

If you plan, then you'll do... but it helps to have a friend

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Many people look forward to the New Year for a new start on old habits. While you are more likely to do something if you plan it in advance, research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), shows that partnering up or planning with someone can really boost the likelihood of sticking to your resolutions. This finding suggests that 'buddy schemes' could make a big difference to people following dieting plans, health programmes and could be integrated into government well-being initiatives.

"Specific plans regarding when, where and how a person will act have been termed 'implementation intentions'," explains Professor Mark Conner from the Institute of [Psychological Science](#) at the University of Leeds. "We already know that these kinds of plans can be really effective. You set up cues that prompt your planned behaviour - 'if I walk to work on Monday, then I will jog home', 'if I feel hungry before lunch then I will eat an apple, not a chocolate bar.' "

But research by Professor Conner and his colleagues Dr Andrew Prestwich and Dr Rebecca Lawton from the University of Leeds has now demonstrated that this effect can be made even stronger if you get other people - friends, family, colleagues involved too.

The Leeds team worked with employees from 15 councils who volunteered to participate in two studies attempting to increase their levels of exercise or improve their diet. Some employees were just left to do it on their own; others were asked to recruit a partner. A third

group were encouraged to develop 'if...then...' plans, and a fourth group was told to make these 'if...then' plans with a partner.

"We followed up after one, three and six months to see how the employees were doing. And it was quite clear that working together and joint planning really helped employees stick to their new exercise regimes. Moreover, the involvement of a partner in planning had a sustained effect that was still noticeable after six months."

Professor Conner warns that roping in a buddy is not a guarantee for success. The real power is in matching your 'ifs' and 'thens' so you have powerful cues for your new behaviour. When all else is equal, forming exercise plans with a partner will increase your chances of actually sticking to them.

These findings could be applied to various government and NHS initiatives, such as smoking cessation programmes or the current drive to reduce obesity. Instead of putting all the onus on an individual, people should be encouraged to work with others and form clear 'if... then...' [plans](#). "Individual change can of course happen," notes Conner, "but it is even better to have a friend on your side!"

More information: Study: 'Testing the efficacy and mechanisms of collaborative implementation intentions'

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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