

10-28-2019

## Promoting Healthy Lifestyles for Extension Employees: An Exploratory Study

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### Recommended Citation

Donaldson, J. L., & Franck, K. L. (2019). Promoting Healthy Lifestyles for Extension Employees: An Exploratory Study. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, 7(3), 5. <https://doi.org/10.54718/SVBV1715>

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### Acknowledgments

This study would not have been possible without the contributions from many people, especially all of the Extension employees who gave their time to share their voices during the focus groups. We also want to thank the leadership given to this project as well as the other strategic plan initiatives by Shirley Hastings and the leadership given to this initiative by Beth Bell. We also want to acknowledge the Healthy Lifestyles Initiative Committee members who helped to collect data and shared their expertise for this project: Betty Greer, Janice Hartman, Jeff Lannom, Hilda Lytle, Natalie Owens, Grant Palmer, Janie Pedigo, Charlotte Smith, Kimberly Smithson, Jessica Taylor, and Heather Wallace. Thanks to Brandi Berven for all of her support throughout the project

## Promoting Healthy Lifestyles for Extension Employees: An Exploratory Study

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*Employee health is regarded as a strategic advantage with individual, organizational, and societal benefits. This study sought to describe the major health issues, motivations, barriers, and needs related to healthy lifestyles for Cooperative Extension employees. A total of 16 focus groups were conducted throughout Tennessee with 105 participants. Separate focus groups were conducted with seven groups of University of Tennessee Extension employees: administrative assistants, county agents, county directors, program assistants, departmental faculty, administrators, and professional staff. Findings indicate chronic stress as the dominant health issue. Respondents were motivated to stay healthy to be role models for good health, among other reasons. From an organizational standpoint, respondents reported that both an organizational culture that does not prioritize health and their job demands kept them from achieving optimum health. From a personal standpoint, respondents reported that a lack of time for healthy eating and physical activity and their own over-engagement with their work were barriers to health. Employees desired a coordinated, substantial organizational shift toward a culture of wellness that includes an effective employee wellness program. Employees indicated that a culture of wellness would result in employees who represent more balanced lives, thereby setting a better example for those served by Extension.*

*Keywords:* healthy lifestyles, employee wellness, Cooperative Extension, obesity prevention, stress management

### Introduction

Research points to employee wellness programs as harbingers of health and productivity, both for employees and organizations. For instance, a meta-analysis of 22 studies found that for every dollar invested in workplace wellness programs, medical costs were reduced by \$3.27 (Baicker, Cutler, & Song, 2010). Other studies have demonstrated that the aggregated benefits of lower medical costs, reduced absenteeism, and improved productivity could produce as much as \$6 for every \$1 invested in employee wellness programs (Berry, Mirabito, & Baun, 2010).

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In 2010, University of Tennessee (UT) Extension introduced a new strategic plan, titled *Advancing Tennessee* (UT Extension, 2010), which included the goal to “become the employer of choice to attract and retain a diverse and highly qualified workforce.” One of the action steps in this plan was to “promote healthy lifestyles for employees.” The major motivations for this study were to explore the UT Extension workforce and their health issues, motivations, barriers, organizational culture, and ideas for an employee wellness program.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was encompassed by the healthy organizations model, which is an organizational development thrust (Lowe, 2010). Lowe has proposed a healthy organizations model that includes these maxims:

- “Employee well-being is an organizational performance issue, not simply a matter of personal health.
- Healthy organizations put in place conditions for sustainable success, renewing their workforce capabilities and relationships with customers and communities” (p.17).

Organizations should focus on a healthy organizational culture (including designing workplaces that provide healthy food choices, ergonomics, natural light, and color) and leaders should empower employees to pursue wellness (Stringer, 2016). An effective planning process, whether to create a healthy organizational culture or other organizational initiatives, can create capacity for organizational change “to help personnel adapt to current changes while growing the capacity to thrive during ongoing and future changes [and] to encourage personnel to take an active role in organizational planning processes” (Smith & Torppa, 2010).

Numerous sources point to employee health as a strategic advantage that has organizational and societal benefits (Lowe, 2010). Yet, a dearth of research describes major health issues, motivations, barriers, and needs related to healthy lifestyles for Cooperative Extension employees. Available research points to unhealthy lifestyles (Oliveri et al., 1997; Skaggs, 2006).

Alavanja and colleagues (1988) studied mortality among Extension agricultural agents. The group of agents studied consisted of 1,495 white males. This group was compared to the U.S. population of white males for the same time period, 1970-1979. The study found significantly higher rates of leukemia among agents compared to the general population. Also, rates of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, multiple myeloma, and brain cancer were higher for agents, but not at a significant level. Because this study found similar rates among agents when compared to farmers, the researchers suggest factors related to agricultural practices during the ten years studied, such as increased use of pesticides. While the exact cause of the increased cancer rates among this group of Extension professionals is unknown, an employee wellness program may have a role in helping Extension professionals recognize and reduce exposure to harmful

environments. Oliveri et al. (1997) described that a subset of Extension employees in one state was found to have unhealthy levels of cholesterol, diastolic blood pressure, and body mass index. In studies of Extension employee turnover, work/life balance (a healthy lifestyle factor), is often mentioned. In one study, interviews with former and current Extension agents found that poor work/life balance created job dissatisfaction (Skaggs, 2006).

