



Fit For Sisters

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Columnist

Is exercise contagious?

Can the people you associate with the most subconsciously determine how you behave? Do you have a friend who is always encouraging and inspiring others to move and challenge themselves? Perhaps someone reading this belongs to a social networking site which helps promote healthy behavior?

The company you keep or the social messages you're exposed to play a direct role in exercise habits, according to psychological studies.

We are exposed to hundreds of influential social messages per day. Some quite obvious, like advertising, others less so, like the way noticing the running

shoes next to the door may trigger the desire for an afternoon jaunt. These messages are powerful influences on behavior. Despite the staunchest avoidance of social pressure, everyone is primed to behave by the outside influences they're most exposed to.

The *New York Times* recently published an article including new research on the way this works. Using data from five years and 1.1 million users of a run-tracking system, they were able to distill some interesting findings.

The researchers looked at data where people belonged to a social network of runners where they could view and see the other runners' efforts. If a friend runs on any given day, a person is more likely to run themselves. Speed and distance were also influenced. If friends ran faster or farther, they themselves pushed the pace/distance. The weather played a role as well. If someone's peers ran on a day of inclement weather, they were more likely to do so as well.

Simply recognizing that friends and peers are out exercising is effective motivation. This was also studied at the University of Pennsylvania. The subjects were either exposed

to motivational advertising toward exercise, or placed in a social network among other students and given prompts about the others' exercise class attendance and their fitness progress.

The results showed two different outcomes: The group who received the marketing messages initially improved their exercise class attendance, but after time this effect wore off; the students drifted back to normal behavior. In contrast, the social support group continued to increase its effectiveness as time passed. As the students saw more and more peers succeeding at exercising they were motivated to emulate and actually continued to increase exercising.

This is important, because

the typical exercise routine is tackled full-steam for a few weeks, then inevitably tapers away once the initial motivation begins to subside. If a person can join a social group, they are much more likely to get past the dangers of dropping out, and will eventually create a habit loop which includes the exercise and healthy behaviors they sought out.

Common interests and activity are essential to a feeling of belonging. Aside from exercising, peer groups can also be a tool for creating healthy friendships. A web of healthy, supportive, and strong friendships transcends a workout partner. Feelings of belonging establish strong ties — ties that create a ripple in the fabric of

a community. Our society is faced with a plague of inactivity, unhealthy habits, and cascading negative health outcomes because of it. If there is anyway to create a healthy community, perhaps it can start with the spread of influencers on the ground level.

Need to develop a strong network of active, health-conscious friends? Explore group activities, gyms, bike/running/hiking shops. Seek out SPRD programs. Look into a gym. These all are places where people are welcoming, friendly, and supportive of one another.

Above all, commit to the group, show respect and reflect the friendships you wish to create outward with others.

Great hair doesn't happen by chance. It happens by appointment.

R

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