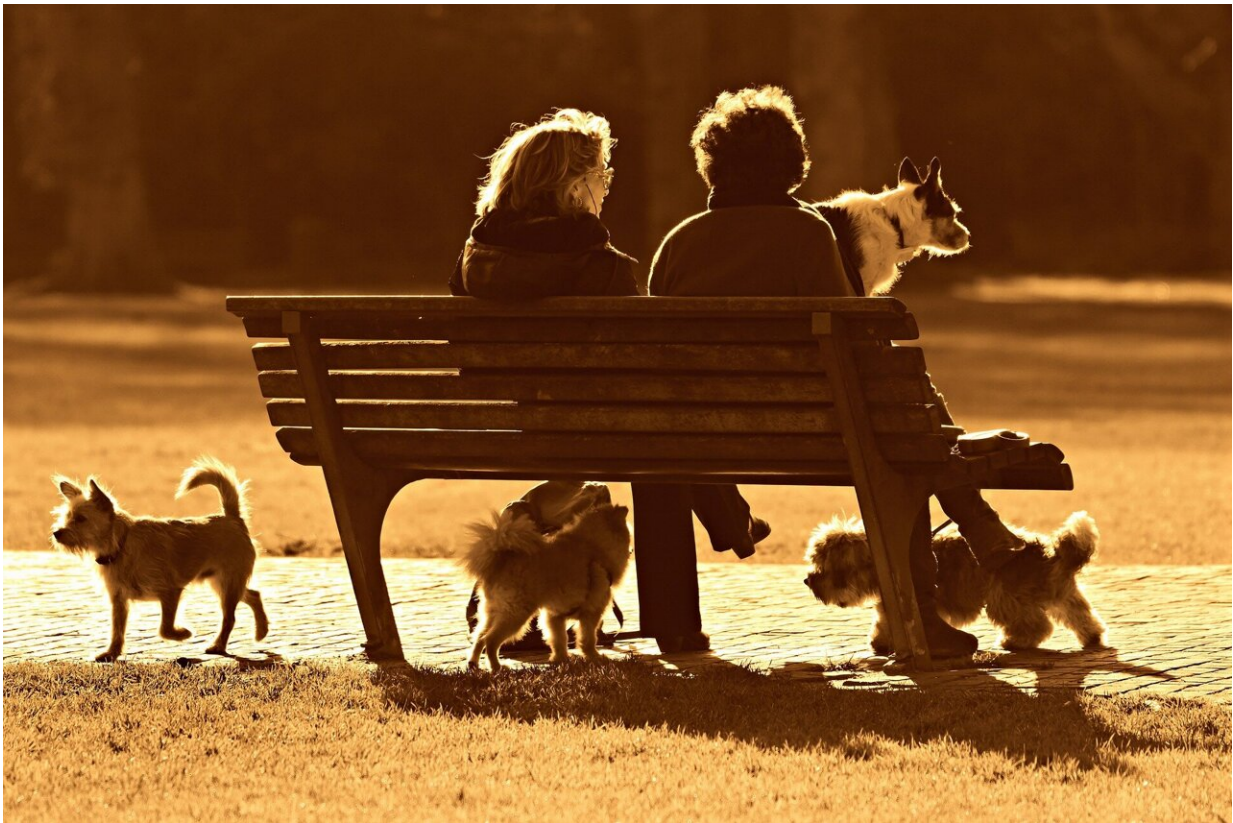


Family, friends can be more effective health role models than celebrities

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Adults in a study who said they looked to a person they knew as role model for good health—such as a friend, relative or health care provider—rather than a celebrity, had greater motivation to reach their

health goals. The women participants were also more likely than men to choose a personal role model rather than a celebrity. And the person most often named was their own mother.

"We know that parents have a huge influence on shaping people's health trajectories throughout their life just by teaching them about [physical fitness](#) and nutrition," said the lead author Nicole O'Donnell, a Washington State University communications researcher. "As this research shows, parents' influence does matter and it's long lasting, even well into adulthood."

For this study, published in the [journal *Health Communication*](#), researchers surveyed 404 adults who said they were inspired by health role models. The participants answered questions about their chosen role model as well as their motivation to improve their physical and mental health.

The findings revealed that "perceived similarity" was one of the biggest reasons for choosing a role model, which may be why the majority, about 64%, picked a family member, peer or acquaintance.

"If you see a friend get a gym membership, or decide to run a half marathon, you're able to follow their journey, and you also have similar resources to be able to do the same thing," O'Donnell said. "Celebrities often have personal chefs and trainers—they have a lot of resources that we don't."

The women in the study were also about 2.5 times more likely to choose a personal role model than men, though many participants of both genders still chose celebrities. Among all celebrity role models, the most often chosen was The Rock followed by LeBron James, Tom Brady and Michelle Obama.

While personal role models had a stronger influence, the authors noted that [celebrity](#) role models also had a positive impact on motivation. How they talk about health can be critical, O'Donnell pointed out.

"When celebrities and influencers talk about health, it's important they also share their challenges and how they overcame them," she said. "For instance, The Rock's openness about depression helps to destigmatize [mental health](#) struggles and makes him a great role model."

The research also revealed that [social media](#) had an amplifying effect.

"Our results found that following any sort of role model on social media will help boost your motivation," said co-author Christina Nickerson, a WSU doctoral candidate. "It shows there can be a lot of benefits just from thinking about what a role model is to you. Who do you want to be like whether you know that person in real life or not?"

The findings did contain a potential warning about following a role model's behaviors too closely. Some participants indicated their role models were extreme in achieving their [health goals](#), such as severely restricting their diet or over-exercising, but they still found them inspiring.

Overall, the study pointed to advantages of having a role model for health. In the initial intake, the researchers identified a group of people who said they did not have a healthy role model, and that group reported lower mental and physical health than those who did.

"Look to those around for people who inspire you," O'Donnell advised. "It's a form of social support that we often overlook because we think of role models as something for kids. But this study, along with others, has shown that role models are important across the person's lifespan, so we should seek them out."

More information: Nicole H. O'Donnell et al, Health Motivation in the Influencer Era: Analyzing Entertainment, Personal, and Social Media Role Models, *Health Communication* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2024.2346679](https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2024.2346679)

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