Additional research has focused on recommendations for employee wellness programs. In a study of Vermont Extension employees, Burczyk and Bowin (1994) found support for an employee wellness program that would include exercise, mental and emotional health, and continuing learning opportunities in balancing work and leisure, stress management, and relaxation. Igodan and Newcomb (1986) surveyed 241 Extension agents regarding burnout. Igodan and Newcomb recommended that agents needed to develop stress coping strategies to alleviate the excessive demands of the job. Ensle (2005) used six different studies of Extension workforce issues to form specific suggestions for a healthier work-life balance, including administrators as role models for pursuing balance in personal and professional lives; staff development in stress management, coping strategies, and wellness programs; and investigations of policies and programs that would provide work-life balance.

The research project discussed here adds to the research base by focusing on employee-identified sources of stress, barriers to healthy lifestyles, and employee ideas to promote health and well-being throughout Extension.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The overall purpose of this study was to understand how a statewide Extension organization could promote healthy lifestyles for employees. Specific objectives were to:

- 1) Identify major health issues facing the Extension workforce,
- 2) Identify motivations related to making healthy changes,
- 3) Identify barriers related to healthy lifestyles,
- 4) Identify aspects of Extension's organizational culture that may influence healthy lifestyles, and
- 5) Collect specific ideas for an employee wellness program.

### **Methods**

This was a qualitative study conducted with focus group interviews. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at UT (UTK IRB-14-09260 B-XP). In planning, focusing, and conducting the study and analyzing data, the grounded theory tradition was employed (Creswell, 1998).

Focus group interviews are planned discussions that help capture perceptions from a select group of people. Focus groups have multiple uses including needs assessment, program development (Krueger & Casey, 2009), evaluation (Mertens, 2010), and marketing (Mertens, 2010). Focus groups were chosen for this study because this method is useful when researchers need to understand experiences, viewpoints, and/or impressions. Focus groups can provide depth and breadth of information about the topic of interest (Mertens, 2010). The ideal size of a focus group is 7 to 10 people (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Smithson, 2008).

## **Participants**

The participants in this study were all employees of the University of Tennessee (UT) Extension organization. Participants were nominated by regional and state Extension directors who provided a list of 135 potential participants. These nominees represented different Extension employee groups: county agents, county directors, county administrative assistants, county program assistants, and state-level personnel, which included state-level faculty, state-level professional staff, state-level Extension administrators (vice chancellors, department heads, and deans), and state-level administrative assistants.

County Extension agents are educators who “have constant contact with the clientele he or she serves” in providing research-based information and educational programs (Seevers & Graham, 2012). County Extension directors typically have some responsibilities for educational programming while providing leadership for personnel and daily operations for the county Extension unit. Extension administrative assistants provide the clerical support and serve as receptionists and bookkeepers. Extension program assistants serve as paraprofessionals supporting the educational programs implemented by county Extension agents. Extension faculty are those in tenure-track positions with Extension appointments. They serve as state specialists, and they are located on-campus in academic departments. State-level Extension professional staff included organizational support positions such as those in information technology and communications. State-level Extension administrators were composed of positions where the majority of the work assignment was supervision, such as vice chancellors, department heads, and deans.

## **Data Collection**

A total of 16 focus groups were conducted throughout the state. Four focus groups were conducted simultaneously in each of the three Tennessee Extension regions (Central, Eastern, and Western) with separate focus groups for administrative assistants, county Extension agents, county Extension directors, and program assistants. In addition to the regional focus groups, four focus groups were conducted at the state level on the UT campus in Knoxville. These four on-campus focus groups included one focus group of state-level Extension administrators, one focus group of faculty members with Extension appointments housed in on-campus departments,

one focus group of state-level professional staff, and one focus group of state-level administrative assistants.

Table 1 shows the number of focus groups conducted and the total number of focus group participants for each of the five position groups.

***Table 1. Participants by Extension Job Position (n = 105)***

<b>Positions of Group Participants</b>	<b>Number of Groups</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
County Extension Agents	3	18
County Extension Directors	3	21
Administrative Assistants	4	28
Program Assistants	3	21
State-Level Personnel	3	17

## **Procedures**

Researchers sent invitations via email to all of the nominated individuals asking them to participate in a two-hour focus group. Follow-up invitations were sent to those who did not respond to the first invitation. Of the 135 nominees, 105 participated for a 77% participation rate.

