

newtopia

The Benefit of Using Virtual Health Coaches to Significantly Reduce Chronic Disease Risk Factors Among Employees

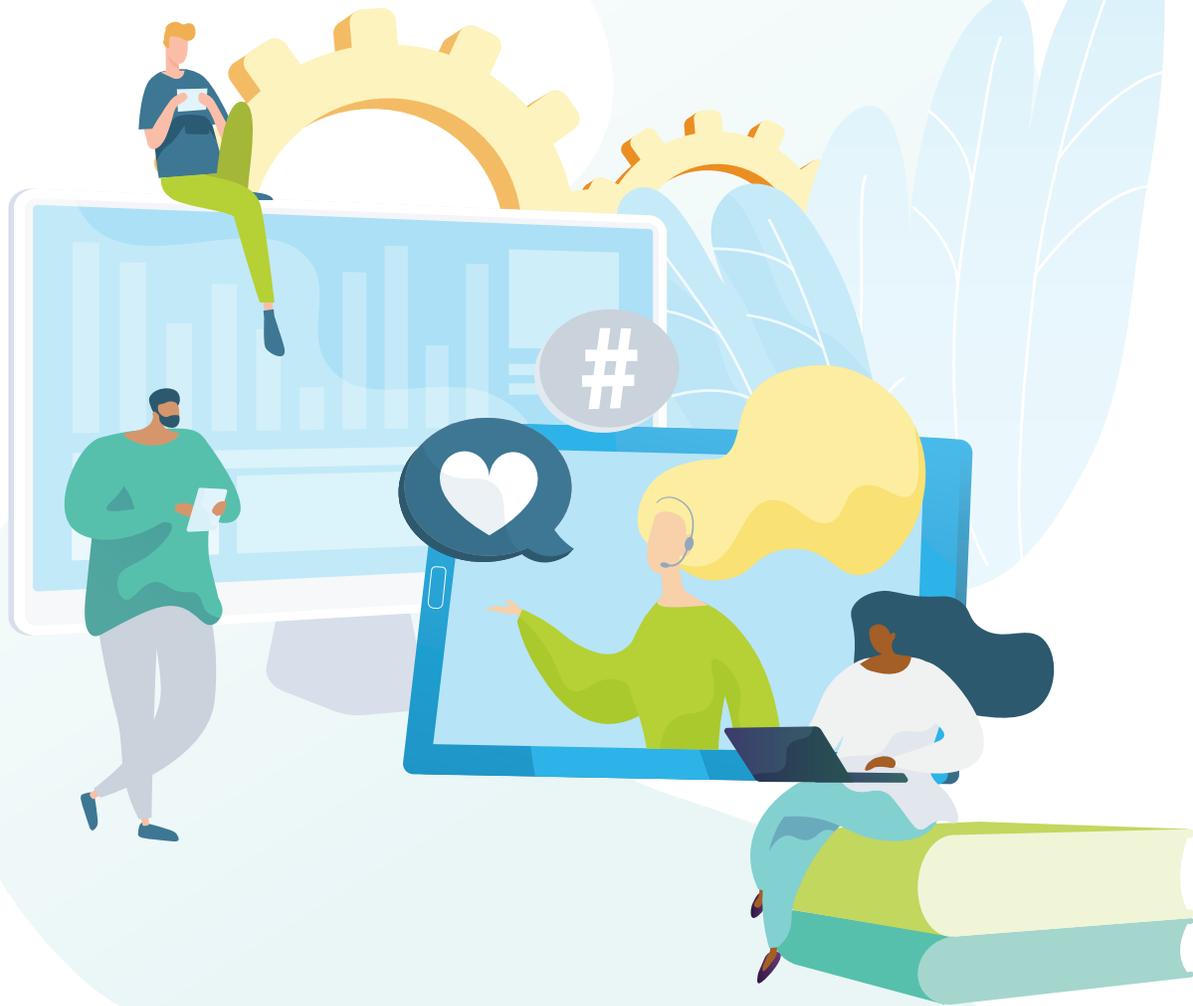


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Personalization Reaches the Workplace	3
Engagement in Virtual Care	4
Digital Health Tools	4
AI and Machine Learning	5
Case Study: Levi Strauss & Co.	6
Embracing Our New Virtual Healthcare Reality	8

