

# THE HEALTHY LIVING CHALLENGE: Addressing the Cause of Ambivalence



white paper

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White Paper

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The promotion of healthy lifestyles is no longer a topic, but a trend. Organizations are investing heavily to offer programs, products and solutions to address the escalating costs and poor quality of life associated with chronic degenerative diseases and obesity that result from inactivity, stress and unhealthy eating habits.

The good news is these initiatives demonstrate a strong initial return on investment. The bad news is most individuals either decide not to participate in such programs, do so half heartedly or revert to unhealthy habits after the incentive ends. This seeming inability of the majority to truly adopt a healthy lifestyle has economic, business and social consequences too significant to ignore.

Until this sizeable challenge can be overcome, many health promotions will fail to achieve anticipated returns, and solutions to the escalating crisis in healthcare and diminished quality of life among the chronically ill and obese will elude us. Fortunately, there is new insight into the underpinnings of personal change that will transform the ability to promote health-enhancing behaviors and lifestyle choices. This paper addresses the challenges of promoting healthy living and provides new thinking on influencing the habits of the unhealthy majority.

## The Shared Cost of Poor Lifestyle Choices

The high personal and societal costs of chronic lifestyle diseases is not news, but the far-reaching impact of these costs is neither obvious nor easily traced. Some of the individual costs are intangible: poor quality of life, decreased self-esteem and lower personal productivity. Other costs are hidden, such as the cost of lost productivity related to obesity among Americans estimated at \$3.9 billion by the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) and National Institute of Health (NIH). From their research, it is believed that the direct cost of physical inactivity may be as high as \$24.3 billion. They also estimate annual medical spending due to overweight and obesity to be as much as \$92.6 billion – or 9.1 percent of US health expenditures. The harder costs are found in higher insurance premiums, prescription costs, absenteeism and productivity rates.

### Social Cost

- Spending for prescription drugs increased another 8.2% in 2004, adding to the average annual growth of 13% from 2000 to 2003. Total spending for prescription drugs accounted for 10% of national health expenditures in 2004, as reported in *Health, United States 2000*, an annual report from the National Center for Health Statistics (Centers for Disease Control).

### Economic Cost

- Chronic illnesses impact the economy by an estimated \$1.3 trillion a year, according to a 2007 study by Milken Institute.
- Annual out-of-pocket spending on health care for the average person is \$623. It is 62% higher at \$1024 for those with chronic conditions according to a 2007 John Hopkins & the Pharmaceutical Research & Manufacturers of America study.
- The US spends more on health per capita than any other country. In 2004, national health care expenditures in the United States totaled \$1.9 trillion, a 7.9% increase from 2003, per *Health, United States 2000*.

### Business Cost

- Studies indicate obesity costs US businesses \$12.7 billion per year in insurance and workers compensation premium costs, lost time for doctor's appointments and absenteeism, and lower productivity.
- US health care cost is forecasted to grow to \$2.8 trillion (or \$9,216 per person) by 2011 – up from \$1.3 trillion in 2000 according to the National Health Statistics Group, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. In 2007 85% of those funds were devoted to people with chronic conditions (John Hopkins & the Pharmaceutical Research & Manufacturers of America)

### Where the ROI Stops

Across the board, organizations are promoting healthy lifestyles to their employees as well as their customers. In today's business climate, health promotion is viewed as a corporate responsibility and bottom line strategic decision. For those in the consumer goods, health, wellness, fitness, educational and insurance sectors, healthy living promotion is a further opportunity to invest in healthy lifestyle research, products and campaigns that address a global crisis and raises brand awareness in the process.

It is well documented that an investment in employee health translates into higher productivity and efficiency, lower absenteeism and healthcare costs, greater employee satisfaction, and higher operating and profit margins over the short term. Companies can save anywhere from \$2.00 to \$6.00 in health-related expenses for every dollar spent, with an average savings of \$3.00 for every dollar.

These employee programs, however, run the risk of reaching a breakeven point or losing money as participants fail to maintain their new healthy habits. Encouragement, incentives and initial enthusiasm doesn't address the deep-rooted struggle people have in staying motivated or believing in themselves. As with New Year's resolutions, the desire to change is seldom enough to push through the day-to-day realities of maintaining a new behavior as a way of life.

