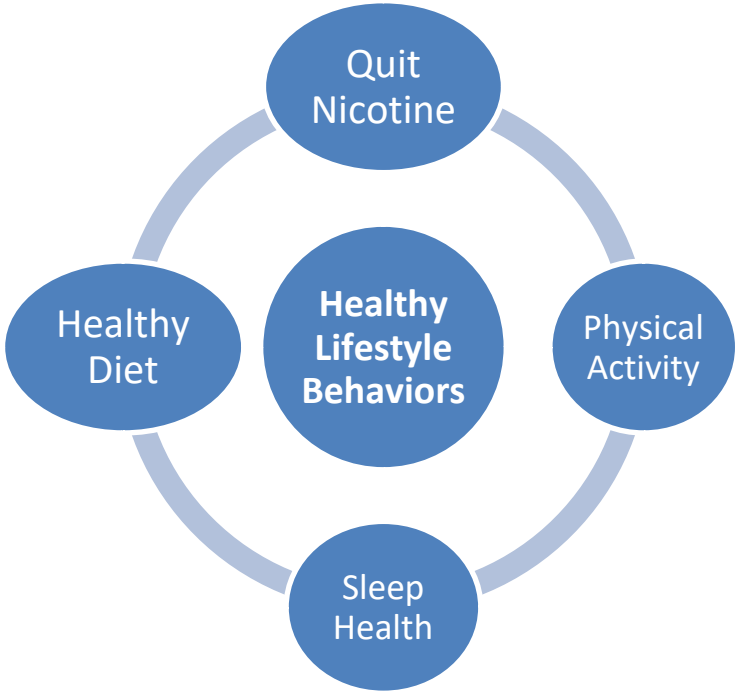
An Introduction to Healthy Conversation Skills

A new way to engage patients in brief, behavior change counseling

HCS was developed by a multidisciplinary team from the University of Southampton & its partners

Nationwide Children's
When your child needs a hospital, everything matters.

The Ohio State University
College of Medicine



Why care about lifestyle behaviors anyway?

- Chronic disease rates (including cardiovascular disease) continue to increase (Martin et. al. 2024)
- The National Research Council estimates that lifestyle behaviors account for 40-50% of the risk associated with death before the age of 75 years (Ford et. al. 2012)
- American Heart Association (AHA) has also transitioned to focusing on the promotion of lifestyle behaviors to prevent the onset of CVD risk (Lloyd-Jones 2022)
- However, promoting healthy lifestyle behaviors remains challenging (Schroeder 2007)

Intersection of Healthy Lifestyle Behaviors and Mental Health

Sleep: Strongest behavioral link between both anxiety and depression

- Insufficient or irregular sleep disrupts emotion regulation, stress responses, and cognitive functioning

Physical Activity: Consistent physical activity is strongly linked with better mental well-being

- Movement improves mood through neurochemical changes, reduced inflammation and improved sleep

Nutrition and Eating Behaviors: Irregular eating routines and skipping meals predict poor psychological health

- Regular meals and stable daily routines support brain health and stress tolerance

Wang et al (2025); Long (2025); Amiri et al (2024)

What is the role of clinicians?

- Healthcare clinicians are encouraged to **discuss healthy lifestyle behaviors that prevent chronic disease and promote mental health in a patient-centered manner** (Kris-Etherton 2021; Kaminsky 2022)
- Discussing healthy lifestyle behaviors significantly **increases the likelihood that the patient will initiate behavior change**. (Arnett 2019; Waldron 2011)
- However, clinicians face **several barriers** including time constraints, difficulty conveying "risk levels" to their patients, and lack extensive training in behavior change counseling (Kolasa 2010; Kushner 1995)

What is lifestyle behavior change counseling?

- Structured, patient-centered approach to help patients modify unhealthy behaviors and adopt healthier ones
- Lifestyle behaviors can include
    - •Diet, Physical activity, sleep, smoking, substance use
- Typically involves
    - •Assessing patient's risk behaviors
    - •Advising on need for change
    - •Agreeing on specific goals
    - •Assisting with treatments/resources
    - •Arranging follow-up to support sustained change

What are the different types of behavior change counseling?