The phrase “virtual reality” has traditionally been applied to gaming and other simulated experiences. But over the past several months, our new reality has become, to a great degree, virtual: virtual work, virtual business meetings, virtual school, virtual doctor appointments, virtual calls with family. Virtually every part of our lives has become a digital experience. Nowhere is this more evident than healthcare.

Personalization Reaches the Workplace

The use of telehealth has skyrocketed since March. While many healthcare providers had considered incorporating virtual care into their service offering prior to the pandemic, few had actually done it. In 2018, just 14% of providers had implemented telehealth,¹ but in March of this year, 97% either implemented or expanded its use.² More than 16 million Americans say they used telehealth for the first time during the pandemic.³ And, for the most part, they’ve embraced it. The reasons are many. First, and most obvious, is that it keeps them safe from exposure to the virus. This is especially important for patients with preexisting conditions or who fall into one of the high-risk categories. Second, telehealth increases access for those who live in rural areas by removing the burden of having to drive long distances to see a provider. While the pandemic has renewed the emphasis on virtual health technology, the interest was already there. In one survey, 84% of patients said they would choose a provider who offers telehealth over one who does not.⁴

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Participant Perspective

As a goal-driven person, Donna was inspired by her co-workers to join the Newtopia program. Donna admitted that while she likes setting goals, she also sometimes struggles to achieve the goals she sets. She explains, “Having goals is great, but if something tasty comes along, well—that goal is not important.”

Donna described how her favorite component of the program is her Inspirator and the regular phone and video calls they have. The calls were the perfect mix of casual catching up and providing the accountability and motivation needed to achieve her goals.

Just a few months into the program, Donna lost 20 pounds. The biggest change that she has noticed since working with her Newtopia Inspirator is a healthier eating style. She now incorporates more healthy fats into her diet like avocado, vegetables, and healthy grains. Donna also works hard to remain conscious about her activity level and adds more exercise after a day of sitting. She is also proud of the small and easily achievable habit changes she has made in her lifestyle, including eating breakfast now and trying not to eat late at night, which have both contributed to her overall success.

Donna has seen a difference with coaching, “I just want to take a moment and recognize my Inspirator. She is doing a great job at motivating me, as well as holding me accountable to my plan and my goals. She has been available to educate, refocus, and celebrate with me on our calls.”

¹ <https://www.managedcaremag.com/archives/2019/12/virtual-primary-care-visits-future-already-here>

² <https://www.mgma.com/data/data-stories/medical-practices-innovate-care-delivery-increase>

³ <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/covid-19/covid-19-consumer-behavior.html>

⁴ <https://www.healthcareitnews.com/news/telemedicine-during-covid-19-benefits-limitations-burdens-adaptation>

Engagement in Virtual Care

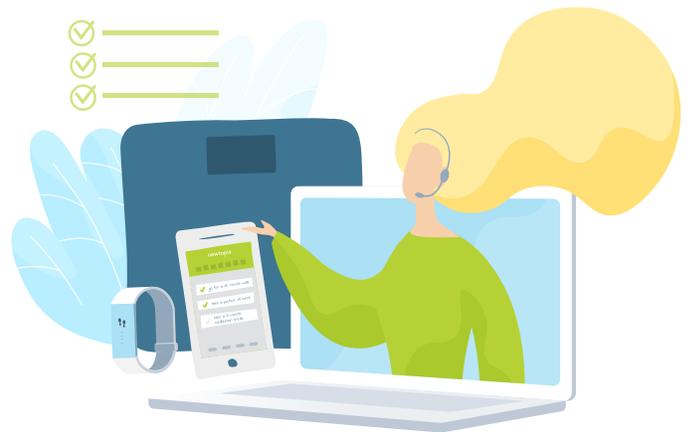
So why has it taken so long for physicians to implement virtual health into their practices? The answer is complex. For one, until the pandemic, low reimbursement rates for telehealth made it a less attractive option for physicians. Regulations as well have limited its use to specific geographic regions like rural communities. Even then, patients had to go to a local healthcare facility to connect. Those two barriers have been removed for now, but there is another reason some physicians have been hesitant to implement virtual care. They've been afraid of losing the human connection. And that is a valid concern for telephonic visits. It is challenging to truly connect on a personal level without eye-to-eye contact and without the ability to read visual cues. But that is changing.

