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Season 2, Episode 8: From Small Wins to Big Changes: Harnessing the Power of Lifestyle Coaching – Part 1

Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff live their healthiest lives.

DC: Welcome back everyone to the Healthier You Podcast, a podcast to help you live a healthier life. I am really excited to introduce Madeline Morrison, a clinical inpatient pharmacist here at VUMC. Madeline, we're so glad to have you on the podcast today. Would you mind sharing with us just a little bit about who you are and what you do here at Vanderbilt?

MM: Yeah, I am, like you said, a clinical pharmacist. I work specifically with the lung transplant team here, and it's super rewarding, and I've been here doing that for about five years.

DC: Well, thank you again for joining us. This conversation is particularly special as we dive into the transformative world of lifestyle coaching. For many of us, achieving our health and wellness goals can feel like an uphill battle filled with obstacles and many uncertainties, but what if there's a way to navigate this journey with guidance, support, and a clear roadmap? I'm really excited to dive into your story, Madeline. You decided to reach out to lifestyle coaching and had a really transformative journey that I think will be so valuable for the VUMC community to hear. I would love if you would mind just sharing with

us a little bit about your health and wellness journey before you decided to seek out lifestyle coaching.

MM: Yeah, so, like many people, I think I've done the whole yo-yo of what's healthy? How do I be healthy? I want to lose weight. I'm going to try this random diet or health trend that's going around. And recently, kind of over the summer, I was at sort of an all-time stressful time at work and just in life and realized I wasn't being successful at any of that. So, it kind of sparked this desire to, number one, manage stress, because at the time, I was super stressed out, and number two, just kind of start taking any steps toward building this more sustainably healthy lifestyle. So, that's kind of where I started, I think, when we had first talked.

DC: Well, just for our listeners who may be hearing your story and already relating to some parts of it, let's maybe back up just a second and just describe what lifestyle coaching is from your perspective. So, can you just tell us a little bit about what it was like to participate in the program?

MM: Yeah. This is actually great, because I didn't really know what to expect when I first reached out, but it turned out our first meeting was, you were so kind and just open and willing to listen. And you, basically, I think you leave a really open space for someone to come to you with anything. I could have told you that my goal was anything or I was working on anything, and you would have been 100% on board in your corner, and that's kind of what I think a good summary of coaching is. It's just like having your own personal cheerleader that is there to listen and hear your goals and like help you maybe craft attainable ways to move toward those goals and cheer you on.

DC: Wow. I'm so glad that you had that experience.

MM: Totally. I actually think at first it felt a little scary that it wasn't more prescriptive, like the open-endedness can feel scary for people, especially if you feel like you want that guidance or you want that sort of, you're like a box checker or you're type A, that can feel kind of hard, because you're like, "Oh, well, I thought you were going to tell me what I needed to do to be healthy." And instead, you basically said to me, "What do you want? What does this look like for you in a month, in six months, etc.?" And that, I think, is really powerful, that little nudge outside your comfort zone to be pushed to really think about that for yourself. What does that look like for me and what steps can I take? And you're there as a guide, sort of, but not prescriptive, which I think is really important.

DC: Yeah, yeah. That makes me smile because I think just that's really the biggest take away with coaching is hopefully empowering you and those who are listening to say, "Hey, what's meaningful for you? What's your vision of wellness?" So, we'll talk about that, too,

but tell me just a little bit about a specific moment or achievement during your coaching journey that you are particularly proud of.

MM: Let's see. So, when we first met, it was in the summer, so my husband and I had been consistently going to the gym, and we felt like that was going pretty well for us, and so then I kind of wanted to tackle the next thing. I wanted to add a building block. And for me, a struggle has always been sleep, because I know that that's like one of those core tenets of health, you know? Get enough sleep, eat a balanced meal, move your body, and sleep was always just a struggle for me, and so I came to you with that goal as one of my kind of top things I wanted to work on. I wanted to try to get seven hours of sleep, and just for the listeners awareness, I use an Oura Ring, which tracks my sleep, and so that was kind of the data I was using for this metric, and it's really nice. It gives you reports like on a weekly/monthly basis to track that, so that's what I was using for my sleep, and throughout our time coaching, I made big improvements in hitting that goal more consistently. Still not perfect, which I think will be a theme of this conversation today, but made strides toward hitting that and really gained some insightful new habits or like changes that have helped me continue to move the needle toward getting better sleep or getting more sleep. So, that is probably one of the things I was most proud of, because it had been something I had kind of worked on on and off, and until we kind of met and had a more focused plan, it was not attainable.

DC: Yeah, yeah. I love that you mention sleep, because it really underscores everything, right? Sleep is at the core of all of those things, so yeah, it was really awesome just to see you progress in that area and, you know, just see how it impacted you in your professional life, your personal life, and of course your health goals.

MM: Yeah, we could have a whole sidebar on sleep, but I think, especially with all the information about health and "do this hack to be healthy" or do this, like, people are forgetting the basics, and sleep is literally the foundation of that pyramid. And you can't function, you can't do anything well if you're not sleeping, and I think people so often forget that.

DC: well, you mentioned habits, so would you mind telling us just about the concept of habit stacking and why starting small was important for your journey?