- **5As** (Assess, Advise, Agree, Assist, Arrange)
  - Works well with smoking, has limited evidence in lifestyle behaviors
- **Cognitive Behavior Theory (CBT)**
  - Works well for a variety of behaviors but need extensive training
- **Motivational Interviewing (MI)**
  - Highly effective in working for lifestyle behaviors
  - Dependent on fidelity of person delivering counseling
  - Needs long amount of training

What is Healthy Conversation Skills?

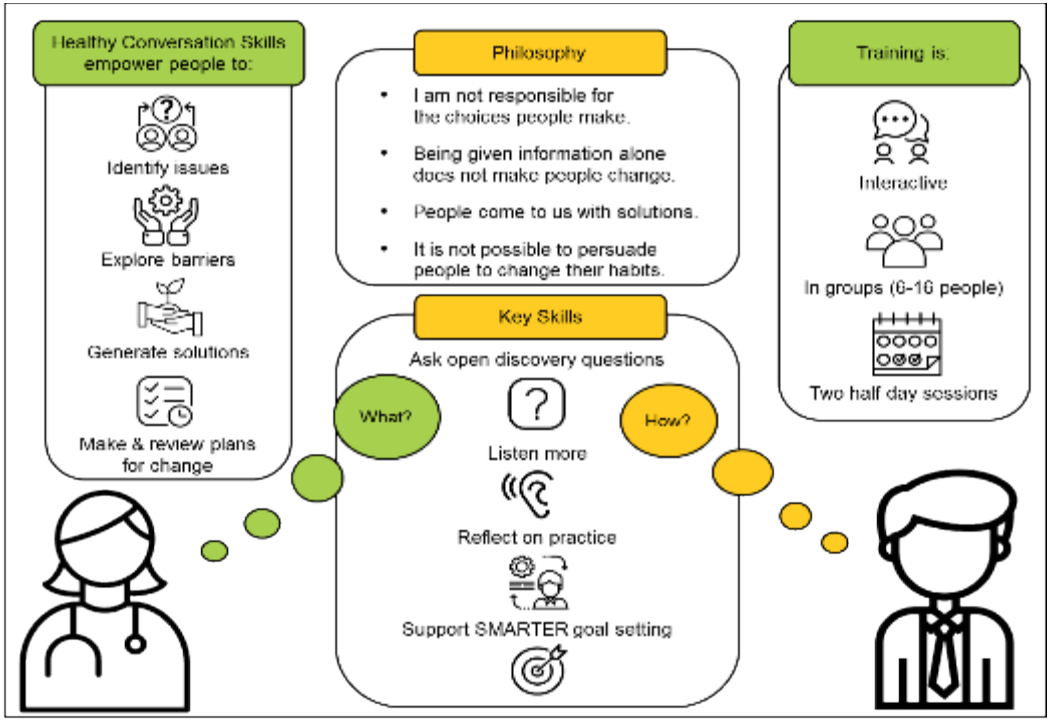
- Healthy Conversation Skills is an **evidenced-based communication skills training program** to support health care providers to initiate effective **behavior change conversations** with clients in **time-limited interactions**. Healthy Conversation Skills is **person-centered**:

Engage and motivate clients to explore the context of their behaviors, set their own goals, and identify their first steps to change

What is HCS©?

- Developed by multidisciplinary team at the **University of Southampton, UK**
  - *…to "address barriers related to changing health-related behaviours among women with young children in Southampton, UK"*

- Based on **Social Cognitive Theory** and underpinned by the **Behaviour Change Techniques**
- **Enables tailoring for any health behaviour**
- **Used with any client population**
- **Delivered by a HCS trainer**



Why HCS?

- Supporting people to **change their health behaviours is important**
- **Giving people advice and instruction** (i.e. used in traditional healthcare consultations / medical model) is usually insufficient for behaviour change
- **Person-centered approaches use exploratory conversations** to understand the person's context and support them to identify their own solutions
- **Health care provider (HCPs) report barriers to using person-centered approaches for behaviour change**
  - Low confidence in their communication skills
  - Concern that it will negatively impact rapport with their client
  - Feeling ineffective in supporting client behaviour change
  - Not enough time in busy appointments
- HCS is one **evidenced-based person-centered approach** that can be used to support HCPs to have conversations about behaviour change with clients

What is a healthy conversation?