As seasoned providers of virtual health programs, Newtopia has seen firsthand the impact virtual visits can have on engagement, habit change, and long-term health improvements.

Virtual healthcare and digital tools can help enhance the human experience through more personalized, interactive engagement. A prime example is virtual coaching through digital technology like video conferencing. Virtual coaching in this type of secure one-on-one environment can promote trust and help develop meaningful connections. And trust is important in a coaching relationship. It's also something that can't be replicated through things like digital assistants (aka "chatbots"). Some health improvement companies use digital assistants to provide a coaching-type experience, but they have yet to effectively replicate a human experience. Even the most technologically savvy companies like Facebook have struggled to implement effective chatbots on its Messenger platform.⁵ In other words, we aren't yet at the place where digital technology can completely replace the human connection in healthcare.

Digital Health Tools

In 2017, a report by Transcend Insights found that 64% of patients said they use a digital device or mobile device to help them manage their health.⁶ In the past five years, the growth of wearables has exploded with 21% of Americans claiming to regularly wear a smart watch or wearable fitness tracker—a figure equal to nearly 70 million people.⁷ The feedback on activity, weight loss, and heart rate can motivate behavior change, but can diminish over time.⁸



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⁵ https://www.theregister.com/2017/02/22/facebook_ai_fail/?zd_source=mta&zd_campaign=12120&zd_term=michaelaffronti

⁶ <https://www.mobihealthnews.com/content/survey-64-percent-patients-use-digital-device-manage-health>

⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/01/09/about-one-in-five-americans-use-a-smart-watch-or-fitness-tracker/>

⁸ [https://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343\(19\)30553-4/pdf](https://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343(19)30553-4/pdf)

AI and Machine Learning

As AI and machine learning have gained broader use, the capabilities and accuracy of health apps and wearable devices has greatly improved. Today's apps can learn from the user's behaviors and apply that data to deliver a more effective, personalized experience. These technologies can tie interventions to action. For example, the app can determine the most effective time to send a user motivational information or prompts to check weight or to take medication. Over time, these technologies make the program even more effective by working hand-in-hand with connected health devices to create a more personalized experience.

The most effective programs are those that pair virtual engagement with digital health tools, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning. This dynamic combination provides a more personalized, effective experience for the participant.

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Newtopia Participants Credit Human Connection with Habit Change

Newtopia recently conducted a survey of individuals who had been in its habit change program for 12 months. Our goal was to show that the quality of the coaching interaction makes a difference. Our coaches are called "Inspirators" and they're matched to each participant based on personality and preferences. Participants regularly engage with their dedicated Inspirator via video connections.

The following represents the percentage of respondents who ranked their Inspirator as an 8-10 on each item (on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being "Extremely Poor" and 10 being "Excellent"):

- 91% → My Inspirator is helpful
- 90% → My Inspirator is a good match
- 83% → My Inspirator inspires me to increase daily exercise and be more active

It's important to note that the survey was conducted during the initial stages of lockdown during the pandemic, a time in which stay-at-home orders and social distancing required the shuttering of places like gyms, yoga studios, YMCAs and other health facilities. In one study on self-managed weight loss during the pandemic, many respondents reported "high levels of 'stress eating' and 'eating out of boredom', followed by 'higher food consumption,' 'more opportunities to eat,' and 'higher consumption of junk foods.'"⁹ The majority said that the pandemic had impacted their weight loss strategy and more than half said that their exercise strategy had been impacted.



