

Find A Buddy

Exercising with a supporter can help you get in shape and stay motivated

by: Jill Barker

Getting in shape doesn't have to be a lonely endeavour. Nor does losing weight.

Friends, family, spouses and coworkers can have a positive effect on anyone struggling to make a change. But as friends and family members of someone attempting to make a positive lifestyle change can attest, it's not always easy to know what kind of support makes the biggest impact. Should you be empathetic and non-judgmental? Or is a more direct approach better? In other words, is surrounding those you care about with positive messages while they're trying to achieve their fitness or weight-loss goals a winning strategy? Or is urging them to stay on track with their commitment to change a better tactic? Research done within the weight-loss community suggests that a combination of both approaches leads to better success. What isn't as clear, however, is who's best suited - friend, alternate family member or co-worker - to provide that support? In an attempt to find out both who has the best potential to assist in realizing weight-loss goals as well as what type of support is most effective, a team of American researchers studied a group of individuals participating in a weight-loss program that encouraged using a buddy system. About half the group, 382 participants, chose a buddy. Just over one-third, 35 per cent, of those buddies were romantic partners. The rest included co-workers (22 per cent), family members (19 per cent), friends (16 per cent) and fellow program members (six per cent). Progress of the study subjects, with and without a buddy, was followed over the course of the program with body mass index, weight and waist size measured on a regular basis.

Also collected by the researchers was data on how often participants connected with their buddies and what type of interactions they had.

The results were broken down even further, comparing the exchanges of friends, family members, co-workers and participants in the same weight-loss program with that of a romantic partner.

With the numbers crunched, it was clear that having someone in your corner, romantic or otherwise, made a big difference.

"Participants who had a designated buddy - someone to help keep them on track with their goals - lost more weight and reduced their BMIs and waist sizes," the researchers say.

The reasons buddies have such an impact are probably varied. Some people use their buddies to add accountability to their efforts.

Knowing that someone else is invested in your success can provide the resolve needed to say no to that second helping and yes to an early morning workout.

But it's not just having a buddy that increases the chance of success.

The quality of the interaction between the buddy and person pursuing change is also important.

"Participants attained their greatest reductions in BMI and waist sizes when they perceived their buddies as generally attentive and caring in addition to encouraging them to keep their goals," the researchers say.

That means buddies are most effective when they offer unconditional support while keeping the goals of the person trying to lose weight at the forefront.

Confirming the importance and role of a weight-loss buddy is important and not just for anyone who wants to lose a few pounds. It's likely that having a buddy can make a difference for anyone trying to achieve a specific exercise goal, as well.

Training for a marathon or triathlon or just making it to the gym three times a week can be made easier with an advocate at your side.

Also good to know is that any type of buddy will do as long as they can strike a balance between being positive and being goal-oriented. Knowing when to be supportive and when to be directive is the key to being a good buddy. It's also the key to choosing the right buddy, which can help direct you to who among friends, family and colleagues is best suited to assist in achieving your diet or exercise goals.

So if your mom only knows how to be a cheerleader and your spouse is more inclined to push you toward your goals, neither is your best option. Instead, choose a buddy equally adept at keeping you honest when the numbers on the scale start going in the wrong direction and giving you a well-deserved high-five when you hit your weekly exercise goal.

There's no doubt that lifestyle changes are hard and that doing it solo is even harder.

That's why it's good to know that having a buddy along for the ride can make it easier.

Photo: Getty Images, Istockphoto / Enlisting the help of a friend, family member, colleague or acquaintance can keep you honest and improve your chances of achieving your weekly exercise and diet goals.;

© 2018 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.