

Optimal workout partner encourages less to motivate more, says researcher

May 8 2013, by Megan Saunders

(Medical Xpress)—The best workout partner may be one who understands that silence is golden, according to one Kansas State University researcher in the College of Human Ecology.

Brandon Irwin, assistant professor of [kinesiology](#), recently found that individuals tend to work out longer when their partner was perceived to be more skilled and was one who kept verbal encouragement to a minimum.

Irwin worked with researchers at Michigan State University on the study "You Can Do It: the Efficacy of Encouragement in Motivating the Weak Link to Exercise Longer During an Online Exercise [Video Game](#)," which will be published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*. He said the team's goal was to determine how to increase motivation during [physical activity](#).

"People like to exercise with other people," Irwin said. "In [exercise groups](#), people tend to encourage each other, saying things like, 'Come on, you can do it.' We wanted to find out what effect this had on motivation."

In a separate study, Irwin discovered the optimal exercise partner is 40 percent better than the other, motivating the less skilled partner to exercise for a longer period of time and at an increased rate. In this study, 115 participants were told to do planks, an abdominal exercise, for as long as they could.

Next, the researchers told a group of participants they would be exercising with a partner who was slightly better, although the partner was a looped video recording. A third group was told they would be exercising with a partner—also a recording—but this time, the partner verbally encouraged them.

"Initially, it made sense to us that encouragement would be motivating," Irwin said. "However, we found almost the opposite to be true. When exercising with someone who is slightly better and who is not verbally encouraging, participants exercised longer than if conditions were the same but that person was verbally encouraging them. We didn't expect that."

Irwin said the researchers' best guess for why this happened is that those who received encouragement from a partner whom they perceived as more skilled may have interpreted the comments as condescending.

"If two individuals are exercising together and one is constantly saying 'you can do this' to the other, it may be taken as patronizing," Irwin said. "Those who received encouragement may have felt condescended, or even that their virtual partner was encouraging themselves, since no names were used."

Participants in the study were not aware that their partner was a recording and would never stop the exercise. The researchers told all participants that as soon as they stopped, their partner had to stop.

"Being the 'weak link' is a big motivator in partner or group exercise," Irwin said. "You don't want to let your partner down. We're honing in on that aspect of group exercise."

Irwin said this research could be used in designing electronic media, including both video games and social media. In a video game, the

research findings could help develop the best virtual character in an [exercise](#)-based video game, like the Nintendo Wii Fit.

"Our research suggests that the best virtual workout partner is someone who is a little better than you and doesn't encourage you under certain conditions," he said.

Irwin added that these principles could also be applied to real workout partners on a proposed social media fitness website. Partners could be matched through an algorithm that would be used to dictate how much communication they should have.

"When you're communicating through an electronic medium, the designer puts restrictions on what and how you communicate with each other," Irwin said. "If you're partnered with your ultimate workout buddy, your communication could be facilitated or inhibited, depending on your preferences."

Provided by Kansas State University

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