THE WELLNESS COUNCIL OF AMERICA PRESENTS

How my company's wellness program saved my life!

One Woman's Journey From Sickness To Health

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ABOUT **David Hunnicutt** PhD

Dr. David Hunnicutt is the President of the Wellness Council of America. As a leader in the field of health promotion, his vision has led to the creation of numerous publications designed to link health promotion objectives to business outcomes.

ABOUT **Madeline Jahn**

Madeline Jahn is the Communications Associate for the Wellness Council of America. Her role is to coordinate the development of new publications and pool existing resources for WELCOA members, serving the mission of health promotion through marketing and planning support. She earned her Bachelor of Arts from Creighton University, and is currently pursuing a Master's Degree in Organizational Leadership from the College of Saint Mary. For questions about this publication, or to obtain permission for reprinting, please contact Maddy at *mjahn@welcoa.org.*

ABOUT **WELCOA**

Wellness Council of America (WELCOA) was established as a national not-for-profit organization in the mid 1980s through the efforts of a number of forward-thinking business and health leaders. Drawing on the vision originally set forth by William Kizer, Sr., Chairman Emeritus of Central States Indemnity, and WELCOA founding Directors that included Dr. Louis Sullivan, former Secretary of Health and Human Services, and Warren Buffet, Chairman of Berkshire Hathaway, WELCOA has helped influence the face of workplace wellness in the U.S.

Today, WELCOA has become one of the most respected resources for workplace wellness in America. With a membership in excess of 4,000 organizations, WELCOA is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of all working Americans. Located in America's heartland, WELCOA makes its national headquarters in one of America's healthiest business communities—Omaha, NE.

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The following testimonial illustrates how CEOs and Senior-Level Executives can make a difference in the lives of their employees. By being committed enough to care, organizational leaders can provide gentle nudges and encouragement to their employees to take better care of their health—a simple act that can make all the difference in the world—especially when it comes to protecting the pearl of great price.

As tragic as it is, people value their health most when they lose it—and that was certainly the case with Anita Hagen. Fortunately, with the help of a senior-level leader, this story has a happy ending. Here is one woman's account of how a committed company executive essentially saved her life. By being committed enough to care, provide encouragement and follow-up, Anita Hagen avoided a potentially catastrophic health tragedy.

As a Senior Level Executive and organizational leader, if you choose to embrace good health as good business, your commitment can make an enormous difference to the health of the people in your organization—something that's worth its weight in gold.

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...WELCOA offers a best-in-class Webinar and Certification series on workplace wellness?

As part of our mission, WELCOA is dedicated to providing a variety of training opportunities each year. Drawing from the latest science as well as best practices in the field, WELCOA offers dynamic and nationally recognized seminars, webinars, and certification opportunities that engage workplace wellness practitioners, business leaders, and health professionals all across the country.

Check Out This Year's Schedule:

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Anita Hagen's Story

On a chilly February morning, my blackberry was screaming at me. As I walked to the conference room to redirect the project team around the latest batch of client complaints, the Executive Vice President of our firm said hello to me in the hall. Little did I know that what he said next would change my life.

In this day and age, it seems we never have time for ourselves, let alone time to really have a good long 'think' about our future health. It really is true—you don't think about your health until it is gone. I never thought twice about it, just kind of always expected it to be there for me. I didn't anticipate a major health issue knocking on the door at age 46.

But it did.

> "The most important thing I learned is how fine the line is between good and bad health, and how the simplest, seemingly smallest of changes on a daily basis got me moving out from under the cloud of doom."

Life's Distractions

Between the stress of a high-pressure advertising job, the juggling of after-school activities with my kids, being the social butterfly at book club and the president of my neighborhood association, I always associated the "busy-ness" in my life with the equivalent of being active. I think I just assumed that my family's history of high blood pressure and vascular disease was either a faint memory, or way off in the distance—not something that could interrupt such a busy life—one that seemingly charged on without any signals of letting up.

