

Partners can help or hinder attempts at changing diet

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For people trying to make a change in their diet, significant others generally play a positive and supportive role, but sometimes respond in negative ways, according to a study in the March/April *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*.

Led by Judy Paisley, Ph.D., R.D., of Ryerson University, Toronto, the researchers looked at how significant others responded when their partners attempted to make a dietary change for health reasons. "For most pairs, the significant others' emotional and behavioral responses to the dietary change appeared to reflect the general dynamics of the relationship," says Dr. Paisley.

The researchers conducted interviews with 21 people making dietary changes—most in response to a medical diagnosis—and with their partners or significant others. "By examining the perspectives of significant others, we hoped to deepen understanding of the social nature of dietary change," Dr. Paisley explains.

The partners' emotional responses varied widely: from co-operation and encouragement to skepticism and anger. In most cases, the significant others described themselves as playing a positive, supportive role. Some facilitated the change by joining in the new diet, or by changing their shopping or cooking habits. Others helped by monitoring the dietary change, finding and sharing information, or providing motivation.

These positive roles seemed to reflect the general dynamics of the

relationship, according to Dr. Paisley. "Significant others who demonstrated strong support for their partner's dietary change typically described their relationship as very supportive and often saw their direct participation in the change as a natural extension of their relationship."

However, in some cases, the person trying to make a change felt their partner had a negative impact on their efforts—for example, by eating 'forbidden' foods in front of them. In these cases, the significant others did not view their response as negative. In only one case did both partners agree that the significant other played a neutral role.

Most studies of the role of social support on dietary behavior have focused on the perspective of the person attempting to make a change. The researchers hope that their study will aid in developing ways of promoting dietary modifications as a shared activity.

"Although most significant others described their response as co-operative and supportive, the responses varied widely in terms of the impact that their support may have had on changers' experiences," adds Dr. Paisley. "For example, indirect indications of support like not complaining about dietary changes may have been less meaningful to changers than direct support offered through positive reinforcement and encouragement."

Source: Elsevier

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