If current programs don't address the core issues, one has to ask:

- What does it take to drive action and adaptation?
- Are the right types and mix of programs and promotional campaigns in place?

Today, these issues are being contemplated in the boardrooms and marketing organizations of the nation's top companies, as well as by directors of corporate wellness, health and fitness programs.

The promotion of healthy living to consumers has become widespread. Few Fortune 1000 companies targeting consumers in the health and consumer good sectors have missed the opportunity to be part of the trend to promote healthy lifestyles. While some are doing this as merely a PR and advertising opportunity, others are championing the cause and investing at a deeper level with a passion for positively affecting lifestyle changes. For these companies, understanding health behavior change is essential. For any organization investing in health promotion the question is: how long we invest in its poor performance.

If there isn't enough response or changes from the healthy living campaign, how long can companies invest in its promotion?

### The Challenge is Within

Business Week ran a controversial cover story "Get Healthy – Or Else" (Feb 26, 2007), highlighting Scotts Miracle-Gro CEO Jim Hagedorn's corporate campaign to reduce healthcare costs by mandating healthier employee habits. The story generated strong editorial response, including "Jim's decisions are based on the harsh reality that our workforce apparently lacks the basic self-discipline to control its calorie intake and

exercise every week. The dramatic effects of today’s obese workforce continue to affect our company, with an average yearly premium increase of 30%.” Another letter to the editor stated, “Our company provides an outstanding array of health care programs yet they are routinely disregarded and sometimes openly derided by employees.”

Most people are not living a lifestyle despite all the options made available to them, from fitness, wellness and nutrition programs to medical clinics, disease management, psychotherapists and health coaches. More than sixty five percent (66.3%) of the population is overweight and a third (32.2%) is obese. This percentage has increased ten percent in the last ten years. (Figure 1.)

**Percentage of US Population Overweight or Obese (US Adults 20 years or older)**

| Body Mass Index (BMI)  | 1988-1994 | 1999-2000 | 2001-2002 | 2003-2004 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| BMI of 25-29 (Overweight)  | 56%       | 64.5%     | 65.7%     | 66.3%     |
| BMI => 30 (Obesity)  | 22.9%     | 30.5%     | 30.6%     | 32.2%     |
| The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) from the National Center for Health Statistics (as part of Center for Disease Control) |           |           |           |           |

Figure 1: During the past ten years, the number of people who are overweight or obese as measured by the BMI (Body Mass Index) has increased by 10%. Two-thirds of the US population is overweight; one-third is obese. BMI is a calculation of weight by height.

As many people, if not more, are unhappy and struggling with low self esteem – which impacts one’s resolve to change, willingness to take care oneself, and relationships at home and work. In turn, this dynamic negatively impacts the ability to feel energized, confident and productive. The inter-relationship between weight gain, self-esteem and feeling energized is a slippery slope. Herein lies the real crux of the issue.

The “healthy living dilemma” will not be solved by offering more programs and variety. The solution is to find methods that address the emotional and mental roadblocks that are unique and individual to each person. What is needed is mass customization from the inside out that addresses behavioral understanding and change. What most people are being given are mass marketed features and options that focus on behavioral compliance.

When the focus is on behavioral compliance to a specified goal or benchmark, the participant will inevitably fail, then quit and later resist renewed participation. A method that focuses instead on what is getting in the way, what is triggering behaviors and how to select healthier options by choice is what is needed now. When individuals are validated, feel understood and are able to make choices that suit them best, change is more likely to be adopted and eventually turned into a lifestyle.

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### Understanding the Unhealthy Majority

There is a misperception that those who are living unhealthy lifestyles are lazy, stupid, lacking in willpower or incompetent. This prejudice is unfounded and fails to consider what these people are struggling with internally. Without spending a day in their shoes, it is impossible to address the issues that keep them from successfully taking action on their own behalf. Lasting change evolves; it cannot be prescribed.

