

WEIGHT LOSS

These big 'losers' become big winners

Nonprofit staff hosts contest to promote healthy lifestyle



19 HOURS AGO • [ROSEMARIE KEMPTON](#)

When Alternatives for Better Living had a “Biggest Loser” competition in its office, every staff member became a winner.

At the beginning of 2012, the staff collectively decided to begin a “Biggest Loser” contest because they were overweight, explained Joni Yacoe, clinical director for the small Napa-based nonprofit.

The weight loss challenge began in February. So far, the 10 employees at the addiction treatment and anger management program have lost well over 100 pounds.

In a show of support for the goal, Yacoe and Executive Director William Krimm decided to buy gym memberships for the staff — five therapists, two interns and two office personnel. Not only does the staff have health club memberships, they are given work time to go to Exertec.

“The gym membership came out of our decision to ‘walk our talk,’” Krimm said.

The purpose of Alternatives for Better Living is to help people live more satisfying, successful lives, according to the nonprofit. Services include alcohol and drug abuse treatment, classes for parents, and classes for people convicted of various legal offenses.

Perhaps the most widely used service is anger management, which is called “managing emotions,” Krimm said. About 80 percent of Better Living’s clients are referred by a judge. Most of the rest come because someone important to them insisted. A few clients come because their own behavior scared them or was making them miserable, he said.

“We teach clients that living a happier, more successful life requires exercise, paying attention to your diet, some sort of meditation or spiritual practice, having friends or family and practicing healthy ways of thinking and behaving,” Krimm said.

“While we all know and try to practice this stuff, we also know that finding a time and place to exercise is the biggest gap in our own attempts to live healthier lives,” he added.

The Exertec memberships and giving people time to work out “was a concrete way to put our money where our mouth is,” Krimm said. “It worked.”

Krimm admitted that he initially wasn’t sure the gym memberships would pay off and, being a low-budget nonprofit, he feared losing money. But he said he’s impressed with how his staff responded. Working out while at work “means that staff all support each other in using the gym

and focusing on their personal goals,” he said. That support has made the program successful, he said, and contributed to an improved sense of being a team.

“Everyone here knows a lot about diet, food plans and what it means to eat healthy,” Yacoe said. At the same time, “I believe — especially for women — they often skip the gym because they feel guilty. They’ve been at work all day and now should be home with their family. By giving them the opportunity to use work time, they do not have to take away from family time,” she said.

Working out at Exertec, just two blocks from their office, has not detracted from employees’ work productivity, Yacoe said.

Using the buddy system, employees work out with a partner. “There is a lot of research that shows much better outcomes if people have a partner or team they feel accountable to,” Yacoe said. More than once, she’s heard employees challenging each other to go to the gym, even if they first say no.

The biggest individual loser at Alternatives for Better Living was intern Rainy Stegall. She received \$50 as her prize.

“I lost 30 pounds,” Stegall said. “I feel better about myself (and) more able to talk openly about my food addiction and weight issues. I am very thankful to Alternatives for Better Living for paying my gym membership — especially as an intern at the agency.”

Stegall wasn’t alone in appreciating the free gym memberships. Office manager Renee Silva said that the benefits were felt by the entire staff. She noted that she, as well as other staff members, now feel better about themselves and have more energy.

Staff members usually visit the gym three to five times a week. “We do cardio and weight training and water aerobics,” Silva said. “We all rotate partners. If one person is not available, we go with another person.

“It is a morale booster,” Silva continued. “We feel valued by our employer for allowing us the paid time to go during work hours. It is incredible! We all have busy lives. We would not find the time after work to exercise.”

Silva said that improved employee health became noticeable about a month after staff began working out at the gym. Exercising together brings a sense of camaraderie, she added. “We all agree that planks and push-ups are not our friend,” Silva said, laughing.

Should other organizations do this?

“If they can, yes. Healthy, happier employees are more productive,” Krimm said. “Every organization or business should actively promote the physical and emotional health of their workers in any way they can. We are fortunate to have a staff culture and the flexibility (as a nonprofit) to try out ideas.”