

Helping cancer survivors socialize and get exercise

February 28 2014, by Adrienne Harry



Credit: Casey Lessard via Flickr

Inspired by the popularity of online dating, Associate Professor Catherine Sabiston is hoping to help cancer patients find their perfect exercise "match" post-treatment.

"One of the biggest barriers that women with cancer identify is lack of [social support](#)," said Sabiston. "They say that if they just had someone to

knock on their door and pull them out of the house, they'd exercise. It made me wonder how to match these women with other women so that they can get that social support and hopefully exercise more."

Sabiston met with a team of computer engineers who had developed a popular online dating service to explore the possibility of creating a similar site for exercise partnering. She discovered that, with some tweaking, she could create an online forum where cancer survivors can sign on, specify criteria and find an ideal workout partner. Tentatively called "Connecting Peers in Motion", or CPM, the website idea received an innovation grant worth more than \$191,000 from the Canadian Cancer Society.

The website is a simple concept that has never been done before. By focusing on dyadic lifestyle activity intervention, or an exercise "buddy system", Sabiston will study the role that social support has in increasing physical activity among cancer survivors. The features of the CPM website will be tailored to accommodate partnered, rather than individual, exercise and include resources like a partner matching tool, a discussion forum and examples of exercises made for pairs.

"Social support is so important," said Sabiston. "The social dimension of exercise has more of an impact than the physical dimension in terms of improving quality of life. A quality match can not only impact one's fitness level, but also improve their life from a social and emotional point of view."

The study, which is an extension of prior research on the natural changes in physical activity among breast [cancer survivors](#), includes participants in Ontario and Quebec and will look at women of various ages and with different types of cancer. As participants use the website to find a workout partner, Sabiston's team will follow fifty pairs over a year to chart their progress. Through a combination of interviews,

questionnaires, web analytics and data from accelerometers such as the FitBit, Sabiston will determine what kind of effect social support has on physical activity.

While it is too early to know how or if participants will use the website's resources, Sabiston theorizes that sharing similar experiences with a proposed workout partner is a strong foundation for long-term change in physical activity.

"We know from research that people like to be with like-minded people, or people with some sort of similarity," said Sabiston. "If we can give them a similarity on multiple facets—having undergone cancer treatment, geographic area, similar fitness levels, etcera—I would imagine it would be even better in terms of fostering social support."

Sabiston's first step will be to create a website design based on feedback from focus groups. Once she has determined what participants would like to see in an online matching system, the CPM website will be built, tested and ready to launch later this spring. Sabiston theorizes that a site like CPM could have implications on [physical activity](#) long after her study concludes.

"We don't know how the site will turn out," said Sabiston. "But I do see a website like this helping many people with chronic illnesses gain the social support they need."

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Helping cancer survivors socialize and get exercise (2014, February 28) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-02-cancer-survivors-socialize.html>

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