Example of a "Healthy Conversation"

Ask Open Discovery Questions (ODQs) – starting with 'what' and 'how'

Identify behaviour <u>they</u> want to change

Explore their **barriers** to change

Help them generate <u>their own</u> **solutions**

Make and review plans for change

Skills can be used in any conversation to explore behaviour change

SPRING
Southampton PRegnancy Intervention for the Next Generation

Gravida
HEALTHY START WORKFORCE PROJECT

EACH-B

MAKING EVERY CONTACT COUNT

HCS has been rolled out in many locations…

*Slide content from A/Prof Lawrence

Healthy Conversation Skills hotspots!

Research projects and to meeting Govt. health agenda

What does the training for HCS© look like?

- No technology e.g. PowerPoint slides
  - Resources include: whiteboard, posters, post-it notes, pens, easle paper, hand-outs etc

Healthy Conversation Skills:
response styles

- Open Discovery Question
- Open Question (other)
- Closed Question
- Empathy / Reflection
- In my experience
- Telling / Suggesting

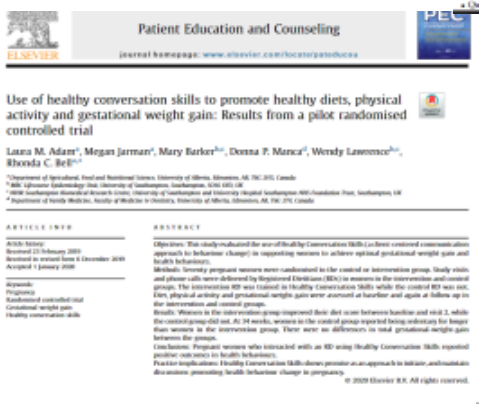
specific
measurable
action-orientated
realistic
timed
evaluated
reviewed

What is the evidence for HCS?

Healthy conversation skills: increasing competence and confidence in front-line staff

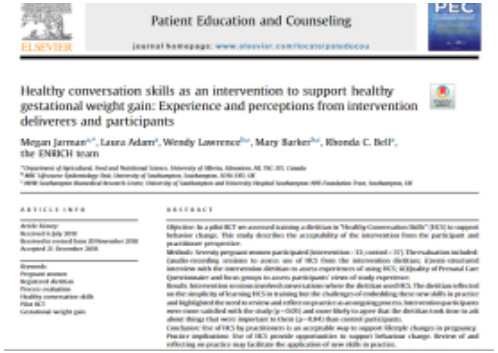
Health and Social Care in the community

Implementation of new Healthy Conversation Skills to support lifestyle changes – what helps and what hinders? Experiences of Sure Start Children's Centre staff



Patient Education and Counseling

Use of healthy conversation skills to promote healthy diets, physical activity and gestational weight gain: Results from a pilot randomised controlled trial



Patient Education and Counseling

Healthy conversation skills as an intervention to support healthy gestational weight gain: Experience and perceptions from intervention deliverers and participants

Range of HCP in different settings:

- ⇑ competence in using ODQs ("what' and "how')
- ⇑ confidence in having behaviour change conversations
- ⇑ use of HCS when providing care
- HCS sustained up to 1y post-training
- HCS – highly acceptable, satisfied with training

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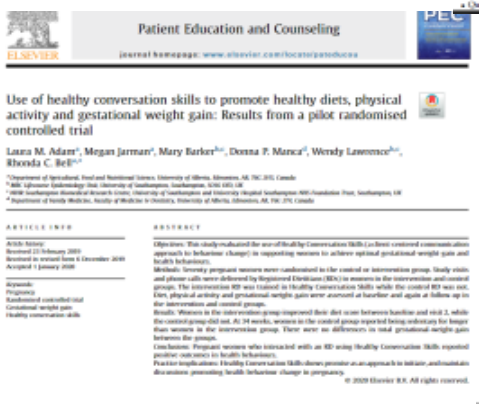

