length, and each group meeting is 90 minutes long. The groups are facilitated by an individual trained in health topics and behavioral science principles. While content is imparted in the groups, the main emphasis is on participants sharing their progress towards achieving their behavior change goal. Many individuals like the idea of being held "accountable" by reporting to the group.

One unique feature of the WMBF is that it is firmly grounded in behavioral science. According to the Society of Behavioral Medicine:

Behavioral medicine is the interdisciplinary field concerned with the development and integration of behavioral, psychosocial, and biomedical science knowledge and techniques relevant to the understanding of health and illness, and the application of this knowledge and these techniques to prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation.

WMBF was developed at the Stanford Prevention Research Center (SPRC). SPRC's focus is on disease prevention and in understanding the role of regular exercise, good nutrition, and weight control on health. Their mission is to turn research into practical programs that are disseminated to the community.

Participants usually sign up for the group because they realize that "diets" don't work and they want help changing their lifestyle. They want to be held accountable to their goals, and want the support of a group. They feel that joining a group will be the motivation they need to commit to some healthy lifestyle changes.

Unlike other programs, the Weight Management: Building a Foundation has a focus on gradual lifestyle change and sustainable behavior patterns. The hope is that participants will slowly adopt healthier behaviors, which will eventually lead to improved health and well-being. Because we advocate gradual change, we do not expect that participants will see a lot of changes in biometrics by the end of the group; although some participants will experience such changes. Rather, our goal is to lay a strong foundation in terms of necessary skills and attitudes around successful behavior change.

Specifically, we would expect participants to experience the following benefits:

- Participants should reduce their "all or nothing" mindset.
- Participants will be more mindful of their lifestyle behaviors.
- Participants will learn how to set realistic short-term goals and monitor progress.
- Participants will have skills around identifying effective rewards; building a support network; and cultivating a positive inner voice.

- Participants should start to see changes in lifestyle behaviors.
- Many participants report positive changes in their career or personal relationships, as the lessons learned in class are applied to other aspects of their lives.
- Some participants will see changes in their biometrics.

The groups are “closed”, meaning that there are no “drop ins.” Participants sign up for the group and must commit to attending most of the group sessions. All potential participants engage in a short screening call to ensure that the class will be a good fit for them.

Once it is confirmed that an individual would be a good fit for the group, he/she is encouraged to assess his current lifestyle behaviors and readiness for change before the class starts. Participants are encouraged to keep a behavior log for two weekdays and a weekend day.

Session Components

Sessions follow a similar format. Most sessions begin with either a group or pairs activity that facilitates group bonding and foreshadows the lesson contained in the meeting. The crux of each session (starting at Session 2) will be the setting of new behavioral goals to work on over the upcoming week. Starting at Session 3, participants will also be asked to share how it went over the past week with their previous goals, as well as set a new goal.

In addition to the goals, there is a lesson embedded in each session. While the most important learning actually takes place during the goal process, participants seem to appreciate getting a “lesson” in a specific topic area. These lessons may be around physical activity, healthy eating, or stress management per se. Other lessons describe behavioral science concepts such as building a support network, effective goal-setting, and dealing with ambivalence. In each session, the goal setting and recounting process takes precedence over the lesson.

How is this group different from other weight loss groups?

Emphasis is on behaviors, not weight: First and foremost, although most people sign up with weight loss in mind, the emphasis is on behavioral change. Participants learn that lifestyle behaviors are what we have control over, and biometrics should change as a response to the change in behaviors. Participants can disclose whether they’ve lost weight, but it’s not a required part of the program.

Gradual change is encouraged: Participants are asked to embrace the idea that gradual change is the key to sustainable change. Ultimately, while participants are in control of what goals they set for themselves, they are encouraged to create goals that are just a small step beyond their current level.

Less focus on nutrition and physical activity information and more focus on behavioral science: We assume that most of our participants already know the basics about what they should be eating and that they should be physically active. In fact, many of our participants probably have too much information and are overloaded, confused as to their next steps. Thus, we focus on teaching them the behavioral science skills that they will need to translate that knowledge into action. There is special emphasis on setting realistic goals that are attainable and thus should improve self-efficacy. That said, we do review basics around physical activity and nutrition during the group, as well as answer specific questions as they arise. The emphasis is on information that is easily translated to action.

Curriculum is based around motivational assets: As mentioned, the program is grounded in behavioral science. Specifically, the curriculum of the program has been constructed to maintain or bolster participants' motivational assets and readiness for making a lifestyle change.

The most important learning takes place during the goal setting process: While we have a "lesson" every week, the most significant learning takes place during the goal review and goal setting process. This is when the participants can brainstorm with one another strategies for overcoming barriers and apply their knowledge.

Participants act as self-managers of their own health: Many other programs have an inherent motivation to keep participants dependent on them, as a constant source of revenue. Our goal is to empower our participants to be managers of their own health. As such, we do not prescribe a diet plan or exercise regimen, but instead teach our participants how to set appropriate goals for themselves. Ultimately, we would like our participants to take what they've learned and construct environments that will support healthy lifestyle changes in their coworkers, family members, and friends.

Individualized goals: We are firm believers in the adage: One size does not fit all. In other words, when it comes to goal-setting, each participant will set a weekly goal that is right for her. Goals share common qualities: they are behavioral, measurable, concrete, and specific; they are a small step beyond participants' current behaviors; and they have to be something the participant is ready to do. But the specific substance of the goal will vary from person to person.

Leader is a facilitator, rather than a teacher: Group members help each other: One corollary of the fact that we want participants to be managers of their own health is that these groups are "facilitated," rather than "taught." The facilitator encourages participation from all members of the group, and feels that it is preferable to have group members "teach" each other, rather than having all the information coming from the facilitator. The facilitator is responsible for being the "time keeper" and to ensure that all members have a time to speak. They are also expected to synthesize themes that come up during a session and to provide feedback to group members, as needed (if feedback is not forthcoming from the other group members.)