## **Focus Group Interview Questions**

Focus group questions were developed by the researchers based on a literature review. The questions were reviewed by the 13 members of the Tennessee Extension Healthy Lifestyles Committee. The members of this committee are representative of the same employee groups participating in the focus groups. The same questions were used for every focus group. The focus group questions are shown in Appendix A. Examples of the focus group questions were:

- 1) What do you think are the major health issues facing Extension employees?  
Probes:
  - a) Describe any ways that your job influences your health, if at all?
  - b) Describe any ways that your job influences your family, if at all?
- 2) What motivates Extension employees to make healthy changes?
- 3) What keeps Extension employees from making healthy choices?

The researchers served as the focus group interview moderators for many of the focus group interviews and provided instruction for the members of the Tennessee Extension Healthy Lifestyles Committee, who also served as moderators for some groups. Separate, private rooms were utilized for each of the focus groups.

Focus group proceedings were taped, and the tapes were transcribed. In a few instances, specific words or phrases could not be clearly discerned on the tapes, and transcripts were compared to field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Every focus group session had one moderator and one note-taker. Note-takers were members of the Tennessee Extension Healthy Lifestyles Committee.

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers mined the data, reading, and re-reading transcripts to create categories and to “tag the data” (Creswell, 1998). An inductive, open coding approach was employed to organize the large, narrative data set into categories (Thomas, 2006). Transcripts from the different employee groups were analyzed separately. The categories obtained from the different employee groups were then aggregated (Creswell, 1998).

For verification of qualitative research, Creswell (1998) describes how research participants can review interpretations and conclusions. The researchers modified this method by showing the interpretations and conclusions to the members of the Healthy Lifestyle Committee who served as moderators. These committee members are representative of the same employee groups as the participants. In addition, for verification, an external audit involved a separate analysis of question one of the focus groups by a student staff assistant who was not connected to the project (Creswell, 1998). This external auditor used NVivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2012), and the key themes identified by both the researchers and the external auditor were 100% identical.

### **Results**

Findings are presented by themes and subthemes. Also, findings include similar and different themes based on the types of employees.

#### **Objective One. Identify Major Health Issues Facing the Extension Workforce**

Participants shared that stress, at continued high levels, was the most dominant health issue facing the Extension workforce. All seven of the employee groups named stress as the health issue negatively affecting Extension employees. In fact, most of the groups mentioned stress first. The groups mentioned numerous health problems produced by high stress, including high blood pressure, obesity, lack of activity, poor mental health, lack of sleep, and poor personal relationships. As shown in Table 2, the different employee groups identified some similar and some differing sources of stress related to their jobs.

**Table 2. Similarities and Differences of Extension Employee Groups Regarding Stressors**

Stressor Themes	Specific Stressors	Administrative Assistants	County Agents	County Directors	Program Assistants	On-Campus Faculty	Professional Staff	Administrators
Stress from over-engagement with work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poor work/life balance</li> <li>Feeling that the job is never completed or “done”</li> </ul>		X	X	X	X	X	X
Unhealthy, challenging work schedules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Working odd hours including working on vacations, weekends, evenings</li> <li>Issues surrounding lunch (working through lunch, not enough time for lunch, etc.)</li> </ul>	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Stress from supervising responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supervising others</li> <li>Isolation/limited support from others</li> </ul>			X		X		X
Stress from uncertain funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grant-funded positions</li> </ul>				X	X		

**Stress from over-engagement with work.** Most groups identified issues related to poor work/life balance. Part of this over-engagement was the idea that their job was never finished and that they always felt behind, described by an agent as: “We never get the satisfaction [that] the job is done.” Several admitted that many of these stressors were related to their own personal choices as one county director commented: “We do it to ourselves.”

Several employees talked about how the stress of the job affected their families. Many described how difficult they found balancing their job commitments and time with their families. For example, one county director mentioned how his adult child pointed out that they only went on vacation to places where there were work-related activities such as 4-H livestock shows or conferences. For administrators, they commented on the need for two lives, one personal and one professional. One administrator discussed the importance of commuting because it allowed time to “clear your head by the time you get home.” Several employees mentioned that stress at work carried over into their family interactions. Representative comments included:

The first thing I do when I get over-committed with work, work comes first, and I start checking off my calendar any personal obligations I have because family and myself has

to just go last so I can make sure I get everything else done. And that is my . . . downfall.  
(A County Extension Agent)

It stresses us out at work, but then we're stressed, we carry that home and then it puts stress on our family relationships. And it's just a ripple effect. (A County Extension Director)

**Unhealthy, challenging work schedules.** Participants shared two major issues related to work schedules. First, many employees felt compelled to work nights and weekends. Second, participants described having to work during lunch. Administrative assistants noted that lunch schedules often varied between counties where some county offices were closed for lunch, and others remained open. Some administrative assistants described only having 30 minutes for lunch, others talked about having to eat lunch at their desks, and others commented that they had to work through their lunch at times because of job demands. This was especially true in county offices that did not close for lunch. Administrative assistants from those counties talked about how it was difficult to take a regular lunch break when clients come to the office for assistance during the designated lunch hour. Other employee groups talked about the pressure to work during lunch in order to meet deadlines and because their peers worked through lunch. Typical comments expressed by professional staff participants included: "I see all of the people in my department just working through lunch. So then if I want to take an hour lunch, I kind of feel guilty about it" and "My work is never done. So that's why I work through lunch."

