Connected Commons

LEADERSHIP

INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING

Physical Health is Not a Solo Sport

For better health, don't just change your workout—change your network

Rob Cross Jean Singer Karen Dillon

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About the Connected Commons

The Connected Commons, a consortium of major employers and people leaders co-managed by renowned thought leader Rob Cross and human capital research firm Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp), applies organizational network research to impact business performance, workforce collaboration, and individual well-being.

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Physical health is not a solo sport

Have you ever set a New Year's resolution to get into better shape, only to see it fizzle by February? If so, you're not alone. Each year, more than half the US population makes a New Year's resolution, with exercise and weight loss topping the list. Eighty-eight percent or more of them fail, the large majority by the second week in February.[1,2] The usual response is to blame yourself—too weak-willed, not enough focus—or chalk it up to the demands of life. It may come as a relief, then, to know that maybe the problem isn't you. Even an intense personal commitment to getting your health back on track may not be enough to actually achieve it. What you need is to have the right people around you. In our research, we listened to people describing times in their lives when they were able to change course from unhealthy routines to healthy ones; what we heard were stories not of stunning self-discipline or steely determination but of connections with others who supported their journey to physical health.

Our research is clear: **Improving and maintaining physical health is not a solo sport.** We found specific ways that connections with others help to initiate a healthier trajectory, to create "stickiness," so it's not abandoned when work becomes pressing, and importantly, to create benefits of identity, friendship and belonging that embed new health behaviors in our lives.

Robin's story

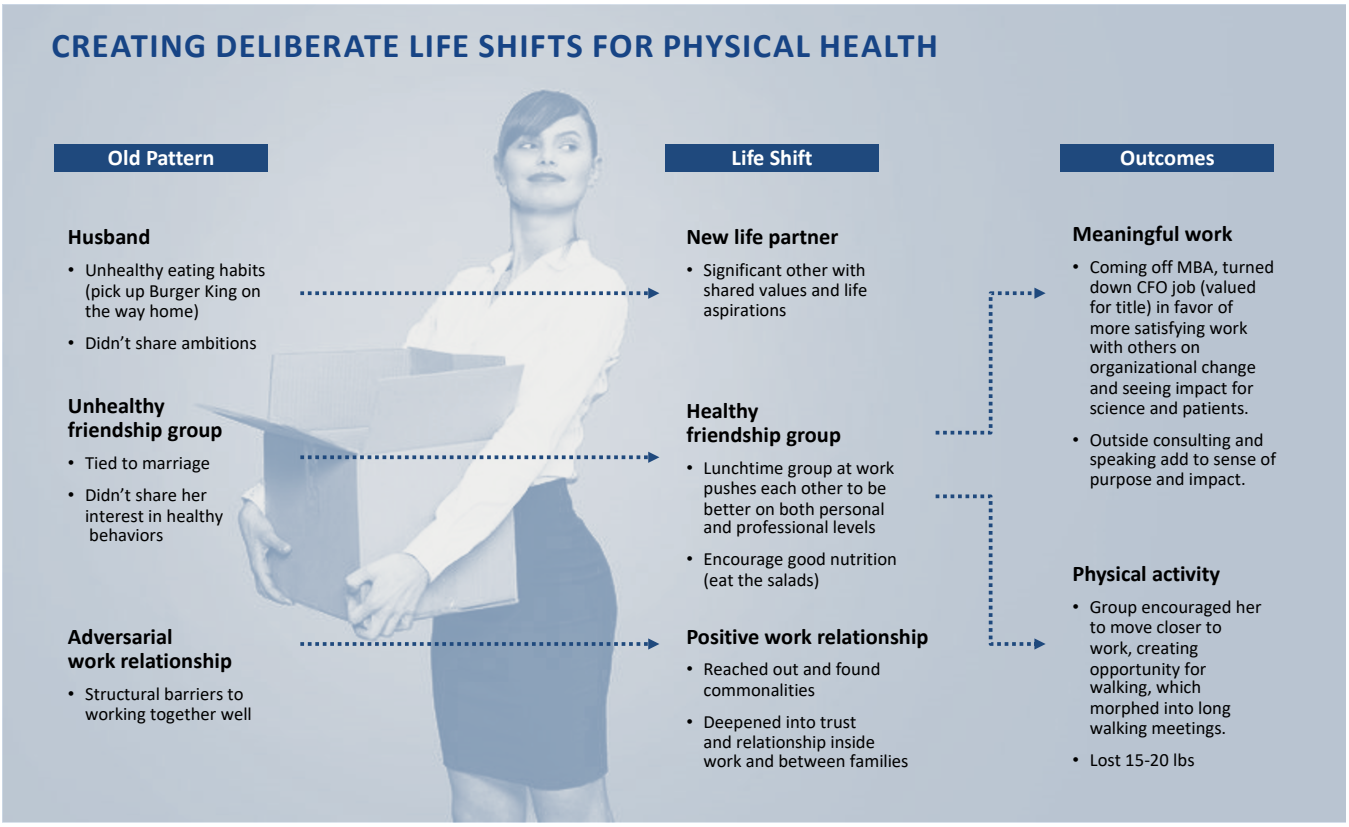
Consider the story of Robin, a leader at a major research institution. She told us how her physical health had hit a low point six or seven years ago, when she was finishing up her MBA. The MBA was a weekend program, and between studying and a full-time job with over an hour-long commute each way, she had little time or energy for exercise. Robin would drive home from her long commute, and her husband, who had no interest in cooking, would say, "Just pick up Burger King on the way home." Exhausted much of the time, she simply agreed. And so, they ate fast food. A lot. Once active and vibrant, Robin was aware that she had fallen into some destructive habits, but since neither her husband nor their mutual friends were particularly interested in exercise and nutrition, her lifestyle was pulled in their direction. They weren't bad people, but they didn't share her professional ambition or her desire for a healthy lifestyle. As a result, she found herself getting more and more out of shape—and more miserable in the process.

