



Issue

Fresh Juice:
Summer 2013

Partners in Health: How to Live Healthier Together

Making healthy lifestyle choices with your partner isn't always a walk in the park. Here's how to ensure that when it comes to diet, activity and outlook, your influence on your mate is for better, not for worse.

By Lesley Young

Old-school stand-up jokes aside, long-term romantic partnerships are generally good for our health, or so say two decades of studies. But newer research reveals details about [the way our habits affect the health of those we spend the most time with](#). If you approach it the right way (we don't mean nagging), you can work together to have a positive effect on each other, says Aislin Mushquash, a clinical psychology PhD student and researcher at Dalhousie University in Halifax. Here are a few expert tips for getting (and staying) healthy together.

Don't drag each other down

It's not news that [the less active you are, the more likely your partner is to skip out on exercise, too](#). The lesser-known kicker: this negative cycle can chip away at the emotional health of partners as well.

In a 15-year study published in 2011, researchers at the University of British Columbia found that spouses' depressive symptoms (unhappiness, loneliness and restlessness) waxed and waned closely with those of their partners. Plus, this depression corresponded closely with an inability to function, such as climb a flight of stairs. So couples are likely to bring each other down in both mind and body.

Why the influence: "It's like that saying 'Use it or lose it,' in regard to functional ability," says Christiane Hoppmann, the study's lead researcher and an assistant professor in UBC's department of psychology. "When people are depressed, they tend to want to stay home, and that causes a spouse to stay home more. That's a problem because when older adults stop being active, they risk losing their functional ability. These findings help illuminate the often vicious cycle between depressive symptoms and our physical abilities."

Do this together: The earlier you take up joint activities, the better. And it doesn't have to be physically ambitious. Even a healthy-cooking class gets couples out of the house. Get in the habit of pairing up to tackle errands such as buying groceries.

Try some vitamin TLC

Researchers at the University of Missouri were surprised when they recently uncovered the extent to which marital happiness -- in other words, the quality of the relationship itself -- impacted health positively.

"The increase in marital happiness over time that occurred in our study corresponded with an increase in self-rated health, which suggests a happy marriage is quite protective of health," says Christine Proulx, the study's lead researcher and an assistant professor of human development and family studies at the university. "This is pretty powerful because I expected to see declines in marital happiness and health over time that just weren't there. So when marriages improve in the long run, they might benefit health."

Why the influence: "There's [a stress-buffering effect](#) in supportive relationships," says Proulx. "We know stress is bad for our health. People talk about marriage as a source of strength and support. A good strong marriage acts as a shield against daily stress."

Do this together: "Nurturing and caring for our partner is another way of caring for one's health," says Proulx, who adds that we should think about cuddling with our better half as a healthy habit on par with walking the dog, taking a multivitamin and counting calories.



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Resist the road to excess

Should every day be a party for two? No. Researchers at Dalhousie University showed a clear predictive influence of binge drinking that one romantic partner has on another.

"Our study showed that we can understand how much someone drinks based on how much they drank previous to starting the relationship and by knowing how much their partner drinks," says Mushquash, the lead researcher. "So, for example, if at the start of the month, the boyfriend was drinking a lot, by the end of the month, the girlfriend would be drinking a lot, too."

Why the influence: Research by Corinne Reczek, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Cincinnati in Ohio, recently identified three explanations for [why couples in long-term relationships pick up each other's bad habits](#). According to her research, long-term intimate couples (both straight and same sex) tend to do so through "direct responsibility" (one partner buys junk food and brings it into the house, for example) and "personal responsibility" (they don't do anything to change a partner's bad habit, so they're complicit). Gay and lesbian couples nearly exclusively also cited "unhealthy habit synchronicity." In other words, one partner may not engage in an unhealthy habit on his or her own, but if a desire to do so is matched by the other partner, they partake.

Do this together: "Look at whether you're bonding with your partner around unhealthy habits," says Mushquash. "Ask yourself if it's harming you both in some way. Since we know that partners do have some effect on each other's health behaviours, eating and drinking included, we can capitalize on that and encourage them to [adopt more positive behaviours](#)."

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Above: Adam (Adam Driver) and Hannah (Lena Dunham), characters on HBO's hit series Girls, have different habits. When he tries to motivate her to jog, she lies in the street in protest. She is incredulous when he says he doesn't "do" ice cream.

Photography, courtesy of HBO Canada (Girls).

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