**Stress from supervisory responsibilities.** County directors and administrators commented about the added stressors of being in a supervisory role and having to handle employee issues. County directors have a unique role in Tennessee. They also serve as agents, so they have both administrative and educational responsibilities. They talked about the importance of meeting all the needs of their county, as well as having to care for their employees. They felt that they needed to be supportive and aware of issues that their employees were facing at home and at work. They also felt that they needed to be good examples of how to balance the demands of work and life. A representative comment from a county director was:

Especially for a county director, you have your set program, but still yet in the back of your mind you've got to worry about every other program that's going on and make sure that every need is met for the whole county, so that adds up to a lot of pressure and strain and stress.

Similar to county directors, state-level Extension administrators also mentioned the extra burden of responsibility for their employees. Administrators did make a point that they felt their stressors were the same as those they supervise, except, in one sense, those stressors that they felt were specific to the role of an administrator. They felt that their job was somewhat isolating. Typical comments from administrators included: "There are times when I wish that we had more of a support group than we do." and

And our jobs are, we are lonely. We are quite often lonely. When we have an issue, we can't really [share it with] administration, and we can't share it with anybody in the faculty . . . you wrestle with the issues yourself. So, this administration job is the loneliest. You are on your own.

In cases where they would like to discuss an issue with a friend or colleague, they felt the confidential nature of personnel and/or student issues would not allow them to disclose any information. They also felt that, in many cases, they could speak candidly with their supervisor about a given issue, but they did not do so out a sense of self-reliance.

**Stress from uncertain funding.** Program assistants, professional staff, and faculty reported stress related to the availability of extramural funding. In Tennessee, program assistants and professional staff often are funded exclusively through grants, and those participants identified this as a source of stress. Several program assistants mentioned the fact that they worried about losing their jobs because they would lose health insurance for themselves and their families. In a similar vein, faculty members reported stress from having to maintain extramural funding levels. As one faculty member said:

You know, that's what keeps me up at night. I have two people that I pay their salary [through extramural funding], and that's like okay, where is their salary going to come from? . . . It's just a never-ending cycle once you get in the hamster wheel.

**Sedentary jobs.** While stress and specific stressors were the major themes discussed, several employees mentioned that the sedentary nature of their jobs contributed to unhealthy lifestyles. Administrative assistants identified their positions as being very sedentary as represented by this comment: "I can sit at my desk for an hour or two at a time and never move."

Program Assistants viewed their jobs in the context of extremes, from days where they worked very long hours without time to eat lunch or take a break, to days where they were working at a desk with little activity or breaks. Other groups talked about how some employees were more active than others, but that still might not be enough activity to promote physical fitness. Administrators talked about the demanding travel schedule that they and the faculty faced that increased sedentary behaviors. Other employees discussed how travel often contributed to making poor food choices, such as eating fast food or eating out more frequently.

## **Objective Two. Identify Motivations Related to Making Healthy Changes**

Employees were asked to describe motivations for choosing to make healthy changes. It is noteworthy that motivations seemed more difficult for participants to identify than any other factors, and their discussion regarding motivations was more limited when compared to all other items. Table 3 shows the similarities and differences across employee groups regarding motivations for healthy lifestyles.

**Table 3. Similarities and Differences of Employee Groups Regarding Motivations**

Motivation Themes	Administrative Assistants	County Agents	County Directors	Program Assistants	On-Campus Faculty	Professional Staff	Administrators
Motivation to be role models		X	X	X			X
Motivation from others/group support	X		X		X		
Motivated by health crisis/personal choices		X	X	X		X	
Motivation for insurance savings	X	X	X				

**Motivation to be role models.** Although some employees discussed how having to be a role model for healthy behaviors contributed to their stress level, many also felt that this motivated them to be healthier. They discussed wanting to make personal choices that would encourage their clients to be healthy. Administrators felt that Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) county agents were motivated to be healthy in order to encourage their clients. Employees also talked about wanting to take care of themselves to be an example for family and friends, including one county agent who stated:

If I am teaching nutrition, I want to be that example. If I'm talking about healthy eating, I want to be the one that packs the healthy lunch. . . . Whatever I'm teaching, I'm going to try to be that example to the target audience.