What helped Robin finally turn things around? It wasn't a New Year's resolution, but simply the slow recognition that she needed a shift in her social network. There was a certain dissonance between how Robin saw herself and the lifestyles of the people around her. It began to dawn on her that maybe she wasn't in a good place. "I just felt like the people I was hanging out with weren't the best for me," she recalled. At the same time, the development of friendships with people at work who shared similar goals and aspirations began to play a critical role in changing her trajectory. Little by little, in moments of camaraderie, those friends nudged Robin towards an exercise routine that worked for her. When she confided in her colleagues that she was going through a divorce, they encouraged her to move into the city, cutting her commute time and adding more time to exercise. One connection, a supplier she had been working closely with on a project, knew they were both trying to find time for more exercise in their day. She suggested a new approach: "Start walking and then call me. We'll walk together while we work." Walking meetings soon became the format of all their conversations, and it would give them a good hour of exercise. Without extraordinary effort, they were getting work done and Robin was using her time efficiently. More importantly, she was starting to drive a healthier lifestyle.

Meanwhile, Robin was working closely with four or five colleagues, and they had so much going on together, they decided to form a lunch group. Sometimes they would work over lunch, but sometimes they would just chat. Their conversation easily flowed from work to the ongoing set of personal events in their lives—marriage, divorces, family—and they bonded while sharing the highs and lows. Despite the demands of work, they made it a priority to hold that hour of the day open. Sometimes they even allowed themselves a little wiggle room for more bonding: "Okay, it's a Friday afternoon. We're going for a drink and it's going to be a two-hour lunch where we can laugh and escape, or just be glad we got through the week." The members of the group would exert subtle

peer pressure on each other to do better in all aspects of their lives, both professionally and personally. "We were pushing each other to eat a little better, make sure we were eating salads and that sort of thing," Robin told us. "I lost, probably, fifteen or twenty pounds within six months."

Robin now has a new partner who is a better match for her and a strong positive influence on her health. She told us: "I can't even remember the last time I had fast food. It was such a simple answer at the time. I was so stressed out and busy that it was easier to make bad choices then." But now, she says, she has a wall of support: "Even if I had that moment where I was like, 'Hmmm, I really want McDonald's tonight,' my significant other would say, 'No, we're not doing that. Let's make something better.' It's simple stuff like that, but the effect of the support is real."



Changes occurred in small moments but added up over time to a herculean accomplishment for Robin: she lost over 15 pounds, stuck with a walking routine, improved the nutritional quality of her food choices, and formed authentic connections. She became a different person in the process—one she likes a whole lot better.

Robin's challenges are not unique—the reality for many is that our physical health will decline as life's burdens wear us down. But Robin's experience is proof that we don't have to accept that fate. Our research says creating a positive health trajectory is entirely possible if we understand where the best support and motivation can come from. So, while conventional prescriptions for health turnarounds would have us do things like make a detailed plan, start with small steps, or keep a resolution journal, they often miss the important point that **our health decisions and behaviors are embedded in our relationships with others**. In our interviews, we heard time and again from people who had turned things around through a network of personal relationships that supported their health goals.

This makes a lot of sense. Research has consistently found that relationships make a difference in our health: they impact our fitness, susceptibility to disease, and longevity in several different ways. What network studies show—and what most people miss about building a healthy lifestyle—is that it's not just a matter of self-discipline. Our physical health relies profoundly on the network of people around us, through the physiological responses they trigger, the norms they set, and the behaviors they enable.

Let's look at what some of the prior research tells us about why these relationships are so important.

