Peer Support Groups

Peer support allows individuals to share similar lived experiences and provide advice and encouragement to one another. Attending an ongoing peer support group may help motivate employees to meet their personal healthy eating goals.

"Peer support interventions may contribute to a workplace culture where people care for each other and support each other."

Definition of Success

Employees are able to participate in an ongoing peer support group that encourages healthy eating.
Peer Support Groups as Part of a Comprehensive Approach

Educating employees about changing personal healthy eating behaviours may be frustrating if tempting food and beverages are available in the workplace. Ideally, interventions that promote healthy eating in the workplace should be implemented along with positive changes to the workplace food environment (i.e., food sold in cafés, cafeterias, vending machines and tuck shops, as well as, food offered during meetings, celebrations and workplace events).

1.0 Needs Assessment

Ask employees about their needs and interests in a peer support group. Refer to page 74 in the Getting Started section for sample employee interest questions.

During your needs assessment, identify employees who may face barriers in linking to social supports (e.g., shift workers, employees who work at alternate locations, etc.).

2.0 Evaluation Indicators

Evaluation indicators will help you to determine if the peer support group has resulted in positive changes. Possible evaluation indicators include:

- Formative indicators such as
  - Relevance of nutrition information to employees participating in the group

- Process indicators such as
  - Attendance at activities
  - Employee satisfaction with the group
  - Suggestions for changes to the group

- Short-term outcome indicators such as:
  - Health behaviour changes (e.g., cooking more often, eating more vegetables and fruit, eating fewer “Foods to Limit” etc.)
  - Increased knowledge or skills (e.g., label reading, gardening, etc.)
  - Increased feelings of social support in the workplace
  - Percentage of employees who have met personal health goals

Refer to page 81 in the Getting Started section for more information about evaluation indicators.
3.0 Implementing Social Support Groups in the Workplace

Workplaces are encouraged to offer peer support groups that are relevant for all employees. A peer based group should help individuals succeed in maintaining healthy behaviour changes by:

- Tailoring the group to the needs and interest of the employees
- Promoting healthy eating habits such as eating more vegetables and fruit, whole grains, legumes, eating fewer “Foods to Limit”, etc.
- Providing opportunities for skill building such as healthy cooking, gardening, label reading, self-monitoring and goal setting
- Ensuring the nutrition information shared in the group is from a credible source (i.e., it has been written by a Registered Dietitian)

Some employees may also benefit from a group that provides an opportunity to share experiences living with a health condition (e.g., diabetes, heart disease, etc.).

Promote the group(s)

Consider:
- Having wellness champions personally invite employees to join the group
- Posting flyers and other promotional materials in high traffic areas (e.g., washrooms, employee entrances, kitchens/cafeterias, etc.)
- Advertising the group in employee newsletters, on web portals, etc.
- Inviting participants to bring a friend
- Having a kick-off event

Taking the Focus Off Weight

A “Health at Every Size” (HAES) approach is recommended, which includes the promotion of healthy eating, physical activity, self-acceptance and overall well-being. This approach targets a larger group of employees compared to weight loss promotion, which may only appeal to a small number of employees.

Focusing on weight loss does not guarantee that employees will be healthier, as many individuals who are attempting to lose weight do not follow healthy eating recommendations. The HAES approach also reduces the risk of unintended problems that can occur as a result of promoting weight loss, such as increased stigma, focus on appearance, poor mental health outcomes or resorting to unhealthy weight loss practices such as skipping meals.

The effectiveness of promoting weight loss is also questionable as weight loss is difficult to achieve and most people who lose weight, gain it back within one year. A study on workplace weight loss programs found that weight loss tends to be very modest (i.e., 3.2 lbs). Therefore, the risks of promoting weight loss in the workplace likely outweigh the benefits compared to a HAES approach.
Peer Support Groups References


