

Engaging People

Cutting the carbs!

Penny Walker explores green lifestyle coaching, sees parallels with dieting, and finds lessons we can all learn about changing habits.

This year one of my resolutions was to lose a bit of weight and get fitter. So I've developed a personal interest in the techniques used by organisations whose entire existence is based on the possibility that they can help you change your bad habits for good ones. I'm getting top tips, weekly e-mails, a graph to track progress, rules to stick to and a motivating support group of like-minded people. Yes, I've joined Weight Watchers.

And I'm intrigued by the parallels between cutting the carbs, and cutting carbon emissions – what keeps the slimmer motivated and engaged, when all around the temptations to stray and the excuses for failure are so powerful? How do individuals change their behaviour, day by day, and develop habits that produce the desired results – whether that's a leaner physique, or a greener front room?

Getting up close and personal

In the field of fitness, personal trainers are commonplace. They are now available to the eco-conscious, to help each and every one of us green up and cut our carbon. Reality TV has also got in on the act with 'No Waste Like Home' and 'It's Not Easy Being Green' beaming real life eco-makeovers into our homes.

I tracked down some of the new breed of coaches, to find out what makes their approach successful.

First up was the Carbon Coach, Dave Hampton. Hampton is an expert on environmental building techniques and keeps his hand in advising construction projects. His Carbon Coaching business is different, working one-to-one with clients over an extended period, to reduce their carbon footprint. So who hires him? Hampton says, "Most of my clients are in senior positions, or on their way to being business leaders. Coaching on their personal impact is seen as part



of their professional development. If they are going to ask the organisation to cut emissions, going through a similar journey themselves means they are better equipped and much more credible.

"I start off by asking them on a scale of one-to-ten whether they think man-made climate change is happening, and how important it is to them. This provides a frame for them setting their own goals. One of the big problems with carbon emissions is their invisibility – no smell, no sound. I use giant purple balloons, one metre in diameter, to show one kilo of carbon dioxide. You emit one for every five miles you drive. A room full of these balloons is a tangible thing. It's crucial not to feel bad about how many you are producing but to celebrate the one that you can avoid. Concentrate on the ones that are within your sphere of influence. Carbon coaching is one-to-one, one tonne at a time. Every session is different. Clients bring their own dilemmas to work on. Success comes from them making a free choice about what to do, empowered

by a belief that it is worth doing and that they can make a difference."

Hampton also uses more direct techniques. "I carry energy efficient light bulbs in my bag, and I won't leave the house until they've changed at least one bulb!"

Donnachadh McCarthy is the green lifestyle coach who worked with the Strawbridge family on the BBC's 'It's Not Easy Being Green'. His coaching always begins with a detailed eco-audit, and with a question: why have you hired a coach? This uncovers clients' motivation – essential for re-motivating people when the inevitable difficulties or excuses arise.

What are the hardest changes? McCarthy says, "You'd be amazed at the simple wastage of food, energy, water. Many people are concerned, but haven't got a clue what to do. So there are plenty of quick wins. Getting people to cut car driving is harder – unsurprisingly – but did you know people are very unwilling to give up their baths?" McCarthy says

that fear of change itself is the biggest barrier. "A large part of what I do is to make people feel safe, holding their hands through new experiences. The changes are 40 per cent lifestyle, 40 per cent efficiency and 20 per cent investment. When people are resisting perfectly reasonable changes, then I'm coming up against an emotional barrier. In that situation, I say 'this is environmental best practice, and here's a range of possibilities, and the choice is up to you'."

Global Action Plan (GAP)'s eco-teams, which can run in the workplace or the community, also rely heavily on measuring baselines and progress. An eco-team is a group of half a dozen people who together follow a structured four-month programme to reduce their environmental impact. Team leaders are trained in coaching and facilitation, as well as environmental topics. Participants weigh their rubbish, monitor their water, electricity and gas use, and set their own improvement targets. They meet regularly to share progress, help each other get over difficult patches and celebrate success.

GAP is where Penney Poyzer started out. Now the UK's best known eco-lifestyle coach, she worked with eight very different households on the BBC's 'No Waste Like Home'. They monitored gas, electricity and shopping bills. "We linked it very clearly to saving money – a tangible and universal measure. One family was very affluent, wasting huge amounts of food. The mother wanted every meal to look like a feast. When I challenged this, it touched a nerve. Was I criticising her as a mother? The solution lay in understanding her core beliefs – she wanted to be a good and generous mother. So we had to reframe this – how a good mother teaches her children wise lessons and prepares them for the future."

That sounds like a risky area to get into. Poyzer says, "It really helps if you understand some behavioural psychology. The initial stages need to be about easy wins, which directly result in beneficial change. Giving people low-energy light bulbs is an empowering investment in their self-belief. Once people believe they can reach their goals, they stretch themselves a bit more."

Poyzer also sees the potential for

individuals to spread better habits among their own networks. "Each time they tackle something, their environmental knowledge increases. Other people seek them out, they become trusted sources of information among their friends and neighbours."

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DiETING for the planet

So how does all this compare to the Weight Watchers system, developed over three decades and with over 6,000 weekly meetings running in the UK alone?

The scale is clearly very different (though dream a little – millions of people following a green lifestyle programme on a regular basis...). But some of the keys to success are the same. Weight Watchers' Karen Miller-Kovach writes: "The willingness to make a change is directly connected to a person's feelings about whether change is worthwhile (its importance) and whether it is achievable (confidence that it can happen)."

The additional feeling needed, for those about to eco-overhaul their lifestyle, is that it will make enough of a difference. This is where coaching and support groups help – reducing the sense of isolation and reminding people about what Donnachadh McCarthy calls "the power of example".

Weight loss involves three 'subject specific' changes: eating less food; eating different foods; and taking more exercise.

In the same way, environmental improvement involves some specifics:

- using fewer resources and energy;
- using different resources and energy; and
- repairing the damage done by using those resources and energy.

Both kinds involve some generic change strategies, including:

- getting support – from a coach or a group;

- managing your thoughts – focusing on positive outcomes, setting realistic goals, reminding yourself of your motivation, telling yourself you can do it;
- establishing a baseline and monitoring the changes;
- finding ways of assertively putting your green diet goals first – you politely refuse the new carrier bag rather than taking it so as not to offend;
- sorting out your surroundings so that temptations are out of the way and better choices are easy – put the play station in a cupboard, and a book on the table;
- understanding your feelings – if you realise that it's boredom that makes you waste energy, then you can make a conscious decision to do something different next time boredom strikes; and
- sharing simple, specific tips on how to change your habits – switching to skimmed milk for the dieters, or to organic milk for the greenies.

Inside every one of us there's a lean Green itching to be released, so build this into your work and watch the eco-fat melt away.

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Want to know more?

Weight Watchers pages on the science of behaviour change:
www.weightwatchers.co.uk/health/gui/index.aspx?ContGrpId=4661

David Hampton
www.carboncoach.com

Donnachadh McCarthy
www.3acorns.co.uk

Global Action Plan
www.globalactionplan.org.uk

Penney Poyzer
www.msarch.co.uk/ecohome

No Waste Like Home
www.bbc.co.uk/homes/tv_and_radio/nw/wh_index.shtml

It's Not Easy Being Green
www.itsnoteasybeinggreen.org/