How Social Connections Impact Our Health

If you wanted to become healthier, where would you start? Would you pick a diet to follow, create an exercise routine, or improve your network? While a diet or an exercise routine might seem the obvious choice, you might change your mind after seeing the research on social connection and health. Studies consistently find that people who have satisfying, close relationships with family, friends, and community are healthier and live longer.[3,4] At the same time, we know that loneliness kills. People who are socially isolated are less happy, their health declines earlier in mid-life, their brain functioning declines sooner, and they live shorter lives than people who are not lonely.[5] Social isolation is so bad for our health, it has been compared to the risk of smoking 15 cigarettes a day.[4,6]

In one study that tracked 7,000 men and women in Alameda County, CA, over the course of nine years, researchers found that people who were disconnected from others were roughly three times more likely to die than the people who had high levels of social integration. Notably, these findings were independent of factors such as age, gender, or health behaviors. In fact, people with well-integrated social networks and *unhealthy* lifestyles, such as smoking, obesity or lack of exercise, lived *longer* than people with poor social ties but more healthy habits. Those who can maintain both social connections and healthy lifestyle are in the best position of all. People with good health practices *and* well-integrated social networks lived the longest.[7]

Why would our social networks be such a powerful driver of health and longevity? One reason has to do with the **direct effect that positive social interaction has on our biology**. Supportive interactions with others benefit our immune, endocrine, and cardiovascular functions, and reduce the wear and tear of stress on our systems.[8,9] On the other hand, even a low quantity or poor quality of social contact has been associated with inflammatory reactions and impaired immune response, both of which increase the risk of disease and early mortality.[3,10,11]

To test the relationship between personal connectivity and immune functioning, one group of researchers investigated the impact of social connection on susceptibility to the common cold. They recruited a group of volunteers to report on the diversity of their social ties across twelve types of relationships (e.g., marriage, parents, friends, co-workers, community groups) and then receive nasal drops that infected them with the common cold. The researchers discovered that people with more types of social ties tended to be less susceptible to colds, and the more diverse their networks, the more their susceptibility declined. The impact was striking: people with the fewest types of social ties were more than four times as likely to come down with the common cold as those with the most diverse networks.[12]

A chronic lack of social contact sends distress signals to our systems, and elevates levels of stress and inflammation. Researcher Steve Cole at the UCLA School of Medicine studied the white blood cells of very lonely men and women, and found the cells to be in a state of high alert, as if they were being assaulted by disease. According to Cole, "We think that human psychology interprets loneliness as a kind of threat, and that this kind of inflammatory response is a biological reflex that gets triggered whenever we experience threat or uncertainty."[13] Chronic inflammation is linked to conditions such as heart disease, arthritis and type 2 diabetes, and indeed, studies find that people with a low quantity or quality of social ties suffer from a host of inflammation-driven conditions such as cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, cancer, and slower wound healing.[11,14,15] Conversely, supportive social ties appear to trigger beneficial physiological responses such as reductions in blood pressure, heart rate, and stress hormones.[16]

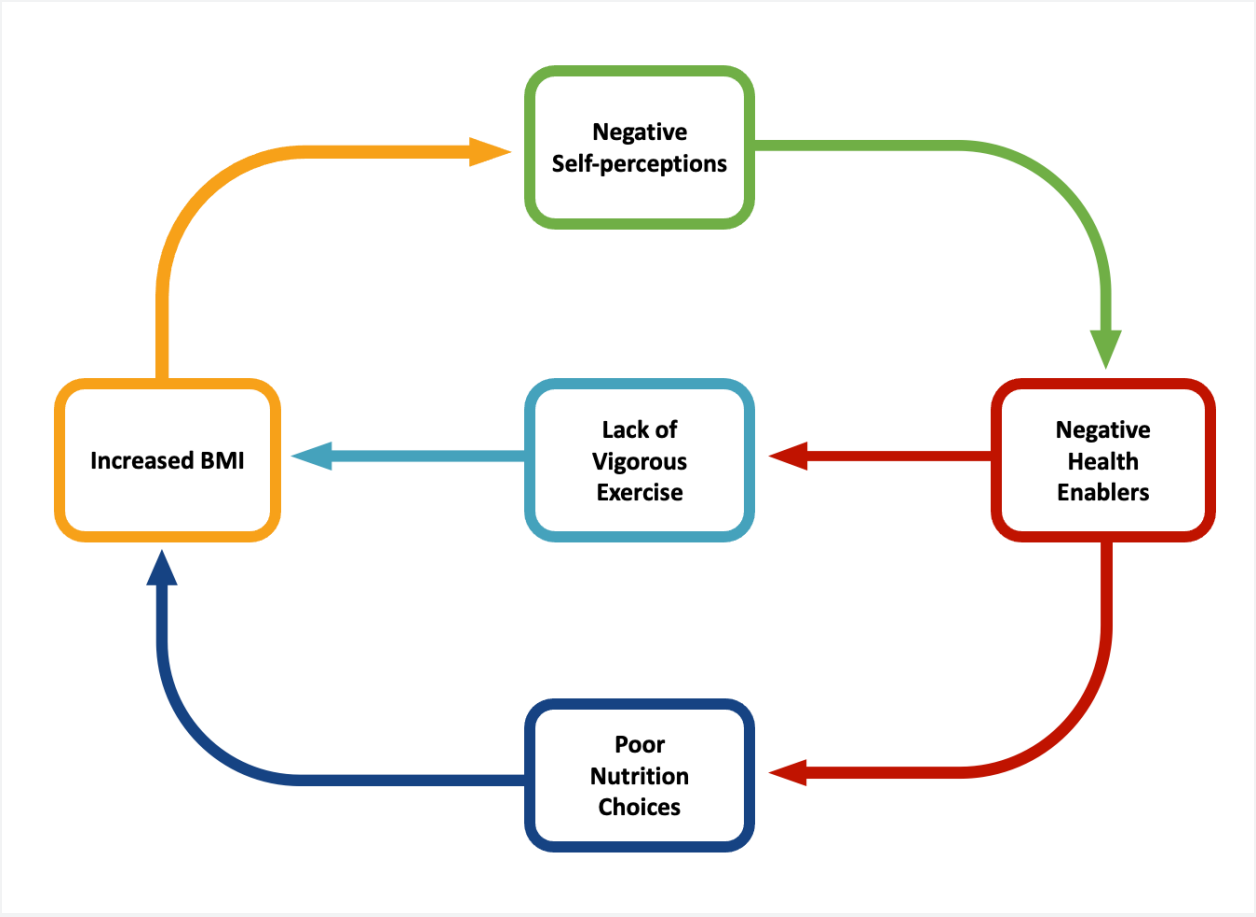
In addition to altering physiology, our relationships with others also impact physical health through a process called **social contagion**. If the people we're connected to become obese, we're more likely to become obese. If they stop smoking, we're more likely to stop smoking. Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler observed this phenomenon in a series of studies, drawing on more than 30 years of health and network data from the Framingham Heart Study.[17–20] In each case, they found that our health behaviors and emotional states are influenced by the networks of people around us. For example, one study showed that people who had a friend who become obese in a given time frame were 57% more likely to become obese themselves. And it's not just direct contacts that matter; it's the larger network extending out three degrees of separation. What that means is if a friend of a friend of a friend becomes obese, it can still affect you. In addition to obesity and smoking cessation, the studies found social contagion at work in the spread of drug use, alcohol consumption, and both happiness and depression.

