

Exercising with Friends #1 – Working with a Buddy

Adapted by Personal Safety Nets® from “Exercising with Friends” in healthywomen.org and “Exercising with Your Partner or Friends” in realbuzz.com.



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There's strength in numbers, the old saying goes, and that's especially true for many of us when it comes to exercising. Social support encourages physical activity. An exercise buddy (or two) makes such support even more personal. If you decided to become more active this year, having an exercise buddy may help you achieve and maintain that goal. Overall physical health is definitely an area where creating a team network pays big dividends!

"Exercise partners can provide a kind of gentle coercion and limit your negative self-talk," says Barbara A. Brehm, Ed.D. professor, Department of Exercise and Sport Studies, at Smith College in Northampton, MA. Forget making excuses about why you're too tired or too busy to exercise. When you're scheduled to meet a friend for exercise, Brehm says, "You'll avoid that debate in your head about whether you should go and work out."

The buddy system keeps boredom away and makes time pass quickly. Many exercise partners talk as they walk or bike (both are popular buddy exercises). The miles or kilometers seem to disappear more rapidly while chatting with a companion than they do when you're exercising alone, focusing on every step or minute.

Having a conversation while exercising dissociates you from any possible discomfort of the activity even if, in Seattle, it's often the rain or dark, says researcher James J. Annesi, Ph.D., Director of Wellness Advancement at the YMCA of Metropolitan Atlanta. "People who can tolerate discomfort better are less likely to drop out from exercise," he says. What's more, even if they start out as only casual acquaintances, exercise buddies often build strong friendship bonds. Nowadays, everyone is busy and rushing around and the opportunity to take a little quality time out should not be missed. A group workout that leaves you refreshed and relaxed is fantastically therapeutic.

The buddy system works for losing weight as well. Researchers at Miriam Hospital/Brown Medical School and University of Massachusetts Dartmouth found that participants in a weight loss regimen that included exercise lost more weight when their support partners took part in the same program and were successful at dropping pounds. Others participating alone, or whose support buddies didn't lose weight, did not do as well. See our February 2009 Newsletter for an example.

One reason that teaming up with an exercise buddy works is that you see someone who's similar to you doing a physical activity. That strengthens your belief that you can accomplish the same thing. (Our founder, Judy, reports success in the annual Seattle to Portland bike ride (STP) because "if Carolyn could do it – so can I!")

The greater your self-confidence about performing regular activity or keeping up in an exercise class, the more motivated you're likely to become, Brehm says. That boosts adherence—your ability to stay with an exercise regimen beyond the start-up phase.

"People who stick to their exercise program get some kind of reward: it makes them feel better, it helps them sleep, it's fun to do, or it's accomplishing something," says Brehm. When you have a

buddy, "you're accomplishing two things at once. You're getting to see your friend...and you're exercising at the same time." You can achieve adherence success with a supportive group as well, says Annesi, who has conducted research on the subject.

He's sympathetic if your knees grow weak at the thought of entering a room filled with sleek, high-intensity, power exercisers. Not all physical activity that happens in a social setting is supportive, he notes. Annesi advises you avoid groups (and individuals) that make you feel as if your body is being judged negatively. "When you find a group that you feel comfortable with...you'll stay with the exercise," he says. Lois and Gloria, having finished their first Women's Danskin Triathlon each commented: "I didn't know strong bodies came in so many beautiful shapes and sizes."

Tips for a successful exercise buddy relationship

- *Consider personality.* Pick somebody who you really want to spend time with but don't convince your best friend to be your exercise buddy if she/he doesn't like physical activity. If you do, your plan could fail quickly.
- *Make joint decisions.* Find someone who shares your same exercise interests and whose schedule is similar to yours. Choose an activity location that's convenient for both of you.
- *When possible, match skill levels.* If you walk for exercise, your buddy's speed should be similar to yours. It's okay if she's a little bit faster, because that will encourage you to push yourself a bit. You don't want a wide difference in skill or you might feel as if you're holding her back.
- *Matching ages doesn't matter.* Brehm tells us age doesn't matter as much as matching fitness levels. Partners of varying abilities can buddy up by meeting at a gym and using equipment set to their skill levels, such as elliptical trainers or treadmills.
- *If you need extra encouragement, make an altruistic match.* Some people have more success when they're exercising because it's good for someone else, such as an overweight child or a spouse with heart disease.
- *Make your exercise sessions a priority.* Buddies need a similar amount of commitment to the plan.
- *Have a back-up plan ready for when your buddy can't participate.* Occasionally, your buddy will get sick or have a schedule conflict. If she can't make a session, have an alternate plan—whether it's to walk the same route alone or while talking to a friend on a cell phone, exercise to a DVD or video at home, or go to the gym.
- If you've not been exercising regularly, checking with a physicians first may be a prudent step.