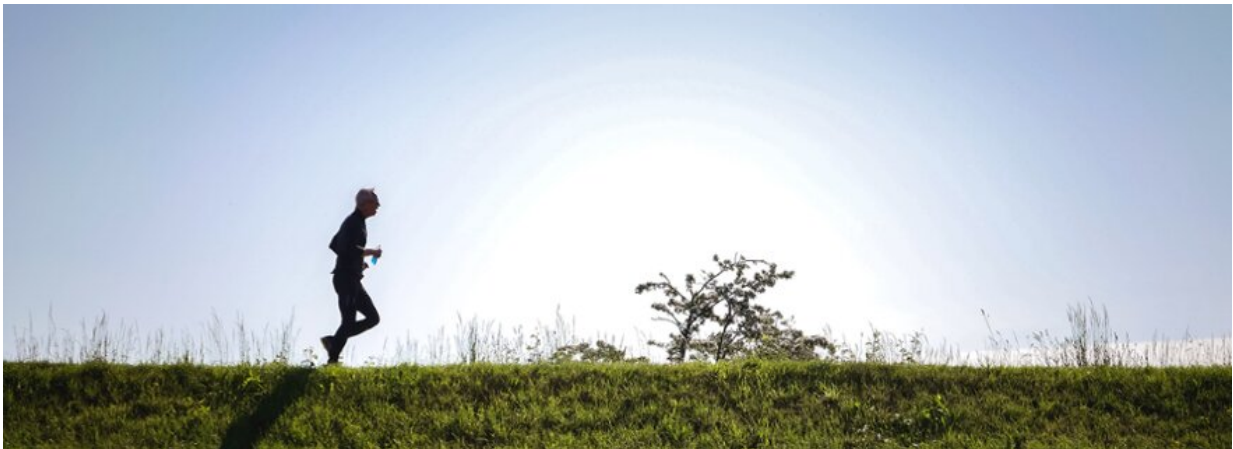


Involve behavioral experts sooner for a healthy lifestyle

September 1 2022, by Dagmar Aarts



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Healthy lifestyle campaigns are often unsuccessful. It is hard to get people to eat healthily or exercise more. Behavioral science expertise should be drawn on at a much earlier stage in policy development, say twelve behavioral scientists in a position paper. They will present the paper to Maarten van Ooijen (State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport) on 31 August.

"If we don't draw on behavioral science expertise sooner, we won't manage to become a healthier country and to remain so," says Marieke Adriaanse, Professor of Behavioral Interventions in Population Health.

Health care has traditionally focused on cure rather than prevention, and medicine and [medical treatment](#) generally take center stage in our [health care](#) system. The increase in chronic, lifestyle-related conditions such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease demands a different approach. If patients and people with an unhealthy lifestyle are to live a longer and healthier life, they will need to change their behavior—and so too will health care and policy professionals because they will need to give different advice.

Behavior change is complex and takes time and money. And the latter is often lacking. Andrea Evers, Professor of Health Psychology: "Everyone overwhelmingly agrees that behavioral science expertise should be used alongside other disciplines, but that it shouldn't cost anything. It's seen as an intrinsic part of things, and people fail to recognize that you have to invest in it from the start to ensure this knowledge is included systematically and that behavior interventions succeed."

Behavioral scientists are not the key to success

The Population Health interdisciplinary program is about sustainable health care that focuses more on prevention. Adriaanse is a professor in this interdisciplinary Leiden University program. "At Campus The Hague behavioral scientists work with GPs, epidemiologists, public administration experts and data scientists in the region. We look at health from a broad perspective. Behavioral scientists are not the key to the success of a new policy or health care that meets people's needs more. It's about collaboration between all sorts of different disciplines."

Trick

At present behavioral experts are often asked to join a project once the policy is more or less complete. "Behavioral expertise is sometimes

reduced to a kind of trick, when understanding behavior and supporting [behavior change](#) is really complex," says Adriaanse. "You need research and [theoretical models](#) to understand behavior and to apply the right interventions and tools to different groups of people."

To develop a successful policy, you need to analyze the target group's needs. What problems are at play and what does the group need to live a healthier life and maintain this? The target group also needs to be involved in developing policy and interventions. What works in one neighborhood may not work in another. Evers: "We know from research that just living in a neighborhood with lots of fast-food chains means that people live less healthily. Finger wagging and good advice then have little effect. This makes it really important to take account of people's lived environment and the limitations they face. Then interventions can be developed that take account of the influence of the environment."

In addition, once it's there, a policy has to be continuously evaluated. Situations, needs and technology constantly change. Take the coronavirus pandemic when no one could go to the gym anymore. And what was the latest technology five years ago is now outdated.

Evers believes the BENEFIT project is a good example: here behavioral scientists were involved from the start in developing tailored interventions to help patients with cardiovascular disease change their lifestyles. Patients with [cardiovascular disease](#) receive support during and after cardiac rehabilitation in sticking to a healthy lifestyle. The support includes e-health tools and rewards for healthy behavior, and takes account of the patient's personal preferences and obstacles.

Climate change

The position paper is about using behavioral expertise in the field of lifestyle. But the researchers believe this knowledge should also be used

more often and at an earlier stage in other fields. Evers: "With [climate change](#) and sustainability, for example, human behavior is the key to successful policy change. Knowledge about behavioral expertise in one area can also be used in other areas that relate to people's behavior."

After all the problems with the coronavirus vaccine, it proved to be a good example of getting people to change their behavior, says Adriaanse. "A community approach meant loads of people were reached in the end. By going into the communities—sometimes using key figures—and making space for questions and providing readily available vaccinations, it's easier to meet peoples' needs and remove any barriers. These are valuable initiatives that we can learn from for the future."

Provided by Leiden University

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