On Valentine's Day, I took the test. And that's when I stopped to really take notice that my busy life was not treating me the way I thought it was. I wasn't gliding through my forties as smoothly as I pictured—moment-to-moment, sometimes stressed, but sometimes wonderfully distracted. My stress was actually building and destroying my health. And if it weren't for the test, I'm not sure that I would have been here much longer.

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The Health Fair

In celebration of American Heart Month, our company was holding a health fair in the courtyard. Over lunch, I was booking my daughter's next round of art classes, reviewing my emails from the morning's meeting, and then I got the message to meet my team for an urgent conference.

I had left my office in such a hurry that when passing the Executive Vice President I struggled to offer a barely-composed 'hi,' followed by the old two-finger 'wave' as my binders and smart phone and coffee mug were rivaling each other for space in my over-packed arms. He stopped, which stopped me, and said, "Hello Anita, you look like you're in a hurry. Are you planning to make time for the health fair today?"

"What, are you crazy?!" I thought to myself—only to myself of course. "Oh, hello sir, not today, but thank you. We've just had to call an emergency meeting to change directions on the Hanson account, and all my attention is going to that right now. Bill will be filling you in this afternoon."

His response was a frown. I thought it was maybe because of the way I brought up the meeting, or because he was reflecting on his concerns with the account. But he said, "Anita, it's especially important on a busy day like today, this is when you need to pay attention to the opportunities around you. Please make the health fair a priority, and right after the meeting, why don't you take your entire team down there too? I want to see you there by 4 PM. Okay? It's very important that everyone participates."

And I said yes. Well, I wasn't going to say no. So I went, and I took my team, and we all had a heart screening at our office, for free.

I'll admit, while at first I was perturbed that I had to take time away to go to the fair, it actually was pretty fun when I walked in. There were colorful booths and interesting equipment displays, and everyone looked happy and relaxed. Our team split up and went in various directions.

Not wanting this to take too long and despite the enticing giveaways, I opted to avoid the free vision-screening and massage lines, and headed for the wide-open blood pressure station.

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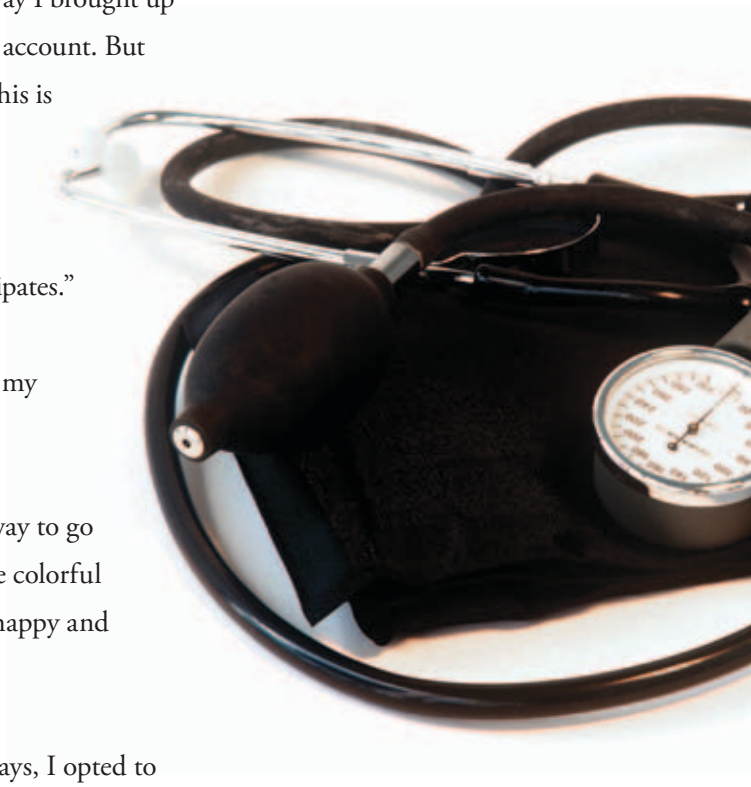

The Pressure's Rising

It had been years since I had taken part in a preventive check-up, and my annual exams always seemed to go as expected—I'd never had any feedback about something being off. So, I wasn't expecting the look on the nurse's face when the reading on my cuff showed 200/100. I didn't even know what that number meant.

