



# Holistic Nurse Coach Leadership Can Transform Healthcare

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## Holistic nurses have many of the tools that are part of core coaching competencies, including relationship-centered care.

An important component of healthcare reform is a renewed focus on wellness, prevention and health promotion. It has been proposed that health coaches play a major role in the delivery of these services to patients and consumers. Registered professional nurse coaches are the ideal practitioners to take a leading role in this healthcare delivery model. Coaching has become a rapidly growing role in the private and corporate sector. The goals of wellness and lifestyle coaching in health care are to improve health outcomes and reduce health costs for individuals, employers, insurance companies and the nation. This development provides nurses with an exciting opportunity to reclaim, reaffirm and expand their role in health promotion, health education, patient support, and advocacy by adding coaching expertise to their professional skills.

According to the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 133 million adults, or nearly half of all adults in the United States, are living with at least one chronic disease such as obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). According to a new report released Nov. 15, 2010, by health insurer UnitedHealth Group Inc, more than half of Americans will have diabetes or be pre-diabetic by 2020 at a cost to the U.S. healthcare system of \$3.35 trillion if current trends go on unabated (UnitedHealth Group, n.d.).

Growing evidence shows, and experienced nurses know, that the suffering these diseases produce can be reduced or prevented through education and behavioral changes. Nurses, through their professional outreach to the organizations, communities, work settings, schools and individuals that they serve, are in an ideal position to implement this vision by providing the necessary guidance, support, motivation and expertise.

In 2009, the Samueli Institute (Jonas, 2009) crafted a document promoting a Wellness Initiative for the Nation (WIN) in collaboration with leaders in the fields of health policy, health promotion, and integrative healthcare practices. The authors suggested several important ways to help move the United States towards a more healthy society with a greatly expanded wellness and prevention infrastructure. The Wellness Initiative proposed training thousands of full-time, community based “health and wellness” coaches to work on chronic disease prevention through comprehensive lifestyle and integrative healthcare approaches with a mission to transform health care and the health of our nation.

### **Nurses Speak Both the Language of Health Care and of Whole-Person Healing**

From a holistic nursing perspective, it is imperative that coaches have a broad foundation of clinical knowledge, experience and skills, as well as a strong foundation in professional ethics, to offer supportive tools and strategies for improving long-term health. With more than 3 million nurses in the U.S. workforce in all sectors of health care — including communities and corporations — nurse coaches will have the opportunity to promote the value of new models for health, resiliency and well-being. This model has proven to be most effective when implemented in primary prevention, management of chronic medical issues, avoiding hospitalization, and post hospitalization aftercare—all sectors where nurses have already assumed the role of health coach.

Recently, the International Council of Nurses (ICN), partnered with the Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International in releasing “Coaching in Nursing,” a document that emphasizes nursing leadership’s role in creating

coaching standards and establishing a relationship between health and wellness coaching and nursing (Donner & Wheeler, 2009).

### **Holistic Nursing Leadership in a Nurse Coach Model**

On a national level, in both education and health policy, there is a growing concern for establishing educational competencies and standards of practice for health coaches—and there are many questions being asked about who will fill this role. Several professional coaching programs have been created, including those at Duke University, Harvard, and at the University of Minnesota’s Center for Spirituality and Healing. Many disciplines, including psychology, medicine, pharmacy and nursing, are exploring a professional certification for healthcare coaches. It is an important moment for nursing to take a leadership role as coaching certification is imminent across diverse professions. This has implications for future health policy, reimbursement, and for changing the health of our nation.

Nurse coaching is a new area of expertise and a new skill set that can build upon a holistic nursing foundation. An authentic coaching relationship is not counseling. It is now evident that there is a need to develop nurse coach and nurse coaching definitions and competencies. Holistic nurses have many of the tools that are part of core coaching competencies, including a focus on relationship-centered care. In addition, we have both AHNA’s and ANA’s *Scope and Standards of Holistic Nursing Practice* (American Holistic Nurses Association/American Nurses Association, 2007). As nurses, we come into the coaching role skilled and educated in giving expert holistic nursing advice as well as offering noninvasive modalities to enhance the healing process. Although these

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are all vital services that we provide to enhance well-being in individuals, it is different from coaching. Nurse coaches assist individuals in accessing their inner wisdom and in motivating and deepening their awareness for behavioral change. Holistic nurses often have an orientation in counseling, educating and instructing their patients and clients on the healthier choices that are essential along the continuum to wellness.

In June 2010, the AHNA appointed a Nurse Coach Task Force to address professional nurse coaching and to explore a national holistic nurse coach certification process. In September 2010, AHNA Leadership Council representatives and the AHNA Nurse Coach Task Force participated in an invitation-only, National Professional Coaching Summit sponsored by Harvard, to establish professional core competencies, educational standards, and to develop a certification process for professional coaches. In preparation for this meeting, the AHNA Nurse Coach Task Force drafted the *White Paper: Holistic Nurse Coaching* (Hess, Bark, & Southard, 2010). They presented this paper to the entire Summit, demonstrating and educating other disciplines about how holistic nurses, with their scope of practice and strongly defined foundation of professional ethics and deep understanding of the nurse patient relationship, are in the position to lead this national effort for the emerging coaching model.

An integrative, holistic nurse coach model presents our profession with exciting and creative opportunities to be leaders in transforming health care, as new models in nursing leadership emerge and are supported by the U.S. Institute of Medicine and the ANA. Nurse coaching along with certification leading to reimbursement opportunities

has the potential to strengthen holistic nursing's role in the transformation of our healthcare system and the health of our nation.

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**Editor's Note:** The authors of this article were all members of the AHNA Nurse Coach Certification Task Force, which has been disbanded. They have partnered in creating an Integrative Nurse Coaching Certificate Program (INCCP) for holistic nurses. To learn more about the program, go to: [www.integrativenursecoach.com](http://www.integrativenursecoach.com)

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