**Motivation for insurance savings.** One of the top responses was the health insurance options provided by the State of Tennessee (2010) health insurance program. Employees can choose to participate in an insurance program with a health coaching and a wellness component that also had lower premiums than traditional insurance. Several employees talked about how this option had prompted them and their family members to become more health-conscious and to take steps to address chronic conditions. A typical focus group comment was:

We have good health insurance . . . . My husband is a diabetic. He gets a life coach call every couple of months, and I have been doing that for weight management, which also brings down, reduces our insurance premium, because we choose to, you know, work with a life coach. My husband, we both, I've lost 30 lbs. in the last year. His A1C for his diabetes is below normal. His blood work is perfect. (An Administrative Assistant)

**Motivation from others/group support.** Several employees mentioned that a motivator for healthy behaviors was support from others such as coworkers, family, and friends. This included doing exercise programs together as an office. Employees talked about the comradery they felt when participating in Extension programs that promoted walking and other wellness activities,

especially the Extension FCS “Walk Across Tennessee” program, which is delivered annually to thousands of Tennesseans, who are challenged to increase physical activity for an 8-week period (UT Extension, 2017b). The program is open to all residents, with many of the participants being Extension employees. Focus group comments included: “The Walk Across Tennessee was a real popular one...in our office that helped us.” (An Administrative Assistant) and “Sometimes, if your spouse is doing something, you’ll do it also.” (A County Extension Director).

**Motivated by health crisis/personal choices.** Employees also talked about making a commitment to their own health. This could be in response to a health crisis or because they wanted to feel better physically and/or emotionally. One professional staff employee commented that physical activity was a way to be more productive at work saying: “The way for me to *not* be creative, is for you to chain me to that desk every day.” Administrators felt that working with the public was a motivation to stay healthy, described as a “positive personal image.”

### Objective Three. Identify Barriers Related to Healthy Lifestyles

Employees were asked about barriers related to healthy lifestyles. Table 4 shows the similarities and differences across employee groups regarding barriers to healthful lifestyles.

**Table 4. Similarities and Differences of Employee Groups Regarding Barriers**

Barrier Themes	Administrative Assistants	County Agents	County Directors	Program Assistants	On-Campus Faculty	Professional Staff	Administrators
Organizational culture	X	X	X		X	X	X
Limited Time for being physically active and eating healthy	X		X	X			

**Organizational culture.** Employees identified Extension’s organizational culture as the top barrier for healthy lifestyle choices. One of the major issues discussed was the pressure to overachieve. As one administrative assistant stated: “I think we feel like we are rewarded, I guess. I don’t know within ourselves, or by a coworker or peers, if we do . . . like . . . more work than we are supposed to do.” County agents described barriers in terms of their attitudes toward work, specifically that “work comes first,” “we neglect ourselves,” and over-commitment due to not knowing how to say no. One professional staff member commented that the mentality used to be that it was “my badge of honor” to not have a life outside of the job.

**Limited time.** Several employees mentioned the lack of time as a barrier to healthy behaviors. For administrative assistants, time was the major barrier. This included constraints on their lunch break and the sedentary part of their positions as represented by one employee: “I usually sit for 12 hours a day between my driving and my working.” County directors also talked about not having enough hours in the day to meet the demands of the job, family and to commit to routines that included being physically active and eating healthy.

**Other barriers.** Administrative assistants also discussed inadequate facilities to prepare lunch in the Extension office and personal physical limitations. Administrative assistants and county directors talked about the challenges of living and working in rural communities. This included limited options for access to healthy foods, especially healthy fast food options. As one county director stated: “Living in the rural communities I can find you a lot more fatback on the shelf at the grocery store than I can find you tofu.” In addition, administrative assistants and county directors talked about lack of places to be physically active such as not having gyms or safe places to walk and exercise.

#### **Objective Four. Identify Aspects of Extension’s Organizational Culture That May Influence Healthy Lifestyles**

Employees also identified aspects of the organizational culture that positively influenced or negatively influenced healthy lifestyles for employees. The participants’ perceptions of how Extension currently supports wellness are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5. Employee Perceptions of How Extension Currently Promotes Wellness**

<b>What Extension is Currently Doing that Promotes Wellness</b>	<b>Administrative Assistants</b>	<b>County Agents</b>	<b>County Directors</b>	<b>Program Assistants</b>	<b>On-Campus Faculty</b>	<b>Professional Staff</b>	<b>Administrators</b>
Providing information, programs, and resources	X	X	X	X			
Flexible schedules				X		X	
Paid annual and sick leave and other time off				X		X	
Healthier food options at some meetings			X				
Insurance				X			
Health-related newsletters				X			
Health screenings				X			

Table 6 shows the participants' perceptions of how Extension discourages wellness.

**Table 6. Employee Perceptions of How Extension Discourages Wellness**

<b>How Extension Discourages Wellness</b>	<b>Administrative Assistants</b>	<b>County Agents</b>	<b>County Directors</b>	<b>Program Assistants</b>	<b>On-Campus Faculty</b>	<b>Professional Staff</b>	<b>Administrators</b>
Work Hours	X	X	X		X	X	X
High fat/high-calorie snacks at group meetings	X		X	X			
No kitchen area	X						
Lack of fitness equipment in the workplace	X						
Lack of support to make healthy changes				X			
Stress from changes at work and job demands	X						

Many respondents viewed the information, programs, and resources provided by Extension, especially FCS Agents and Specialists, as encouraging employee wellness. Respondents viewed three existing programs as examples of what Extension does to encourage health. One program was "Better U," a short-term Extension employee wellness program in a 31-county region. The second was a series of physical fitness challenges built into the Extension FCS Professional Development Conference. Finally, the Extension FCS Wellness program was mentioned as encouraging wellness. This program is an online fitness tracking program available at no charge to the public, and several Extension employees participate (UT Extension, 2017a).

