

BUILD YOUR WELLNESS DREAM TEAM

A little help from your friends can spell the difference between “Eh, I can skip the gym ... again,” and success. So, do you have the support system you need? Find out, and make it even stronger.

BY MELISSA DALY



Yes, your significant other can be part of your healthy support system! That's exactly how WW members Thomas and Nicole N. roll.

PHOTOGRAPHY: TANIA WALCK

WELLNESS SOMETIMES SEEMS LIKE A SOLO PURSUIT. You have one body, it belongs to you, and no one else can munch those veggies or walk those steps for you. But forget that loner mentality! Actually, study after study has found that the support of friends and family is crucial on any wellness journey: Strong connections directly boost well-being, soothing stress and lowering blood pressure. They also make almost every healthy habit—from exercising to wearing your seat belt—feel more doable. So here's a little expert advice on creating a wellness dream team.

ASK FOR WHAT YOU NEED

Let's say you're trying to quit your soda habit. A supportive friend or family member might high-five you when you go a week without it (emotional support), or fill up a water bottle for you on a busy morning (practical support), or guide you toward new flavored seltzers (informational support). Which kind of support is best? Whatever helps you most. And the way to get exactly what you need is to ask. “It's good to be honest with others about how important their support is to you, and then tell them what they can do to help with the process,” says Lynsey Romo, PhD, associate professor in the department of communication at North Carolina State University. “If it's a colleague, you might request that they try not to suggest unhealthy lunch spots. If it's a spouse, you might ask them to watch the kids so you have time to work out.”

The more specific you are with your crew, the better, because well-meaning but unconstructive support can backfire. Studies show that a mismatch between the type of help people want and the type they get can hurt their ability to achieve health goals or manage stress. For example, “friendly” reminders to go work out that feel more critical than encouraging could actually undercut your urge to go for a jog. The actions that have proved most likely to boost health results are compliments and congrats on small wins, but even cheerleading can sound hollow if what you're really eager for is more concrete backup, like help with cooking healthy meals. Don't be afraid to give instructions.

JOIN FORCES

One of the best-proven ways to up your chances of sticking with healthy changes is to make them together with a buddy. When skipping your lunchtime walk means letting down your walking partner, you're much less likely to flake. Who makes the best comrade in arms (and abs, and glutes)? According to Romo's research, one who both accepts you as you are—and challenges you to be better. The two aren't actually mutually exclusive, she says: “Accepting messages, like compliments and reassurances, are positive, warm messages that show your partner validates your feelings. Challenging messages push you to accomplish your goals—tough but gentle love. A combination of both types is what best helps people stay on track with their exercise and health goals.” The ideal walking buddy, for example, will acknowledge that this is a killer hill you're on—she's feeling it too!—but she's not going to let you call an Uber.

Enlisting someone nearby with a similar schedule, fitness level, and interests is a good place to begin. If you're a WW member, drop in to a Wellness Workshop at a WW studio near you to find plenty of potential partners. And check out the groups on WW's social network Connect (find it on the app), which let you reach out to others who share interests in activities from yoga to weight lifting and Crossfit. Not a WW member? Join a local activity group via a site like [Meetup.com](#).

RELY ON PROS WHO GET IT

Health-care workers are the professional hired guns of social support when it comes to making healthy changes. Having a good doctor-patient relationship has been shown to significantly improve health outcomes ranging from weight loss to improved blood pressure to pain relief, according to research by the Empathy and Relational Science Program at Massachusetts General Hospital.

What helps: feeling that your doctor is fully on your side. “There is ample evidence that patients who dislike their doctors don't follow the doctor's advice,” says author Joan C. Chrisler, PhD, professor of psychology at Connecticut College. “The stress they feel when they visit or think about the doctor can interfere with health habits.” This is especially true when the patient's goal is weight loss. Using full-on fat shaming to motivate patients to improve their health actually leaves people more likely to binge eat, feel less control over their eating habits, and be less physically active, according to research. Even microaggressions from a physician who might genuinely mean well—like a doctor frowning when reading a patient's weight—can boost stress, which lowers immune function, and may make it harder to keep up healthy behaviors like sleeping well and laying off alcohol. Ask for doctor recommendations from friends, co-workers, and family members, and don't quit until you find a medical pro you click with.



A group of WW members, there for each other during the ups, downs, and cheers.
TARA DONNE.

SURROUND YOURSELF

If your pals prefer farmers' markets to fast food and tennis over TV, you may have an automatic leg up on wellness yourself. That's because health-related behavior tends to go viral within social circles. In a landmark study of 3,610 Australian women, researchers found that those whose social circles were full of people who practiced healthy eating and engaged in physical activity were more likely to follow such behaviors themselves. Healthy habits may be contagious, concluded the researchers, perhaps because we base our ideas of how to eat, how to move, and how much it's OK to weigh in part on what those around us are doing.

If your IRL pals aren't modeling healthy habits, online friends can fill the gap: Recent studies have confirmed that people are more likely to achieve personal goals, such as weight loss, when they actively engage with a virtual support community (like WW's Connect). Publicly declaring your goal applies positive pressure to follow through, and lets you crowdsource solutions to challenging situations or pats on the back for little victories.

COMPETE WITH CARE

Of course, being part of a community of people striving toward similar goals can stoke a little healthy competition. That may be a good thing, encouraging you to show up and stick with it. But for some, it can feel more like stressful pressure, especially when it comes to social media. The more friends' workout posts you view, the more concern and self-consciousness about gaining weight you may feel, says a new study. But if you look up to fitter friends as role models, those humblebrags can *boost* your exercise attitude. Just make sure the next post comes from you.

HOW SIGNIFICANT IS YOUR OTHER?

Your partner automatically has a spot on your team. But that doesn't mean your SO has to be an *active* member. You're not doomed to failure if your spouse doesn't take up cooking so you can cut back on takeout. “Perceived support”—the feeling that you've got someone in your corner—can be just as beneficial as overt acts of support, per a number of studies. Other research suggests that nagging your partner to join you on your wellness path can cause tension, not togetherness. Focus on your path, and your SO may follow: The same research found that communication tended to improve after one partner lost weight, and the other was more likely to be inspired to embark on a healthy lifestyle.



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