Needless to say, everyone around me was immediately concerned, and I was escorted off to the emergency room for same-day medical treatment.

"But my project…my kids…my husband…am I going to have a heart attack… what will happen?" My thoughts darted from work still left on my desk, to the thought of leaving my loved ones behind—all the while scared senseless, not fully understanding what had just happened.

The emergency room physician explained that I had severe hypertension, and prescribed a blood pressure medication. The next day, I went to see my internal medicine doctor and he prescribed me with a longer-term prescription plan.

Eventually, my blood pressure did come down, but the event literally stopped me in my tracks.

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It Took Time… And Encouragement From Every Cubicle

The next day I went back to work, and everyone, including the Vice President (who unquestionably saved my life), showed tremendous concern and offered their support. It was an unbelievable wave of caring and encouragement.

I wasn't really sure what I should be doing, and for a while, it felt like walking on pins and needles. I felt fragile and weak and let my mental guard down, growing more scared and sad. Other times, when my husband was worried about my health or what I was eating or how I wasn't relaxing enough, I would go into denial and pout as if nothing had changed.

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Eventually, these mood swings got better, and I learned to take the first steps to dealing with my health problem. I did begin to accept it and started changing my habits, and little by little, got moving in the right direction.

Having not ever really been a go-getter when it came to exercise, I occasionally stretched and maybe took a walk in the neighborhood while the kids rode their bikes. But I wasn't into jogging, or cross-training and the like, so the thought of having to take on a new routine because of my heart was at first overwhelming. Luckily for me, the break room at work had recently been converted into an exercise room, with two treadmills, a set of free-weights and a television.

A Turning Point

The day after my emergency room trip, my Vice President sat down to see how I was doing. He told me a story—that he had been through something similar, that he didn't believe it when it happened, and that he wrestled with it for a long time. That's when he realized that he could help everybody at the company be more aware of their health, so they didn't have to face such a big surprise like he went through.

"From that moment on," he said, "this wellness movement became a huge priority." He encouraged me to participate in the company's wellness program, and also to join him for 20-minute walks at lunch. I started a new diet with the help of some brochures the receptionist pointed out, and before I knew it, the tips and triggers I needed to pay attention to were surrounding me.

Why hadn't I paid attention before?

Now I remember to breathe when I'm swamped at my desk. Now I take a walk to the fourth floor instead of the elevators. Now I bring some almonds for my

WELCOA'S dyk DID YOU KNOW...

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To become a WELCOA member simply visit:

http://www.welcoa.org/store/

> "The Executive Vice President said, "Anita, it's especially important on a busy day like today, this is when you need to pay attention to the opportunities around you. Please make the health fair a priority, and right after the meeting, why don't you take your entire team down there too? I want to see you there by 4 PM. Okay? It's very important that everyone participates."

3:00 PM pick-me-up instead of sharing those birthday brownies or whatever is hanging around by the coffee bar.

I am aware—of myself and my surroundings. I am better at time management, and because I put my health first, my 20-minute lunch-break walks are just what I need to feel energized and like I can make it another day.

> "I did begin to accept it and started changing my habits, and little by little, got moving in the right direction."

Workplace Wellness Saved My Life

Eight months later, I am no longer on medications. My blood pressure is under control, and I feel like I have a new lease on life.

The most important thing I learned is how fine the line is between good and bad health, and how the simplest, seemingly smallest of changes on a daily basis got me moving out from under the cloud of doom. I am now a big fan of my company's wellness program, and needless to say, I attend every health fair—no prompting necessary.

Without the support and encouragement of my entire worksite and the Vice President of our company, I wouldn't have known where to start. I am so thankful that because my company brought it to my attention, my first major health problem wasn't my last chance to recognize the value of taking care of myself.

Anita Hagen's story reminds us that health and wellness is not something we should put off, nor do we want to wait for a bad event to start doing something good for ourselves. As a CEO embracing wellness in the workplace, you have a rare opportunity to make a huge impact on your people, and your bottom line, through the simple message of daily encouragement.

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