First consider what has led to the epidemic in obesity and unhealthy behaviors. What tops the list is dieting, perhaps one of the leading causes of obesity and a primary contributor to poor eating behaviors. Dieting fails those that do them, each time lowering metabolisms, ratcheting up fat storing, and creating an insatiable feeling of deprivation only satisfied by bingeing on those things considered forbidden. It is inevitable that at some point during the diet (often sooner than later) the rules will be broken and the dieter will feel like a failure, leading to emotional eating and the perception they are incapable, out of control and bad – the precursor to a lowered self-esteem. It takes enormous will power, strength and determination to diet, and most that are obese have done them repeatedly throughout their lives.

Secondly, obesity has a direct correlation to hormonal imbalances, very often caused by stress. People are overcommitted, overworked and struggling to find down time. Commutes to work are long, working around child care and after school activities are taxing, and self employment with long hours is on the rise. Couples aren't getting recharged, individuals aren't getting their needs met. The daily lifestyles of Americans are draining, yet people do them day in and day out. This takes a physical and psychological toll. This also takes resolve and determination to get through. The truth is the "unhealthy majority" is not lazy or incompetent at all.

Those that are overweight and unhealthy are not solely to blame for their situations. They have tried to change. Most have dieted, joined gyms, been successful for a while, been derailed and tried again. Many will tell you that in other areas of their life they are successful and very much in control and they are at a loss as to how to create a healthier lifestyle they can stick with. They will also tell you that they know what to do but just can't seem to act on it or stay on track. Few envisioned finding themselves so overweight, unhealthy or at risk for chronic diseases.

Most have dieted, joined gyms, been successful for a while, been derailed and tried again. They are at a loss as to how to create a healthier lifestyle they can stick with.

Third is the issue of ambivalence that has further driven up the levels of obesity and poor health. Ambivalence is a state of indifference that makes it difficult to have any interest in taking action or trying to make a change. It occurs frequently when people are depressed, stressed, derailed and have experienced repeated failures in dieting and sticking with a fitness or nutrition program. It is state of giving up and choosing to avoid the issue out of disgust, fear, shame or feeling overwhelmed. The unhealthy majority will drift in and out of the ambivalent state, often staying indifferent for months or years at a time.

#### Obesity Factors

- Dieting  
Low metabolism  
Higher fat storing  
Deprivation-bingeing  
Emotional eating
- Hormone imbalances  
Primarily stress  
- Overcommitted  
- No downtime  
- Needs not met
- Ambivalence  
Depression  
Stress  
Derailed  
Repeated failures

### Breaking Free of Ambivalence

It takes hope, resolve and enough obvious benefit to break free of ambivalence. Once ambivalent, inertia sets in, and it can take considerable effort to make a change. Often that change is not linear but more a process of two steps forward and one step back. The model of behavioral change most widely recognized by professionals in the fields of psychology, exercise physiology and coaching has five stages and supports the understanding of non-linear progression. It is the Transtheoretical Model developed by Dr James Prochaska, Professor of Clinical and Health Psychology at the University of Rhode Island, and Dr Carlo DiClementi, now Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychology at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (1983). This model can also be used to demonstrate the two stages of ambivalence and the shift to adopt healthy lifestyle changes, as shown in figure 2.

- Stage 1:** It begins with precontemplation, where an individual doesn't see their behavior as problematic – or is passively ambivalent.
- Stage 2:** When they become aware that there is a problem, they shift into contemplation. At this point they may consider their situation but be unwilling to address it – choosing to remain (actively) ambivalent.
- Stage 3:** When something convinces them of the need to make a change or they recognize the benefits to changing, then they will move into the planning and preparation stage and shift out of ambivalence. For most people, however, they are looking for something different that will really help them succeed, and they aren't sure what this is. They have come to realize that dieting doesn't work and many question if going back to the gym will be any different than the last time they tried it.
- Stage 4:** When the planning and preparation is complete they are ready to start a lifestyle change and move into the action phase. This will last as long as they remain motivated, supported and accountable.
- Stage 5:** The final phase is maintaining what they have put into action and fully adopting the new lifestyle, which is challenging during the first year of starting new healthy habits.