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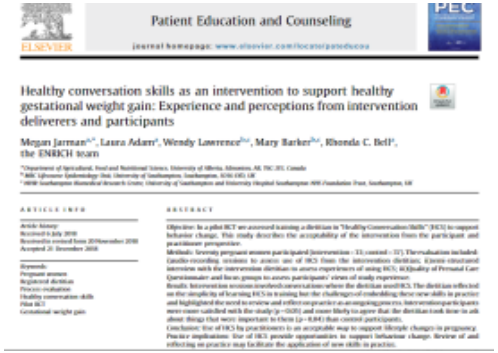

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Patient outcomes from HCS:

- ⇑ quality of care
- ⇑ some health behaviours (i.e. diet and sedentary behaviour)

Healthy Conversation Skills Training

Training is for:
- Practitioners who want to learn how to use HCS when providing care

HCS empowers people to:
- Identify issues
- Explore barriers
- Generate solutions
- Make/review SMARTER plans for change

Philosophy
- I am not responsible for the choices people make
- Being given information alone does not make people change
- People come to us with solutions
- It is not possible to persuade people to change their habits

Key skills:
- Ask open discovery questions
- Listen more than talk
- Reflect on practice
- Support SMARTER goal setting

Training is:
- Interactive, in groups (6-16 ppl)
- Two 3-4 hour sessions
- Can also include mini trainings and intro sessions (like this one!)


General socio-economic, cultural and environmental conditions
Living and working conditions
Work Environment
Unemployment
Social and community networks
Water and sanitation
Education
Individual lifestyle factors
Health care services
Agriculture and food production
Age, sex and constitutional factors
Housing
The Determinants of Health

MAKE YOUR GOALS

Setting goals can be a great way to challenge yourself to make healthy lifestyle changes. Set yourself up for success by making your goals **SMARTER**!

SPECIFIC	MEASURABLE	ACTION-ORIENTED	REALISTIC	TIMED	EVALUATED	REVIEWED
What specifically do you want to change?	How much of this will you do, or how often will you do it?	What will you do to make that change happen?	What is likely to stop you from doing this? What can you do to overcome this?	By when will you have done this?	How will you know when you've achieved your goal?	How will you review what to do next?

S **My goal is:**_____

e.g. I will complete two strength workouts each week.

M **I will do this by:**_____

e.g. I will complete two workouts a week..

A **I will achieve this goal by doing the following:**

_____

e.g. I will go to the gym on my way back home.

R **What makes this goal realistic for my current life and commitments:**

_____

e.g. I will set a reminder on my phone so I don't forget.

T **I will complete this goal by (date):**_____

e.g. I will follow this plan for the next four weeks.

E **I will evaluate my progress by:**_____

e.g. Each week I will review my progress by tracking the days I workout on my calendar.

R **I will review my progress by:**_____

e.g. I will review my progress with my partner and health coach at the end of the month to see how I am doing and adjust the goal if needed.

Compare and Contrast

	Motivational Interviewing	Healthy Conversation Skills
How it works?	• Focuses on eliciting motivation from within the patient, • Exploring ambivalence, • Guiding them toward their own reasons for change, rather than imposing external reasons	• Use Open Discovery Questions to help someone explore an issues • Reflect on your practice and conversations • Spend more time listening than giving information • Use ODQ to support SMARTER plan
Training?	• Yes, often by an expert • Requires several weeks of training • MINT Certification • Other tools do exist	• Yes, two 4-hour sessions
Evidence?	• Strong evidence it can help if done with high fidelity • BMI2+ shows that it doesn't always work (Resnicow et. al. 2024)	• Improves confident and competence in clinicians & initial behavior change • Studies need to see long term effect on sustained behavior change
How long does it take?	• Can take minutes to hours depending on training and type of visit	• Designed to take 2-5 min

What does having a healthy conversation look like?

1 = Talker

(person wishing to change a behaviour)

2 = Helper

(can only *Listen* and ask *Open Discovery Questions* beginning with “how” or “what”)

2 mins for conversation, then swap

Volunteer Please!

Who would like to have a quick talk about something they would like to change?

2 x 2-minute conversations

Thank you!
Happy to take any questions.

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