RENEW YOUR FOCUS ON HEALTH IN 2022

Kick off the year with a little help from your friends at the MUSC Wellness Center.

By Christine Steele

The My Best Health Challenge is a comprehensive 10-week program designed to increase physical activity, prevent obesity and chronic illness and give you the tools to maintain healthy lifestyle habits.

"We have all been stressed for so long, self-care has been put on the bottom of our list," said Program Director Tatiana Baier, Ph.D. "We have had so many things – and people – to take care of, we forget that our health should be our No. 1 priority. We also know that if we are faced with a disease, we need to be ready for it. The whole world has realized this in the past two years. This program helps you look at your overall health, not just your shape."

While the program isn't new, it has a new name and expanded focus. Launched in 2008 by former MUSC Program Director Janis Newton, it was originally called the Healthy Charleston Challenge and focused on weight loss.

Inspired by the reality show "The Biggest Loser," the program had a mentor component and featured teams of participants who competed for the biggest weight loss per team, with prizes as incentives. At that time, the program had as many as 100 participants, with teams of eight to 12 people in each session. Each team included a nutritionist and a personal trainer.

"People were getting together every week, exercising, socializing and having team camaraderie," Baier said. "It was a big program here at the Wellness Center."

Jennifer Jaroscak, M.D., a pediatric oncology doctor who participated in the Healthy Charleston Challenge in 2016, said she found the camaraderie, education and team approach really helpful.

"It really was a lifestyle change for me," she said. "Then, fast forward to March 2020. Things were getting really busy at the hospital. Since I take care of kids with cancer, we really had to be careful about exposures, and we went into lockdown. I really got off track with meal planning and exercise. I remembered how much better I felt when I was exercising frequently, so I rejoined the Wellness Center. To be honest, I was having trouble getting motivated to go. Sometimes it is just hard to get going by yourself."

Tatiana Baier (kneeling in front) leads a team of My Best Health participants through exercises during a group class. Tatiana's team meets at 6 a.m. twice a week during the 10-week comprehensive lifestyle change program. Dr. Jennifer Jaroscak (second from left), a pediatric oncology doctor, is a participant in the My Best Health challenge.

The program has evolved since then, Baier explained. The latest research has been applied, and the program has moved from concentrating just on weight loss to including such important components as mental health, mindfulness, breathing and stress reduction.

"We have the research right here," said Baier. "Experts from every department have helped create this program – dietitians, doctors, fitness trainers, yoga specialists, physicians, nutritionists and dietetic interns. Research tells us nutrition is great, exercise is great, but then we also know your nutrition influences your sleep. So we started talking about sleep. And we included this big component on mindfulness. So it's not just cardio work and eating kale. We also pay a lot of attention to joints and overall pain – we teach what to do to address the joint and muscle pain and how to strengthen our body. Our goal is long-term results and changing life habits forever."

Since then, the program has added a virtual component. Participants will have access to an app that contains the most up-to-date, innovative resources to help them achieve successful results.

"We've added videos we produce here at the Wellness Center with our professional team," said Baier.

The videos include links to resources for participants, and virtual meetings have been added for convenience so everyone will be able to attend. The program was renamed My Best Health to make the larger point that overall health is important.

"We want everyone to be their best selves – whether it's to be able to fight off disease or to run a marathon," said Baier.

Baier knows the program well. In 2011, she came to the MUSC Wellness Center from Moscow to intern with the program while completing her Ph.D. in sports science. After two semesters, she returned to Russia with her research and completed her Ph.D. in 2016. Then, in 2018, she came back to the Wellness Center to oversee the program.

New material will be released each week through the app. Participants have access to videos, presentations and useful links about nutrition, relaxation, stretching, meditation and more to accompany their weekly workout plan.

Teams are required to exercise every day. Participants meet with their personal group trainer twice a week and take part in group exercise weekly, along with special meetings. They track their results and do weekly weigh-ins, with motivational prizes for the winning – or losing – teams at the end of the program.

Since the program was launched, participants have lost 50,000 pounds – the equivalent of a humpback whale or an F-15 fighter jet – and the program has won two national awards: a program innovation award and the best behavior modification program.

"I am really excited to be a part of the My Best Health Challenge," Dr. Jaroscak said. "It has maintained the team approach, nutrition guidance and brain health and has incorporated online sessions and videos to help while you are at home. The group workouts, trainers and team hold you accountable, and weekly meetings really keep you motivated. Our team communicates almost every day, sharing meal and workout ideas. It's a great way to get healthier and make long-term lifestyle changes." ◆

Program dates for the next session are Jan. 10 to March 17, 2022. The cost is $325 for students and Wellness Center members and $490 for nonmembers. To sign up, visit https://redcap.musc.edu/surveys/?s=MDEJ8P8FXP.