

Cyber exercise partners help you go the distance: Motivation gains can double

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MSU's Brandon Irwin (sitting) conducts virtual workout technology in 2009 with a test subject in the Health Games Lab. Irwin led a recent study that found virtual exercise partners increase motivation to work out. Credit: Photo by Derrick Turner

A new study testing the benefits of a virtual exercise partner shows the presence of a moderately more capable cycling partner can significantly boost the motivation – by as much as 100 percent – to stick to an exercise program.

The research out of Michigan State University's Department of Kinesiology shows women taking part in cycling exercises exercised twice as long when working with a virtual [partner](#), results the authors said can be used to help people meet [physical activity](#) recommendations.

The work by Brandon Irwin and colleagues is published online in the journal *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*.

"Being able to more than double one's performance is a substantial gain for those trying to increase their physical activity," Irwin said. "These results are encouraging and suggest the gains we observed over six hour-long sessions could be sustained on a longer-term program of [exercise](#)."

For many people, lack of [motivation](#) is a barrier to achieving both the recommended amount and intensity of exercise. Using the principles of group exercise, which is known to increase people's motivation to stick to an exercise program, the researchers investigated whether a "virtually present" partner would influence participants' motivation to exercise longer.

A total of 58 women recruited from MSU physical activity courses took part in the experiment and exercised on a stationary bike. They were split into three groups: The first group exercised on their own alongside a virtual person, the second group exercised alongside a virtual person but also worked as a team and the third group cycled alone.

At the start, the women in groups one and two were assigned a "virtually present partner" for the ride and were told their partner would be riding at the same time they were, on a similar bike in another lab. The women "met" their partners via a pre-recorded video-chat and were told their partner's performance was moderately better than their own.

During the exercise sessions, participants tracked their partner's progress by watching what looked like a live feed but was in fact a recording. All students rode a video-game exercise bike for as long as they felt comfortable. They then were asked to rate their intention to exercise again, how well they felt they had done and how tired they felt.

Overall, exercising with a virtually present partner improved performance on the cycling task, and the women cycled longer when working alongside a more capable partner than when exercising alone.

Across sessions, those women who exercised as part of a team cycled, on average, two minutes longer than those who exercised independently with a partner – 22 versus 20 minutes – and twice as long as those who exercised without a partner – 22 versus 11 minutes.

In terms of motivation, there was a marked decline in intent to exercise among those who cycled on their own. In contrast, those who cycled with a virtual partner reported no decline in motivation to exercise.

Provided by Michigan State University

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