### Lifestyle Change Adoption Process

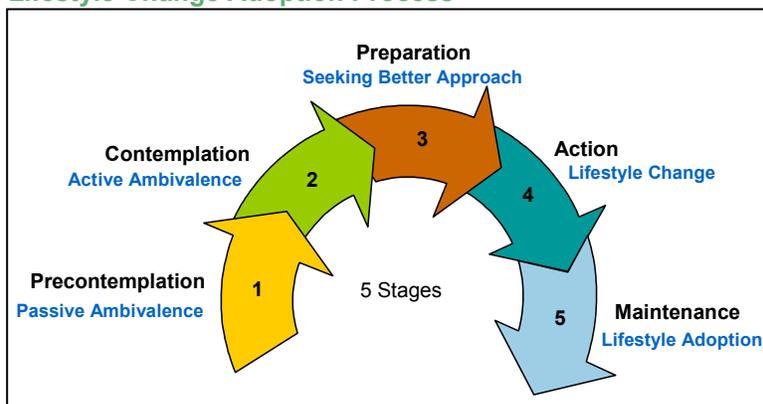
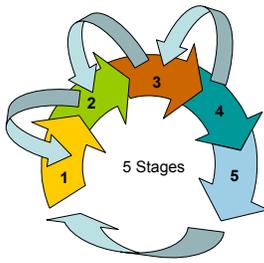


Figure 2  
Transtheoretical model adapted to illustrate the overlapping stages from ambivalence to adoption of healthy lifestyle changes

Feel Your Personal Best, 2007



At any point in the five stages, the process can be disrupted or derailed and the person could end up back in precontemplation or contemplation and stay there for weeks, months or even years as ambivalence sets back in again.

Breaking free of ambivalence, moving into action and maintaining lifestyle changes will succeed only if the internal issues are identified and addressed. What gets in the way of embracing lifestyle changes are beliefs and feelings, supported by internal chatter, that are generally negative and self critical. These stem from past experiences and self perceptions. They also stem from striving to reach what is unattainable: perfection in compliance, measuring up to what others expect, and to reach specific physical results. Many people don't feel achieving anything less is good enough or worth doing, getting caught in the dichotomous thinking of all or nothing, good or bad. Believing there is no middle ground they will give up and berate themselves for not succeeding once again.

And lastly, but perhaps most significantly, a lack of feeling emotionally safe, understood or in control will hold people back from trying to change or will drive them back to their comfort zone if any experience validates their beliefs and fears. It happens every January when people use New Year's as a catalyst to make a healthy change, only to give up with resignation days or weeks later, reinforcing the belief they can't succeed.

Helping the unhealthy majority break free of their ambivalence requires a different approach than what works for those in the minority that routinely respond well to fitness, wellness and nutrition programs. This isn't to say that these programs cannot be effective for the entire population, but for the majority another element must be added for these to work – sometimes in advance, other times in collaboration with existing programs.

### Healthy Lifestyle Coaching

Healthy living is a way of life, not an exercise program, diet or resolution with an end date. This alone is a shift in thinking for many people. During the past thirty years, as gyms, work outs and dieting have become popularized and time has been constrained, the concept of getting into shape has been a target, achieved through hard work and uncompromising dedication to reach a goal, not a lifestyle.

A healthy lifestyle, therefore, must be reframed in people's minds as a long term process, and one that ebbs and flows with daily events, allows for disruptions and is achieved through moderation instead of all-out intensity. It is a completely different mindset, which can be challenging to fully grasp after years of pursuing fitness and dieting to reach a set goal.

A new approach is needed to develop this new mindset and address the high levels of ambivalence. This approach must be appealing, positive and energizing to generate enthusiasm from those with a weary eye towards health and fitness related changes. To be effective and get these people to "buy in", the approach must treat them with respect,

as a partner in change and with an understanding that they are capable. It can not be a one-size fits all program, but one that is highly personalized from the inside out.

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Healthy lifestyle coaching is inherently personalized; facilitating self-awareness and choice, tailored to readiness and ability, and rooted in positive thinking. Coaching has long been used in sports to help children and adults continually develop their skills and mental attitude. Life and business coaching are now well established in guiding people in making behavioral changes that improve personal and professional outcomes.

