

With weight loss being a common self-improvement goal does the 'buddy system' approach to weight loss work?

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One of the more common self-improvement goals, particularly in the winter months before "beach body" season, is to lose weight. How

people attempt to achieve their goals may vary by individual, but one of the more popular approaches is enrollment in a commercial weight loss program that uses a 'buddy system' approach to weight loss.

This is where the program's design is aimed to shape and optimize a sense of community among participants to generate a [positive impact](#) on the participants' individual [weight](#) loss efforts.

So, does it work?

According to some new research, it does, but possibly not in the ways most people assume.

The study to be published in the January edition of the INFORMS journal *Marketing Science* is titled "Inspiration from the 'Biggest Loser': Social Interactions in a Weight Loss Program," and is authored by Kosuke Uetake of Yale University, and Nathan Yang of McGill University in Montreal.

The study focused on how individuals lose weight when they participate in commercial weight loss programs. The researchers' analysis included a review of data from a large U.S.-based weight loss program with nearly 2 million participants. The program does not explicitly restrict certain food groups. Instead it adopts a calorie budgeting system that gives participants freedom to eat any type of food so long as they do not exceed their daily calorie budget.

"The use of peer effects, otherwise known as the 'buddy system,' can have an impact on weight loss," said Uetake. "But those peer dynamics can have either encouraging or discouraging effects, so it is important to know what works and what does not."

The researchers found that the showcasing of average weight loss among

a [peer group](#) can have a [negative effect](#) on an individual participant's actual weight loss. More specifically, when an individual compares himself or herself to their peer group, it can be discouraging.

On the other hand, when the results of top performers in the weight loss program are showcased, it can have an encouraging effect on other participants' individual weight loss. Individuals tend to be more inspired by those who have achieved the most significant results.

"Meeting leaders can use the weight loss successes of top performers to provide inspiration to the group, and perhaps avoid using the overall group's success as the benchmark," said Yang. "In addition, [weight loss program](#) leaders can design the composition of groups so that meeting participants benefit from the encouraging effects of top performers, while minimizing the discouraging effects of average performers."

More information: Kosuke Uetake et al. Inspiration from the "Biggest Loser": Social Interactions in a Weight Loss Program, *Marketing Science* (2019). [DOI: 10.1287/mksc.2018.1116](https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.2018.1116)

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