

The failure of the couples gym membership: A self-control paradox?

May 21 2014

Couples often go grocery shopping together, make joint financial decisions, and choose entertainment options to share. Products and programs like shared gym memberships and joint credit cards are designed with couples in mind. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, how a couple succeeds or fails in these types of joint endeavors depends on their individual levels of self-control.

"We studied the role self-control plays in the joint decisions made by [couples](#)," write authors Hristina Dzhogleva (Boston College) and Cait Poynor Lamberton (University of Pittsburgh).

Through a series of studies involving both real-world couples and pairs of students in a laboratory setting, the authors observed that when both people in a [relationship](#) have high levels of self-control, they are better able to save more money, buy healthier foods, and stick to tasks longer than in a relationship where both partners have low levels of self-control.

Interestingly, when one person in a relationship has high self-control and the other has low self-control, the couple generally makes joint decisions similar to those where both partners have low self-control. They attribute this behavior pattern to the idea that people with high self-control tend to value the idea of maintaining the relationship. In other words, preserving harmony is more important than sticking to their guns.

These findings have real world implications for industries like banking and investments. For example, when working with couples of mixed self-

control, financial planners can better tailor their services to cede control of the retirement decisions to the spouse with lower self-control instead of encouraging joint decision making.

"Our findings might be particularly surprising to the person who incorrectly believes that making joint decisions with someone with more self-control will allow them to exhibit better restraint," the authors conclude. "As it turns out, [self-control](#) can't be outsourced to someone else."

More information: Hristina Dzhogleva and Cait Poynor Lamberton. "Should Birds of a Feather Flock Together? Understanding Self-Control Decisions in Dyads." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2014.

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: The failure of the couples gym membership: A self-control paradox? (2014, May 21) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

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