Healthy lifestyle coaching is borne out of life coaching behavioral change techniques, coupled with a solid foundation in multiple areas, including exercise physiology (fitness training), nutrition, emotional eating and wellness. Instead of expertise in one discipline, healthy lifestyle coaching provides a holistic perspective that recognizes that eating, exercise, self care and contentment are interdependent and causally related. Psychotherapy is not listed, although a healthy lifestyle coach may be a licensed therapist. The focus of behavioral change is not to delve back and resolve an individual's past, but to offer awareness and tools for dealing with ambivalence and making healthy lifestyle changes with confidence.

The key elements of healthy lifestyle coaching that guide people in moving through the five stages of change and out of ambivalence are the following:

- **Conscious self-awareness without judgment**
- **Positive thinking and reframing of beliefs**
- **Self-honoring and self-selected choices**
- **Learning from disappointments (missed goals and self criticism)**
- **On-going guidance, providing accountability, insight and encouragement**

### Conscious Self-Awareness

Most lifestyle behaviors occur unconsciously, so it is difficult to change them if there is no awareness at the time the behavior occurs. A good example is eating to the point of being excessively full. If you aren't aware that you are eating past the point of satisfaction or even past the point of full, then it is impossible to stop. If you strive for perfection and feel that anything less is unacceptable but don't realize that this is a belief, then you can't let good be good enough by revising the belief. Even ambivalence can be unconscious. The average person is just dealing with life and doing the best they can. They have numerous opportunities to respond to a defining moment that could move them quickly into action, but they may not be aware enough to do so.

Lack of conscious awareness isn't laziness, stupidity or even lack of common sense; it is simply not knowing how to be aware or having the tools and insights to know what to look for. This is where a coach provides guidance and will ask the right questions to generate conscious observations, inner discovery and eye-opening insights.

### **Positive Thinking**

Those in most need of lifestyle behavioral changes are people who are overweight, eating poorly or chronically stressed, who may also suffer from low self-esteem, self-criticism and perhaps even depression. In any case, it is probable that they carry a negative body image and negativity about their ability to succeed. This is particularly common in women and anyone that has dieted.

Positive thinking is an attitude adjustment process. It is used to provide awareness of the negative thoughts with an understanding of their source and a practice of reframing them into positive and affirming thoughts and beliefs. This exercise creates new perspective, hope and choice, which is powerful in making changes. For example, if someone feels they can't succeed because they haven't in the past, this is an opportunity to recognize that just because they haven't doesn't mean they can't or won't. It also opens the door for investigation and to create new beliefs.

When someone believes they can succeed, they are far more likely to do so than if they believe they can't. "Such beliefs," according to the renowned scholar on self-efficacy, Professor Albert Bandura, "influence whether people think pessimistically or optimistically and in ways that are self-enhancing or self-hindering. Efficacy beliefs play a central role in the self-regulation of motivation through goal challenges and outcome expectations." (Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective, published in the Annual Review of Psychology, 2001). Lifestyle coaches use positive psychology techniques to assist people in changing their beliefs and attitudes so that they feel in control, inspired and good about themselves.

### **Self-honoring Choices**

People want choices, but many don't know how to go about selecting what is best for them. Often they end up picking what is offered, promoted or is the popular fad of the year. From a health and wellness perspective, this doesn't serve them. What works is learning to discern what feels good to them and their bodies. Yet few people are in touch with what their bodies need. Instead, they avoid eating when they are hungry, eat past fullness, exercise through pain and keep up their busy schedules when their immune system is shutting down. People are conditioned by society to do as they are told, not to pay attention to their physical sensations or inner wisdom. Yet by noticing and recognizing what is right for their body, mind and spirit, people will begin to reinforce healthy choices. They will select healthier options because they will feel better when they do. Once this cycle is established, a healthy lifestyle is within reach.

Healthy lifestyle coaches are trained to help people understand their bodies' signals, and how to intuitively make optimal choices. They provide guidance on selecting foods, exercises and self care activities that their clients will most enjoy and are realistic, that clients look forward to and can easily incorporate into their daily routines. These choices

can be selected from existing program options, or these can be delayed until the individual is better positioned to succeed.

### **Learning from Disappointments**

What drives ambivalence is the sense of failure or inability to succeed. Why bother if there is no easy result or pay off? Disappointments come from missing goals and not getting results as expected. Every fitness, nutrition and wellness program, including healthy lifestyle coaching, sets weekly goals. This can be a setup for failure if the goals are non-negotiable, used as a source of judgment, or inflexible. People will quickly condemn themselves if they fall short and don't achieve the goals exactly as stated. Goals that are unrealistic or used as a stick (negative motivation) will send people immediately back through the stages of ambivalence.