According to Christakis and Fowler, the mechanism of social contagion is not homophily—the tendency for people to associate with others similar to themselves—and their research findings held regardless of whether people were in geographic proximity to each other or far out of range of face-to-face contact. Therefore, "contemporaneous events," which, in the case of obesity, would be things like eating together at fast food restaurants, could not be the driver. The researchers found that social contagion is driven instead by the way our connections with others change our norms. For example, connections with others who are obese create a standard in which obesity and related health behaviors such as overeating and inactivity, are more acceptable, reducing the inhibitions against these types of unhealthy lifestyles. When the norms displayed by the people in our networks shift, our behavior is likely to shift as well.

BEWARE OF NEGATIVE CYCLES

A study by Rob Cross and Andrew Parker[22] shows how relationships we have with negative health enablers can create a reinforcing cycle driving increases in body weight. In the schematic below, relationships with people who create stress or who encourage us to make poor choices regarding health behaviors such as diet or exercise are associated with over-eating and the purchase of fast food. As these "negative health ties" increase, the likelihood of engaging in vigorous exercise also declines. Not surprisingly, when people make poor nutrition choices and aren't exercising, body weight (measured by BMI) increases.

But the study shows another important factor at work: self-perceptions. Increases in BMI can drive negative self-perceptions, which in turn are related to engagement with negative health networks. Taken together, the associations among networks, behaviors and self-perception create a reinforcing cycle that can be difficult to break out of. The study highlights why changing behavior is difficult without changing the relationships and interactions in our lives.



A third way that connections impact our health is by **enabling positive health behaviors**. A spouse or partner, for example, might enable healthy eating by helping to cook nutritious meals. A friend might help get us in shape by convincing us to sign up with the local cycling club. Enabling of healthy behaviors tends to take two forms:

- *Emotional support*, in which the enabler shows empathy and concern, for example, understanding that it's hard to get up at 5 a.m. to go running, but then encouraging you to persevere and celebrating when you do.
- *Practical support,* where the enabler helps to make the healthy activity possible, for example, by driving you to a health screening or watching the kids so you can go for a workout.

Not all enabling is positive. Old drinking buddies may be dear to our hearts but bad for our health, and our social connections can enable a variety of unhealthy behaviors such as excessive alcohol consumption, drug use, overeating, or binge-watching TV. Whether positive or negative, however, enablers have an impact by facilitating and encouraging certain behaviors in a broad range of circumstances including exercise, nutrition, and sleep.

Given how important our social connections are to our heath, it's of great concern that the world is trending towards increased social isolation. According to the General Social Survey, which for over thirty years has assessed social trends in the U.S., the size of Americans' core discussion networks has declined by about a third, from about three confidants in 1985 to about two in 2004. In the more recent survey, people most commonly said they had *not a single person* in whom they could confide; in 1985, the most common number was three. While both kin and non-kin relationships were lost, the greater decline was in non-kin ties. What this implies is a loss of the diverse relationships outside of family—ones we get through hobbies, voluntary associations, and neighborhoods—and an increasing dependence on life partners and parents.