#### **Objective Five. Collect Specific Ideas for an Employee Wellness Program**

As shown in Table 7, the respondents' ideas for an employee wellness program represented three major themes: physical activity, promotion of healthy lifestyles, and healthy work schedules.

**Table 7. Extension Employees' Perceptions of Specific Ideas for an Employee Wellness Program**

Themes	Things that Extension Could Do to Promote/Encourage Wellness	Administrative Assistants	County Agents	County Directors	Program Assistants	On-Campus Faculty	Professional Staff	Administrators
Physical activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gym membership discounts</li> <li>Equipment improvements that encourage wellness, such as standing desks, etc.</li> <li>Fitness equipment at work</li> <li>Opportunities for physical activity</li> </ul>	X	X	X	X			
Promotion of healthy lifestyles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incorporating wellness throughout Extension</li> <li>Promotion of Extension programs for employees</li> <li>Extension leadership needs to set the example</li> <li>Employee recognition for healthy changes</li> </ul>	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Healthy work schedules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assistance with time management</li> <li>Encouragement to take time off for wellness</li> <li>Mandatory week off in the summer</li> <li>More flexibility in work hours</li> </ul>	X	X	X			X	

**Physical activity.** When asked what an employee wellness program would look like for Extension, agents, county directors, and program assistants shared that physical activity would substantially increase if the organization provided gym membership discounts. Administrative assistants and agents discussed access to fitness equipment at the office. One administrative assistant asked, “What if the University provided a used treadmill for you to walk on for 30 minutes or 15 minutes?” Respondents shared opportunities for physical activity in the workplace, such as an employee 5K or other group fitness challenges, would result in greater comradery, personal accomplishment, and overall healthy feelings.

**Promotion of healthy lifestyles.** Respondents shared that healthy lifestyles should be promoted at all levels of Extension administration and that when leaders set the example for healthy lifestyles, employees would model their behavior. As an administrative assistant expressed: “I think we need more motivation. We need more incentive from UT’s end.” Some focus group participants felt that, apart from a formal wellness program, wellness should be integrated into all Extension operations such as serving healthy snacks at all employee meetings and Extension educational events. The need for employee recognition was discussed, specifically time-off for participating in a fitness challenge and gym membership discounts.

**Healthy work schedules.** Administrators discussed their desire for the organization, as a whole, to take a closer look at improving employee effectiveness by creating more reasonable workloads. They described the workload as “somewhat discouraging” due to Extension positions that have not been filled nationwide. They felt that Extension employees had strong service-oriented attitudes, and because of this, they tried to do all of the work their predecessors did and more. Agents discussed that they needed assistance with time management, including consistent professional scheduling policies and implementation of those policies. Other ideas included more flexibility in working hours, a mandatory week off in the summer, and encouragement to schedule time for wellness. As one agent commented:

Whether it’s flexible time, professional flexibility . . . comp time, but to have every person from the state level to the county level on the same page. This is what we’re going to do. This is the plan for staying healthy.

**Other ideas.** Respondents also shared that an effective employee wellness program would be characterized as voluntary and include many options for participation. They described that the program should be easy, straight-forward, and should require minimal reporting.

### Conclusions

The Extension workforce participants in this study reported an organizational culture that does not encourage healthy lifestyles, with administrators, county agents, and professional staff tending to view the Extension organizational culture as unhealthier than did the other employee groups participating in the study. Some specific issues identified were: an over-commitment to work, the need to utilize professional scheduling for healthy lifestyles, the need for kitchens and break rooms in Extension offices, and the need to provide healthier food choices at group meetings and events for both Extension clients and employees. The findings are consistent with Lowe’s (2010) assertion that “heavy workloads and time scarcity . . . are major change barriers” that keep supervisors and employees from “doing more to promote a healthy organization” (p. 153). Conversely, administrative assistants and program assistants also described how their jobs had positively impacted their personal health and/or their families’ health through paid annual and sick leave and health-related newsletters.

Respondents in this study provided many ideas for an employee wellness program. However, beyond employee wellness programs, they desire a culture that exudes wellness consistent with calls for contemporary organizations to move beyond employee wellness program to achieve the greater vision of a healthy individual, workplace, and society (Lowe, 2010; Stringer, 2016). The Extension employees participating in this study envisioned that a successful employee wellness program would provide multiple choices with features such as classes, competitions, and incentives. Both extrinsic (e.g., gym membership discounts and the opportunity to exercise during normal business hours) and intrinsic (e.g., comradery with co-workers) incentives were discussed. Employees mentioned more intrinsic than extrinsic incentives. Like Ensle (2005), employees recommended that modeling by Extension administrators is critical to the overall health of the workforce.