Healthy lifestyle coaches use goals as a learning tool to help people recognize what gets in the way and then create tactics to address them, and to help them set achievable "stretch" goals. The objective is for people to succeed week-to-week, to use goals as a source of motivation, to boost their confidence, and to set in motion the cycle of positive reinforcement for healthy behaviors that engenders life-long healthy habits.

### **On-going Coached Guidance**

Getting started on a new behavior isn't nearly as hard as sticking with it. Of the thousands who start a diet each year or join the gym, few are able to stick with their new behaviors. In a 1996 study, 95% of all dieters regained their lost weight within 1-5 years (Grodstein et al.) What people need and want is accountability, which they imagine requires harsh criticism if they don't fully measure up. While this may work for some people, this approach erodes self confidence and positive thinking in those most in need of change. Instead, healthy lifestyle coaching focuses on accountability techniques based on probing for and understanding individual barriers to success, and holds people responsible for their actions without judgment. This approach yields greater insight, compliance and independence, allowing people to develop the self-confidence and skills to internalize their own self-coaching.

Accountability is not the only thing that helps people stay on track. They also need specific guidance on how to make choices, progress safely, and deal with unforeseen challenges and inevitable plateaus that can be derailing months after getting started. Healthy lifestyle coaches offer a way for people to regularly check in, get supported and encouraged, share accomplishments, and address what is at the heart of any issue.

These five core components of healthy lifestyle coaching address what is missing from most programs in a manner that enhances them and increases the odds for success. Lifestyle coaching helps people understand how to make choices from the options available and gives them the tools to revise their thinking and attitude about maintaining healthy habits for a lifetime.

### Take-Action Healthy Lifestyle Coaching Guides

Not every organization is prepared or in a position to offer healthy lifestyle coaching on site or by phone. This is particularly true of those that simply want to promote and encourage healthy living as an extension of their products or services. It's also true of companies that have already invested heavily in fitness and wellness programs.

Furthermore, the need for mass customization of behavioral change requires a vehicle that can reach, engage and support hundreds, thousands or even millions of people at a time in making mental and lifestyle changes.

The answer is to package healthy lifestyle coaching techniques into a take-action guided format ("coaching-in-a-guide") that allows individuals to gain self-awareness, reframe beliefs, choose healthier options that are personally enjoyable, and create strategies for success – all through self-paced discovery, self-reflective insight and self-chosen choices. This type of guided format talks to the unhealthy majority in a way they can relate to, be empowered from, and undertake at any stage of ambivalence throughout the lifestyle change adoption process. As a result, a healthy lifestyle "coaching-in-a-guide" has the potential to help anyone move toward long-term healthy lifestyle changes.

Take action, mindset-changing healthy living guides can be topic specific, easy to disseminate, cost effective and complementary to existing healthy living promotional campaigns and corporate wellness programs. Furthermore, while the guides can stand alone they can be paired with supporting tele-programs, online content, and individual or group tele-coaching to enhance and reinforce the experience of behavior change. Thus, this approach achieves population-based change and individualized coaching. Offered in this manner, healthy lifestyle coaching represents a method of dislodging ambivalence and guiding people to a point where they will voluntarily engage and increase their chances of succeeding with promoted healthy living products and programs as a part of their new healthy lifestyle.

### Conclusions

The ambivalence observed in the unhealthy majority can be addressed with the right mix of healthy lifestyle coaching in combination with healthy consumer products, corporate wellness programs and the myriad of fitness and medical services now available to the public.

When more people choose healthier behaviors, the companies that employ them and the organizations that promote healthy products and services to them will see greater financial results. There is an opportunity to effectively reach out to those that struggle to be healthy and successfully guide them into action. By doing so, everyone benefits.



To learn more about Alice Greene, Healthy Lifestyle Coaching and self-paced take action Healthy Living Coaching Guides, visit Feel Your Personal Best at [www.feelyourpersonalbest.com](http://www.feelyourpersonalbest.com).