

Comparing to others may improve motivation for self-care

March 21 2013, by Sara Lajeunesse

Comparing yourself to others who are either worse off or are not coping well may increase your motivation to take better care of yourself when facing an illness or disease, according to researchers at Penn State and Drexel University.

"Sustaining motivation for self-care behaviors involving illnesses or diseases, such as [type 2 diabetes](#), is challenging, and the role of [social influence](#) on motivation and behavior is underappreciated," said Joshua Smyth, professor of biobehavioral health and of medicine, Penn State. "In this study, we sought to clarify the effect of evaluating oneself relative to another person on motivation for self-care."

The researchers asked 180 [diabetes patients](#) to complete baseline [questionnaires](#) and to choose to read one of four different stories about another patient—a patient who is coping well with mild symptoms, a patient who is coping well with severe symptoms, a patient who is coping poorly with mild symptoms, and a patient who is coping poorly with severe symptoms.

The team then asked the participants to rate how much they focused on similarities and differences between themselves and the patient they chose to read about, as they were reading. Finally, they asked the participants to rate their motivation for [diabetes](#) self-care behaviors, such as avoiding [sugary foods](#) and getting regular exercise.

The researchers found that most patients preferred to read about a

patient who was coping well with mild symptoms. Patients' motivation for self-care did not differ based on which patient they chose to read about or on the characteristics they reported in questionnaires. However, their motivation did differ depending on how much they focused on differences between themselves and the patient they chose. For patients who chose to read about someone who was doing well with coping or symptoms, focusing a great deal on differences between themselves and that person led to low motivation. For patients who chose to read about someone who was doing poorly with coping and symptoms, focusing on differences between themselves and that person led to high motivation.

The researchers recently presented their findings at the American Psychosomatic Society's 71st Annual Scientific Meeting in Miami.

"Patients with diabetes and other chronic illnesses often learn about other patients through encounters with them in support groups or clinic waiting rooms," said Danielle Arigo, post-doctoral fellow, Drexel University. "In addition, many [illness](#) educational materials also include patient testimonials or descriptions. Each of these situations offers an opportunity for social comparison. Our research shows that comparisons can increase patient motivation for necessary self-care, but only under certain circumstances. As a result, it may be important for clinical care providers to attend to patients' responses to social information. Clinical care may be improved by teaching patients to make the types of comparisons that lead to improved [motivation](#) for self-care."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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