People are feeling the impact of this decline in social connection: a study led by the health insurer Cigna found that more than three in five Americans are lonely, and more and more people are reporting that they feel left out, poorly understood, and lacking in companionship.[21] The issue has raised alarms around the world, and has prompted governments in Great Britain and Japan to establish ministries of loneliness.

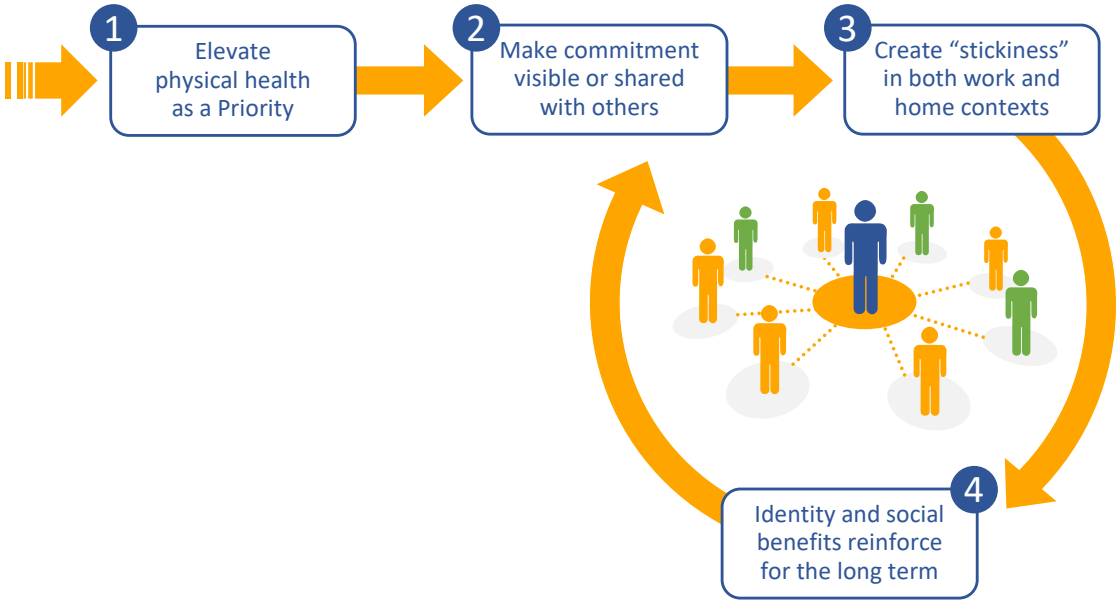
For connections that impact our health in particular, we tend to see a decline as we enter middle age, a time of life when maintaining a healthy, active lifestyle becomes all the more important. One study of networks and health shows an inflection point at age 40, where people start to become less engaged with supportive health networks; that is, they become less connected to people who provide information and motivation around physical activity and nutrition, and who participate with them in activities that improve their health.[22]

In the face of trends towards declining size and diversity of social networks, how do we create and maintain the relationships we need for physical health? As part of a research program involving dozens of top-tier companies and based on interviews with hundreds of people across industries such as technology, life science, finance. and manufacturing, we sought to understand how people engage with networks to support exercise and good nutrition. In particular, we investigated how people transition from "unhealthy" networks that either promote unhealthy behaviors or fail to support healthy ones, to "healthy" networks in which the people around them exert positive influence. What we discovered was not just how people accomplished these transitions but how the networks built in conjunction with physical health ended up creating new identity and social benefits more broadly for people's work and personal lives.

Driving Positive Health Trajectories through Relationships

In our interviews, we asked people to reflect on times in their lives when they were becoming healthier—whatever that meant to them personally—and then to focus not just on what they were doing, but also on the role of the connections around them that enabled this positive stretch. We heard how relationships played a role in undertaking new fitness routines or healthier eating, but what we were most interested in understanding was how they were able to help those new routines stick. How did the very busy people we spoke with successfully integrate new habits into their lives and avoid backsliding?

We often heard a sequence of events that followed the pattern below:



Clint's story

As an example, consider Clint, a senior leader in a manufacturing firm, who decided after thyroid surgery that he wanted to improve his health. He began walking, which felt good and gave him a sense of getting back into shape. One day, he encountered a friend who had taken up running, and the friend told him all about his training regimen and how he got started. That random encounter became an inspirational moment. Clint had been a runner when he was younger, and hearing the friend's story gave Clint the motivation to try it again. Following his surgery, the direction and motivation from his interaction with a friend helped him make his own physical health a genuine priority.

From there, Clint's commitment to running took shape and picked up momentum. He started doing 5Ks, and when he did, he would run into people he knew. That, in itself, helped keep him motivated. "Once you run, with social media and everything, you find you have other friends who run. And then you do 5Ks and you run into people you know who run 5Ks, and I just naturally cultivated a great friendship group." Clint wasn't into group running but would find a friend here or a co-worker there, go out with one or two for weekend or evening runs, and eventually, they would start training together for races. Running became a visible part of his life, shared with others who had similar interests.

For Clint, it wasn't a matter of competing against other people; it was more about accomplishment and his personal journey of getting healthy again. Clint would post his runs on fitness apps and found virtual friends, texting with three or four people on the leader board and joking about who was doing well or putting in more miles.