## Recommendations

### Create an Organizational Culture of Wellness

Employees participating in the focus groups in this study desired a coordinated, substantial organizational shift toward a culture of wellness. These findings support the need that was identified in the strategic plan, *Advancing Tennessee* (UT Extension, 2010). Respondents discussed that an organizational culture of wellness would reduce employee stress and increase productivity. They stated that employees would show a reduction in being overweight and obesity. In addition, they believe other benefits would be employees who set a better example for those we serve through their own more balanced lives. This new, positive image of wellness would effectively serve to market Extension.

Based on findings, the following six action items are recommended to achieve a culture of wellness within the University of Tennessee Extension organization. These elements show how the study's major findings and the literature on healthy organizations are equivalent in many aspects.

**Mitigate identified barriers.** It is recommended that Extension administration (a) ensure that Federal labor laws are followed for non-exempt employees' lunches and breaks; (b) consider and mitigate policies, practices, technology, furniture, and facilities that impede health (Ensle, 2005; Stringer, 2016); and (c) establish customer service and facility standards.

As this recommendation relates to Federal labor laws and lunches and breaks, Federal law mandates that if an employer establishes a meal or lunch period, the employer does not pay the employee for that time as long as the employee may use that time as they wish. As reported by administrative assistants (classified as non-exempt employees), they may work in an office that does not close during lunch, and they feel compelled to help walk-in clients during their scheduled lunch breaks.

Standards are recommended to address the customer service issues illuminated in this study. As the respondents described, some Extension offices are open during the lunch break, and others are closed. Consistency is needed to ensure that employees are treated equitably in terms of time for their lunch. Additionally, consideration should be given to ways to serve effectively serve clients while an administrative assistant is on a scheduled break. Policies and practices are needed that would establish Extension employees as role models, for example, by serving healthy snacks and meals at Extension educational seminars and events. Curtailing high-calorie and high-fat foods available for staff meetings is imperative.

Based on the results from the focus group interviews, standards for Extension office facilities are also needed. Administrative assistants and agents in this study felt that having a treadmill at the office, especially in rural counties that have limited gym options, would be a strong influence on good health. It is recommended that the Extension organization also address the differences among offices related to basic food preparation.

**Demonstrate leadership commitment to an organizational culture of wellness.** It is recommended that Extension administration: (a) pursue work-life balance and make wellness a priority, and (b) provide inclusive leadership, consistent messages, and follow-through (Lowe, 2010).

**Identify healthy lifestyle champions.** Champions would be those Extension employees who model and advocate for healthy lifestyles among their peers. These peer-leaders must observe “language, opportunities, and allies” for a healthier organization (Lowe, 2010, p. 149).

**Promote existing Extension health programs to include employees as participants.** It is recommended that Extension promote participation in existing Extension programs designed for external clientele by members of all Extension employee groups. In this study, administrative assistants expressed a desire to attend many FCS programs, including Tai Chi and functional fitness. Program assistants expressed a desire to attend gardening, food preservation, and programs dealing with chronic conditions. County directors also talked about the value of these programs and the need to use this knowledge to improve their own health. These programs could be an effective way to improve the health of the organization.

**Develop and implement an Extension employee wellness program.** An employee wellness program should focus on culture rather than a free-standing program. The overall employee wellness effort should be integrated into existing Extension operations and programs with a focus on the critical learning content, attributes, incentives, and outcomes identified in this study. Figure 1 illustrates planning considerations for an Extension Employee Wellness Program. The researchers developed Figure 1 to help conceptualize and organize study findings relative to an Extension employee wellness program. Learning content refers to the instructional material that should be taught in an employee wellness program. Attributes refer to how the program is organized and presented. Incentives refer to both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that drive

commitment. Outcomes refer to the end results that should be expected and targeted in program development and evaluation efforts. The critical considerations were defined as being mentioned more often than the desired considerations. Furthermore, respondents expressed stronger feelings and/or more support for the critical considerations than the desired considerations.

**Figure 1. Planning Considerations for an Extension Employee Wellness Program**

	Learning Content	Attributes	Incentives	Outcomes
	Instructional Material	Organization and Presentation	Intrinsic and Extrinsic	End Results
<b>Critical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stress management</li> <li>Managing work schedules and expectations</li> <li>Physical activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Easy/Streamlined</li> <li>Voluntary</li> <li>Choices</li> <li>Consistent expectations/accountability</li> <li>Integrated into Extension operations</li> <li>Group events and activities</li> <li>Opportunity to work as a team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time</li> <li>Gym discount</li> <li>Comradery</li> <li>Accomplishment</li> <li>Feeling healthy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced stress</li> <li>Increased productivity</li> <li>Balanced life</li> <li>Reduction in overweight and obesity</li> </ul>
<b>Desired</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nutrition</li> <li>Mental health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunity to work as an individual</li> <li>Family activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gift card for athletic shoes and apparel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Setting a better example for those we serve</li> <li>Marketing Extension</li> </ul>

**Evaluate, renew, and celebrate a culture of wellness.** The Extension Employee Wellness Program outcomes should focus on reducing stress, increasing productivity, balancing life, and reducing overweight and obesity among employees.

