

# Tight-knit teammates may conform to each other's behavior

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Good relationships between teammates are essential to a team's success, but athletes who feel more closely connected to their teammates may also be more likely to be swayed by their fellow players' behavior.

In a study with NCAA athletes, researchers found that the more closely a player identified as being part of their team, the more likely they were to conform to their teammates' behavior. This was true for both risky and [positive behaviors](#).

Scott Graupensperger, a Penn State doctoral student in kinesiology, said the results suggest that social groups—including sports teams, sororities and clubs, for example—should find ways to help members feel like part of the group without being pressured to engage in negative behavior.

"If you can build the team's identity around positive behaviors, like volunteering, that could help members feel like part of the team in a positive way," Graupensperger said. "But if they're using [risky behaviors](#), like drinking every weekend, to help team members bond, then maybe that should be changed."

Graupensperger said that within groups, peer pressure tends to happen in subtle ways. For example, an [athlete](#) may not explicitly tell their teammates that they have to come out drinking, but if a player sees a fellow teammate they admire going out, they may feel internal pressure to conform to that norm.

Previous research has shown that while participating in sports during college is linked to many positive outcomes—like high graduation rates—student athletes are also more likely than their peers to engage in risky behaviors like drinking alcohol, doing drugs or lying about experiencing concussion symptoms so they can remain in play.

Graupensperger said he and the other researchers were interested in exploring which athletes may be more likely than their teammates to engage in risky behavior.

"Other researchers have looked into why college-aged athletes in general

conform to the norms of their group, or in other words, go along with what their teammates are doing, whether it's a negative or positive behavior," Graupensperger said. "I wanted to examine who on a team is more susceptible to conform to their teammates, and then start to find the process behind that."

The researchers recruited 379 division II and III NCAA student athletes from 23 teams across eight sports, including volleyball, soccer and lacrosse. Each team had between eight and forty teammates participating in the study.

At the beginning of the study, participants completed a questionnaire designed to measure their self-esteem as well as how closely they felt connected to their team and fellow players. It also asked them hypothetical questions about what they would do in various situations involving risky behaviors—like binge drinking—and positive behaviors—like volunteering.

Next, each participant viewed a presentation that displayed data about how their teammates responded to the hypothetical scenarios. But, unknown to the participant, the data had been manipulated to make it appear as though their teammates would be more likely to engage in risky or positive behavior than they actually reported.

"We wanted them to think that their teammates were engaging in riskier behavior than they actually were," Graupensperger said. "Then at the end of the session, participants had the chance to fill out a second questionnaire where they answered those same questions again. So we were looking at whose answers would go up in risky behaviors after seeing their teammates' responses."

After analyzing the data, the researchers found that participants who felt more closely connected to their teammates and identified strongly as part

of the [team](#) were more likely to engage in risky behaviors like binge drinking, marijuana use and hazing if they believed their teammates were already doing these activities.

Additionally, athletes who belonged to teams that as a whole reported being especially close were more likely to say they would conceal a concussion to remain in play.

Graupensperger said the findings—recently published in the *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*—suggest that teams should try to find positive ways to encourage bonding between players.

"The silver lining is that we did find that conforming does also work similarly for positive behaviors," Graupensperger said. "This finding also generalizes to behaviors like volunteering. So our challenge going forward would be to try to reduce pressures to conform to negative behaviors while still encouraging identifying closely with your teammates."

Blair Evans, Penn State assistant professor of kinesiology, said an important takeaway for him was that a wide range of behaviors were impacted by peer influence.

"My hope is to eventually find a way to 'flip these findings on their head,' so to speak," Evans said. "I'd like to see the role of the group be to prime conformity toward the types of [behavior](#) that we see as ideal in the sport, instead of [negative behaviors](#)."

In the future, Graupensperger said he plans to continue researching the types of people who are more susceptible to peer influence. He hopes to explore how social standing within a [group](#) affects peer influence, as well as whether groups that are more tightly knit as a whole are more susceptible to peer influence.

**More information:** Scott A. Graupensperger et al, Everyone Else Is Doing It: The Association Between Social Identity and Susceptibility to Peer Influence in NCAA Athletes, *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1123/jsep.2017-0339](https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.2017-0339)

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