Clint had the good fortune of a supportive family to help him stick with his new-found interest. He and his wife would plan out his training schedule so he could do it around family commitments, and he often got up at 5 a.m. so he could run and still be home when the kids woke up. The whole family would come to his races and spread out along the course so they could cheer him on throughout. Before long, his wife and his two oldest children began running as well, all of them mutually supporting each other. Connections with other runners and the support of his family helped to create stickiness, so that Clint couldn't just back off without other people noticing and getting him back on track.

What had started as a way to recuperate from surgery became a source of identity and social benefits. He looked forward to commuting to races with his fellow runners and the social connection made even the toughest runs easier for him. Finishing those challenging runs and races solidified his view of himself as an achiever, and the camaraderie helped him to keep pushing himself.

Clint even found kindred spirits at work who shared his enthusiasm for running, and it opened up a whole new world of social interaction in the workplace, connecting with people around their common interest in running. It gave him off-task things to talk about with colleagues, building the kind of trust that is only gained from knowing people on a personal level. He deepened relationships in ways that helped facilitate working together and broadened his relationships as he gained better understanding of people different from himself on many levels—but who shared a common bond over running. None of this would have happened without his reaching out to others around running.

As was true for most of the people we interviewed, Clint's journey to better health took place in stages, not in one fell swoop. There are specific actions that Clint (and others) took that helped ensure that he was successful in the long run. Let's take a deeper look at how each stage in the trajectory towards better health works.

1 Physical Health Elevated as a Priority

Throughout our interviews, we found positive health trajectories often started in a manner similar to Clint's, with a health concern brought to the forefront and an encounter with someone who creates motivation or a final nudge that gets us committed. Health concerns we heard about ran the gamut from high blood pressure to feeling sluggish from drinking too much, to visiting the doctor and being shocked at the number on the scale. One interviewee shared with us how his father had passed away after five years of illness, and how he didn't want his own sedentary lifestyle to eventually make him a burden to his children

The nudge from other people is a critical part of this process. Connections often helped convert an abstract idea of improving personal health into a tangible and purposeful set of actions. Anyone can provide that final nudge—family, friends, co-workers—and it can often be the result of a random encounter. Stacie, a tech executive, described how a colleague started bringing lunch to work every day, and she literally saw that colleague shrink. It became inspiring for Stacie and others: "We watched her for 10 hours a day and worked with her for 10 hours a day, and she gained energy. She had a smile on her face more often. We knew she was doing something right, and we definitely were interested in copying whatever it was that she was doing successfully." Stacie and her co-workers would stop this woman in the break room and ask her what she was eating, where she got her recipes and how she was doing it. From then on, people on the floor would share with each other, "Oh, I brought my lunch today and here's what I'm having." And then another colleague might say, "Oh, gosh, you reminded me I forgot my salad in the refrigerator this morning," or, "Gosh, I'm going to think differently about bringing my lunch a couple days a week." That one woman helped an entire group of co-workers elevate their own nutrition and weight loss as a priority.

Other interviewees described various people who gave them the final nudge: a mentor who ran marathons as a hobby and inspired one interviewee to start running; a colleague who offered to go walking together at lunch time; or a spouse's co-worker who invited another interviewee to go on bike rides together. Inspiration can also come from negative sources—the people we *don't* want to be like—such as the manager who becomes overweight and lethargic from too many business lunches or the colleagues who look exhausted and frazzled at work. In many cases, the combination of a new health priority and a social interaction work together to create the incentive for taking the first step.

Three things you can do to find motivation:

- ☐ **Think about where your health habits and fitness are now**, compared to where they used to be. If they have declined, consider what the implications are for the future—for yourself and your loved ones—if you don't turn them around.
- ☐ **Look around for people who are successfully integrating healthy behaviors** into equally hectic lives. Notice what they're doing and how it's affecting their energy and mood.
- ☐ **Look around for role models of people you *don't* want to be** like, and consider that as a source of motivation.

2 Commitment made visible or shared with others

German writer Johann Goethe famously said: "The moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves, too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred." What Goethe left out, however, is that providence is more likely to move when your commitment is made visible to others. When family, friends or co-workers know that we're working on a health-related goal, they can rally to our side. And in their presence, we are more likely to make more healthy decisions. Goals that we keep private, that don't see the light of day, don't have the chance of generating this type of support. Even more powerful can be a shared goal committed to along with others. Repeatedly we saw in our interviews how people who made their goals visible or made collective goals with others tended to reap the benefits of both emotional and practical support. Sometimes these were significant endeavors like running a first marathon. But just as often they were small commitments like walking together or eating better that yielded the same kinds of benefits.