Even with the pandemic, Newtopia participants retained a high level of engagement. Between February and July 2020, engagement was between 78% to 80% with no significant change in April and May when shutdowns were at their highest levels.

Case Study: Levi Strauss & Co.

Levi Strauss & Co. (LS&Co.) has a global footprint of approximately 3,000 retail stores in 100 countries. With more than 14,400 employees worldwide, the company is committed to creating a work environment that promotes healthy, productive, and thriving team members. As part of this goal, LS&Co. has increased its focus on improving the overall health of employees with an emphasis on preventing pre-chronic disease.

The Challenge

LS&Co. wanted a robust wellness program for its employees that was proven to reduce metabolic risk factors (as a pre-cursor to chronic disease) and simultaneously reduce medical costs. The company recognized that obesity can lead to chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke. They wanted a disease prevention program that focused on reducing BMI and other chronic disease health risks associated with metabolic syndrome.

⁹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7413151>

The Solution

LS&Co. chose Newtopia based on its reputation for creating meaningful connections and a more personalized experience for its participants. Two things that stood out for LS&Co. was Newtopia's use of testing for genetic biomarkers and its use of "Inspirators," which are dedicated coaches that provide one-on-one support to every participant throughout the entire program.

Newtopia program was offered to eligible employees, who had a BMI of 30 or greater and/or a waist circumference of 35 inches for women and 40 inches for men, or those who had at least two of the following risk factors:

- Blood glucose levels \geq 100mg/dl
- Blood Pressure \geq 130/80 mm HG
- HDL levels \leq 50 mg/dl for women and \leq 40 mg/dl for men
- Triglycerides \geq 150 mg/dl

The Results

Participant engagement was important to LS&Co. as previous programs had failed to deliver sustained participation. Engagement was measured monthly and defined as completing activities such as coaching sessions, weight and activity tracking, or app logins.

Newtopia's personalized, evidence-based approach to bodyweight reduction and sustainable habit change proved effective in helping participants lose the milestone body weight needed to achieve measurable health improvements. Using validated weight loss outcomes as the indicator, program participants worked towards a 12-month goal of 5% bodyweight reduction. This trend is consistent with Newtopia's Randomized Controlled Trial results.¹⁰

Participation exceeded LS&Co. expectations with 90% active engagement after six months.

Quality Assurance Employee Survey Results

- 81% noticed changes in their habits
- 86% found the tools provided to be helpful
- 85% were tracking toward their goal with the help of their Inspirator
- 82% said they would recommend Newtopia to others

¹⁰ Aetna and Newtopia partnered to conduct a 3 year RCT on 2835 at-risk members, demonstrating meaningful engagement, clinical risk reduction, cost savings and a proven in-year ROI. Results were published in the: Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

The majority of employees achieved weight loss milestones of 2.5% by month three, 4.0% by month six, and 5% by month 12.

LS&Co. program participants have expressed overwhelming appreciation for their Inspirators and attribute much of their success to that relationship and to the hyper-personalized nature of the program.

“I absolutely feel like I’ve achieved my goal... It’s hard to pick just one component of the program that was my favorite. The genetic test, food guidance including recipes, and the workout tips were great, but if I had to pick one, it would be my Inspirator. They were very knowledgeable and offered lots of great tips and helpful information, and I enjoy our conversations.” – Dave H., age 41

Because of these results, LS&Co. plans to expand its partnership with Newtopia. The company is in the process of implementing an incentive program to drive an increase in participation.

Embracing Our New Virtual Healthcare Reality

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted nearly every aspect of our lives, especially our ability to achieve optimal health. But as LS&Co. discovered, digital tools and virtual coaching from Newtopia can help mitigate the impact by enhancing that so-very-important human connection that individuals need on their journey toward improved health.