MM: Yeah, so I kind of alluded to it earlier, but even before I had started the coaching, you know, my husband and I were like we want to do something, and so we decided, okay, we're going to go to the gym twice a week. That was a very conscious decision. Twice a week felt super attainable. It felt like, oh, just two out of the seven days a week, so it made it very digestible, the idea of that, and routines are really hard to change. Like, we're creatures of habit, whether we like it or not, and so that takes time, and I think a lot of people, and even

myself, have struggled in the past with you try to change all these things at once. You try to like, it's kind of like, I'm a scientist, right? You're changing all these variables, you're not going to have a very reliable outcome, and it's funny how, as a scientist, it took me this long to realize that. So, we decided, okay, we're going to change one variable, which is going to the gym twice a week. And it was hard at first. You have to reconfigure those nights. It's like, okay, we get home from work, someone's got to walk the dog, we got to do this, how do we fit in making dinner with going to the gym. And so, at first, that feels hard. And then you do it for a while twice a week, and you're like, oh. We've reworked our nightly routine on those nights to make it work. That is going well. This doesn't feel hard anymore. Easy. So then we add a third day. So now, since that time, so I think it'll be like a year in May we'll have been going to the gym three times a week, and now it's no problem. It's just part of our routine. We've restructured. And so that, I think, is the core idea is routines are hard to change. It can be stressful. You have to kind of reconfigure your habits and your normal daily schedule. And so, changing little things at a time and then gradually adding on is way easier.

DC: Yeah, I think it's easy to kind of undermine or feel like, oh, I'm not doing much, you know, maybe, I went to the gym one time this month, and that just like, oh, why bother, you know? That's not a big change. But it seems like you've built something that is lasting, you know? And it is sustainable. And that's kind of what we're hopeful to promote here with Vanderbilt Health and Wellness is something that is sustainable, right? Not just a crash thing that you do.

MM: Yeah.

DC: And then, you know, you're kind of not sure where to go after that.

MM: For sure. Because I think, I'm, I don't know, I've done Whole30, I've done, you know, 30-day workout challenges, etc. And those, you can do, you can accomplish them, but it's because there's an end goal in sight. You're like, I'm making this really drastic change, but I'm only doing it for 30 days, and then at the end, you can go back to whatever you're doing, so you can get through that period, but none of those changes persist, and none of that, there's no like psychologic change that comes along with that, because it's a temporary thing in your brain. By doing it this way, starting small, you incorporate that. You're like rewriting your psychology about that thing. And so now, like I said, going to the gym three times a week, is just, oh, it's an assumption, like, oh, this is just in our week. That's just part of our life, and that is very different in terms of how long you can keep that up.

DC: Yeah, no doubt. I mean, that really kind of goes into our next question, like, how have you done it? How have you maintained consistency?

MM: I think, so it's not perfect, for sure, not perfect. But I think changing your mindset about that and prioritizing those things that are most important to you or those things that you have worked to implement is number one. So, like I said, we're going to the gym three times a week. so, I think prioritizing it and planning ahead are the best ways to maintain consistency. Earlier, too, I talked about nutrition, and we're trying to maintain certain calorie goals to accompany our resistance training and supplementing protein, and so, same thing for that. On Sundays, we sit down, we make a grocery list, which we had always done. We had always kind of planned out our meals for the week, and it was just a slight change to shift the focus. Okay, how do we make sure that we're each hitting our protein goal most days of the week. And so, we kind of changed how we made our menu plan and how we did our grocery shopping. But it was still fitting into our normal routine of, oh, on Sundays we make our list of meals for the week, now we just added a little bit of another checkbox of, like, okay, do those meals provide us enough protein, what do we need to supplement, etc. And so, that's how we've really maintained it is we just tacked some little caveats onto our normal routine, and then we prioritize and schedule our workouts.

DC: Yeah. Well, it seems like what I'm hearing is you all are very intentional by almost customizing it to your personal life.

MM: For sure.

DC: And I think that's really a nod to what lifestyle coaching is about is, like, what works for you? What works for your family, your schedule, your work, your everything? And you all have been able to, you know, sit down, look at your calendar for the week, and say, hey, this is what we have going on this week. That sounds to me like you're looking at wellness holistically by saying like, hey, maybe we do have some friend time or maybe we do have travel, but we still want to prioritize exercise, and so you plan it that way. I think that's pretty awesome.

MM: Thank you. I do think that's, I think I like that you said intention or intentional, because that really is it, right? Like this is a goal that we're both working toward, that I'm working toward, and so we're keeping that intention high in our just list of priorities or list of things that we're paying attention to at the moment, and that's how it kind of gets that top spot of,

okay, let's plan around this. And I also like that you said that's the point of coaching, which I totally agree. It's not prescriptive. It's not saying following this exercise regimen that you hate or isn't sustainable, you know? I think, too, with all the people on social media or podcasts about health and exercise, everyone, like, has their daily routine. And I think it's helpful to some extent, but that's not, like, my schedule is not the same as some fitness influencer who can, like, wake up and do their cold plunge and work out for two hours and then, you know, that obviously isn't going to work for me. I have to come here to the hospital and take care of my patients, so I think, yeah, totally tailoring it to your lifestyle and making it work. And there isn't a perfect, like, you're going to read and digest a ton of information about how to be healthy or how to do this, and none of that applies to you. They don't know your circumstances or anything, so you really do have to just take the pieces you can and rebuild them into your own.

DC: Yeah, I think what we're trying to draw out here is that we all have our own health journey, and that's going to look differently for each person.

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