Freida, for example, committed with a group of work colleagues to doing a 100K walk in 24 hours. The training was arduous, and she needed to dedicate substantial blocks of time every week to build up her endurance for the event. The group of sixteen co-workers created a groundswell of excitement that helped her to stay focused and motivated to overcome hurdles that would otherwise stand in the way of her training. The biggest hurdle, of course, was time, especially with two small children at home. Fortunately, her husband was part of this group, too, so they worked out a plan whereby they would tag-team child care. Each Sunday, Frieda would go out on her own and walk 30 miles or whatever the training required, then the next Sunday, her husband would train while she stayed home.

We heard a range of stories about how visible or shared commitment to a health goal brought a variety of resources and support to bear. One executive described how she joined "W" (formerly known as Weight Watchers) with a group of friends rather than on her own. Because everyone knew they had a common goal, they shifted eating habits as a group, and get-togethers that normally would center around drinking and platters of meat and cheese became focused on veggie platters and lighter beverages. Another senior leader proposed to his family going meatless, and everyone joined in to make it work. Spouses or partners who know each other's exercise goals often play a key role in accommodating morning schedules or simply saying, "Hey, I know you've been missing your workout. Let's commit for this weekend." Many people also made commitments through virtual connections, such as those formed through Peloton or Nike Training Club. People would set goals together, cheer each other on, celebrate successes and even meet sometimes in person. Whether virtual or in-real-life, what makes these types of support possible is the visibility or sharing of goals.

Three things you can do to be public with your goals:

- ☐ **Casually share health goals with others** who might be interested or have similar goals. This could be co-workers, friends, neighbors, family. or even a virtual forum. Note where you get positive reactions you can build on.
- ☐ **Lay out your goals for family members**, and brainstorm how everyone can help.
- ☐ **Turn a solo effort into a group endeavor** by teaming up with others, such as running a race for charity with co-workers, or joining a club or team.

3 Stickiness created in contexts of work and home

Though some may find it challenging to get going with the initial push to recommit to health or make a visible commitment, the problem for most people is sticking to a new regimen in the face of unrelenting demands of work and home. This is why so many of us give up our New Year's resolutions by February. But our interviewees who described successful health trajectories did something that many people don't. They found ways to create *stickiness*—structures around them that ensured they would adhere to their goals even when they were busy or tired, or feeling pressure to let work take priority.

Many of our interviewees used a strategy of creating **non-negotiable time** for physical exercise. James, for example, had made up his mind to rekindle his passion for basketball and joined a team of men his age playing every Thursday from 9 to 11 p.m. at the local church. He held that time sacred and would tell his assistant, "You can fly me wherever we need to go for business, but have me home on Thursday nights so that I can make basketball."

Sometimes, however, the calendar alone isn't enough to make us stick to a commitment—we also need a personal nudge. Peggy, a senior HR leader, made sure she had 30 minutes scheduled each day to walk the trails around the company campus. At the appointed time, her assistant would march into her office and say, "Okay, time to get out on your walk," and off

