



Choose Your Supporters Wisely

Your mother was right. Choose your friends and associates wisely as their choices have a deep effect on you for better and for worse. And if you can't choose the people in your life (such as family members and co-workers) then at least know about the subtle yet strong force their moods and lifestyle may have on you.

Beyond peer pressure

A theory about the power of social networks takes the concept of peer pressure a step further. Researchers Nicholas Christakis, MD, and James Fowler, PhD, have found that:

- Certain moods such as loneliness can be contagious
- People show “flocking behavior” when it comes to things such as drinking, smoking, and overeating

But don't despair—it's not just the bad habits that spread. Good moods and choices to do things such as stop smoking are also contagious. According to Christakis and Fowler, if one person in a small firm stops smoking, his or her co-workers with the habit have a 34 percent chance of also quitting.

The ripple effect—to three degrees of separation

What's really “new” about this research is that it's not just your best friend who can sway your moods and choices, but anyone in your wider circle stretching out three degrees. That means that a friend of a friend of a friend's decision to



stop smoking may move you to stop smoking as information is shared along communication lines.

On a similar note, Sheldon Cohen, PhD, an expert on social networks and health, has found that a person's “natural networks” of family, friends, co-workers, and community are more useful in influencing good health and habits than the help one might get from strangers in, for example, an issues-based support group.

According to Cohen's co-researcher, Sarah Pressman, "Social ties are important to health, in part because they may encourage good health behaviors such as eating, sleeping, and exercising well, and they may buffer the stress response to negative events."

Cohen stresses, however, that it's the quality of a person's "social ties" that have the greatest impact. In an American Psychological Association address on the topic, Cohen said that if your relationships in your "natural network" are good, then you will benefit more from those influences than you would from a support group of strangers, with one notable exception: If your relations with family and friends are prone to conflict, then you might do better with a group of strangers working on similar issues.

How to benefit from "natural" social networks

All this research is not an excuse to dump friends with flaws (unless they're truly toxic). Instead, the challenge is to build better relationships within your natural network and find something positive to do with friends that doesn't involve unhealthy choices.

- Make sure you have a strong social network. Many studies show that people with friends and active social schedules live longer and enjoy better mental health.
- Ask for advice. Always wondered how a co-worker stays slim? People love to share their stories.
- Exercise with friends. Working out with a friend gives you a burst of brain chemical changes similar to the "high" felt when laughing or dancing with others, according to a University of Oxford study. You're also more likely to stick to an exercise program if you do it with a

friend, according to a University of Connecticut study.

- Don't tune out the power of online friends. Christakis and Fowler studied Facebook and found lifestyle similarities among those who tagged pictures of each other.
- Notice your habits and moods and try to understand their influences. Gravitate toward those who instill healthy habits. Avoid negative people who routinely bring you down.
- Plan substitute activities for problem behaviors such as smoking or eating too much. Instead of a group smoke break, take a walk with someone. Bring fruit to a meeting instead of doughnuts.
- Pick up a new hobby or take classes as a way to make new friends.
- Celebrate lifestyle improvements with others.
- Remember that your choices also have an effect on others. As Gandhi said: "Be the change you want to see in the world." And pass it on.



By Amy Fries

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