### Limitations

One limitation of the methodological approach used in this study was the possibility of social bias. All of the moderators and participants were Extension employees in Tennessee which may have influenced respondents in providing answers that were less accurate but more socially acceptable. While some of the moderators and respondents knew one another personally, great care was taken in assigning moderators to employee groups so that none of the moderators were in a session with a participant that they supervise or work with daily. Nonetheless, participants may have been more candid or less candid given that they knew some of the moderators personally.

The social nature of focus groups is also a limitation. Participants discussed issues of which they were aware and were comfortable discussing in a group setting. The focus group participants, and therefore the issues discussed, represent a cross-section of the Extension organization. This was an exploratory study of employee perceptions. There may be many other health issues of which the focus group participants were not aware or unwilling to discuss in a group of their colleagues.

In addition, focus group moderators did not follow-up on every issue discussed because the focus group discussions were limited to two hours.

### **Implications and Application**

Preliminary recommendations from this study were shared with the UT Extension Healthy Lifestyles Committee in 2014, and actionable results have already been realized, including a “Marathon Month” to promote healthy lifestyles among Extension employees (Donaldson, Bell, Toman, & Hastings, 2016).

Many of the research recommendations were implemented quickly, and the authors are grateful to those who demonstrated such a high value for the health and wellness of the Extension workforce. Reflecting the findings of this study, the Healthy Lifestyles Initiative Committee selected “Balance Life” as the theme for a host of employee wellness activities, including periodic email messages that contain helpful information to tame stress, improve dietary quality, and increase physical activity. The Healthy Lifestyles Initiative Committee also hosted a “Walk Across Tennessee” program specifically for employees (Jarvandi, Yates, & Donaldson 2017).

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### **Acknowledgments**

This study would not have been possible without the contributions from many people, especially all of the Extension employees who gave their time to share their voices during the focus groups. We also want to thank the leadership given to this project as well as the other strategic plan initiatives by Shirley Hastings and the leadership given to this initiative by Beth Bell. We also want to acknowledge the Healthy Lifestyles Initiative Committee members who helped to collect data and shared their expertise for this project: Betty Greer, Janice Hartman, Jeff Lannom, Hilda Lytle, Natalie Owens, Grant Palmer, Janie Pedigo, Charlotte Smith, Kimberly Smithson, Jessica Taylor, and Heather Wallace. Thanks to Brandi Berven for all of her support throughout the project.

## **Appendix A: Promoting Healthy Lifestyles for Extension Employees Focus Group Questions**

[The leader summarizes the purpose of the group, confidentiality, length of the interview, the fact that there are no right answers and that it is ok to disagree.]

- Purpose of the Group: Hello everyone. Thanks so much for being here. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and my colleague is \_\_\_\_\_. Our purpose is to conduct focus group discussions about how UT Extension can promote healthy lifestyles for employees. This is one of 56 action steps in our organization's Strategic Plan.
- Confidentiality: Everything that you say is confidential.
- Length of the interview: We will conclude in approximately two hours from now. We will take a break after the first hour of discussion.
- Ground Rules:
  - First, there are no right answers or wrong answers. We are interested in your opinions and perspectives.
  - Second, you shouldn't feel that you have to agree with everyone else in this room if that's not how you really feel. We expect people will have different views on our questions.
  - Third, we want you to feel comfortable saying good things as well as critical things. We're not here to promote a particular way of thinking. We just want to understand your viewpoints.
  - Fourth, we ask that you talk one at a time.
- First Question: Our first question will be round-robin, we will ask everyone to respond. The first question is:
  1. What do you think are the major health issues facing Extension employees?
 

Probes –

    - a. What, if any, are health issues that Extension employees face that are different from the general population?
    - b. Describe any ways that your job influences your health, if at all?
    - c. Describe any ways that your job influences your family, if at all?
  2. What motivates Extension employees to make healthy changes?
  3. What keeps Extension employees from making healthy choices?
  4. What involvement, if any, have you had with employee wellness programs?
  5. If you had a magic wand, what would an employee wellness program for Extension employees look like?
  6. What does Extension do to encourage employee wellness?
  7. What does Extension do that discourages employee wellness?
  8. What could Extension change to encourage employee wellness?

9. Now, consider a scale where 1 is poor and 10 is ideal. How would you rate Extension today for encouraging employee wellness?

Think about an effective employee wellness program for Extension employees.

10. How can we make this program fun?
11. How can we make this program easy?
12. How can we encourage people to participate?

#### Closing Questions

13. Of all the issues we discussed today what do you think is the most important?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share today regarding Extension employees and healthy lifestyles?