There is a déjà vu moment I often experience that I imagine also occurs with other career health educators. It usually comes in the form of a question, and the person who asks it seems earnest and interested even though the subject is so fraught with complexity that I sometimes wonder if I’m being “punked.” Neurologists speculate that the jolt we feel when we have one of these moments of “precognition” may actually be caused by an errant overlap in short-term and long-term memory systems. But I’m convinced the question has been and will be with me my whole life: “What really motivates people to change?” Most recently the question came up at the end of a speech I gave that described research my colleagues and I conducted on the best-practice components most associated with higher rates of engagement in wellness programs. I took the questioner’s solemn emphasis on the “really” part of his question to mean that he understood change in all of its splendor: capricious and hard, yet heroic and imperative. I wonder if doctors field a question like “How do you really heal the sick?” or if accountants get asked, “How do you really balance the books of a large company?”

The question about the “real” source of motivation felt more ironic and tautological than usual because I had just shared with the audience that our study showed that “one size does not fit all” when designing health promotion strategies. I ended my presentation by describing how the answer to evoking change at both the population and individual levels resided in our ability to tailor interventions to unique attributes such as age, gender, readiness, ability, and risk levels. Still, there it was. Two minutes left in that session’s Q&A period and I’m fielding THE QUESTION yet again. I’m not tempted to answer the question with this old riddle: “How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Just one, but the bulb has to really want to change.” Humor works best when it has a kernel of truth. The true answer is none.

With this issue of The Art of Health Promotion (TAHP), we confront “The Motivation Issue” in all of its glory. Dr. Seth Serxner, a seasoned health promotion expert, likely fields The Question less than I because he explains things so well in his research, writing, and speaking. Still, if his treatise on motivation doesn’t clear things up, I interview Drs. Spring and Moller, who have dedicated their careers to answering The Question. They also join me in a “journal club” discussion to parse between evidence and conjecture in Dr. Serxner’s article. You’ll see that answering The Question involves explaining such closely related concepts as autonomy, control, mastery, and ability. Also, in answering The Question, each of these experts cites the importance of “self-determination theory,” and I’m delighted to report that in a forthcoming issue of TAHP I will feature an in-depth interview with Dr. Edward Deci, a forefather of this seminal theory.

From Our Blog:
In my TAHP blog post about what health promoters can learn from the corporate social responsibility movement, I asked for reader stories about how volunteerism affected their thinking about wellness. Sarah Monley wrote: “When I think about corporate wellness champions, I don’t think they’re inspired by signing teams up for local 5Ks alone. It’s a start, but champions are motivated by the long-term relationships they have with their coworkers. How can corporate social responsibility build trust between employee health management programs and wellness champions? This is where I would start.”

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