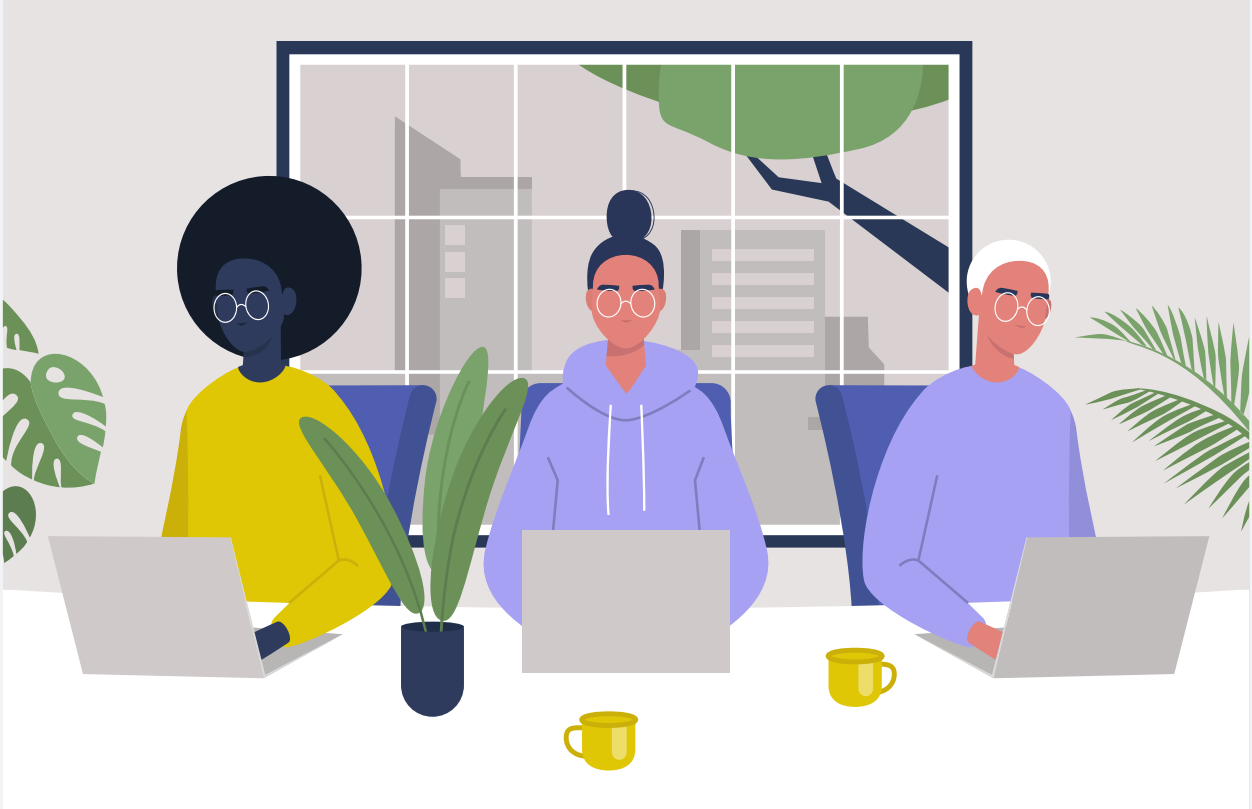
RELATIONSHIPS AFFECT A BROAD RANGE OF HEALTH BEHAVIORS

Our interviewees most commonly focused on how relationships with others helped build physical health in the areas of exercise and nutrition. But the same principles also held for a smaller group that focused on wins in terms of sleep, reasonable work hours, preventive care, or stress management.

Sleep, for example, is critical to health, affecting memory, mood, and cognitive functioning,[23] and a lack of sleep has been linked to health conditions such as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and obesity.[24] Yet more than one in three Americans don't get the recommended seven hours of sleep a night.[25] Family members can influence the behaviors that will help us to get a good night's sleep. They can do things like agree collectively to have "screens off" at 9 p.m., eat together earlier in the evening, or make sure adults avoid alcohol for several hours before bed. One of our interviewees described how she was having difficulty sleeping and would wake up and look at her phone, until her partner encouraged her to unplug and charge the phone in a different room. After that, her sleep improved.

Work hours also have a link to health and can be highly influenced by the networks around us. In one study, people who worked ten hours per day were 45% more likely to have suffered a heart attack than those working eight hours per day.[26] Long work hours have also been related to hypertension, anxiety and depression.[27] People often work long hours because the prevailing culture sees it as a mark of commitment and loyalty, a sign of toughness and strength, or an indication of how important, indeed indispensable, we are. In his book, "Dying for a Paycheck," Jeffrey Pfeffer quotes an employee describing the one-upmanship in his company: "When I started there, I would come in and say, 'I got four hours of sleep last night.' My boss, the VP of Finance, would tell me, 'I got three.'"[27]

Think about how the expectations and behaviors of people around you in a broad range of health areas affect your own behaviors. Can you talk with people in your life about changing some norms (e.g., nighttime rituals) or surround yourself with people who have different values and expectations (e.g., around work hours) that would positively impact your health?



Peggy would go. But then she got a new assistant who didn't take it upon herself to enforce walking time, and Peggy found herself using that open slot to catch up on emails. She needed the combination of a schedule and a bit of personal prodding to keep her on track.

In successful health trajectories, stickiness is often created through a **sense of accountability towards others**. James, the basketball player mentioned earlier, knows that his teammates will give him grief if he says, "Look, I'm feeling kind of tired this week." They'll say, "Well, that's great. But you can still come out. Stop being a baby." James likewise dishes it out to his teammates when they're tempted to ease off. Stacie, who went from a sedentary lifestyle to running marathons, described the social pressure that's formed when one goes through grueling training sessions with others: "You can't be the one person who drops out with a lame excuse. I felt the peer pressure and it was enjoyable because you're all in this misery together." What we won't do for ourselves, we will often do for the people around us—with the fortunate result that our networks help us to show up and keep trying even when it's hard. A sense of accountability to others was a factor for people who were on teams, training with others for events, joining a weight loss program, or just going for regular walks with a friend.

In some cases, stickiness derived from the **caring and camaraderie** of taking on a health challenge with a group. Sarah, for example, joined a weight loss group along with several people from her workplace. The group supported Sarah's success in ways that the program alone could not have. Not only could they help each other with tips and tricks, they formed a support system outside of the scheduled meetings, and a daily sense of togetherness and purpose, both in losing weight and helping each other. In Sarah's words, "it was more about the motivation and the camaraderie, that there were people who were rooting for you and wanted you to be successful, and who knew that you wanted the same thing for them. These are people who genuinely cared about me being successful."

At home, family members often helped by **reminding our interviewees of how good physical health made them feel**. Family members can often see us more clearly than we see ourselves, and help us wake up to the fact that not only does physical health make us feel better, it makes us better in our roles as family members, providers, and friends. James recalled that his wife would tell him, "You're getting out of shape. When you get out of shape, you're grumpy. Go solve this problem because it doesn't help in any aspect of your life." Sarah's husband would remind her that when she doesn't get daily exercise, it affects her humor and ability to focus, as well as her energy throughout the day. Those reminders add a sense of purpose that helps overcome the inevitable hurdles that stand in the way.

Changing our own behaviors often requires that our **family, friends, or co-workers adapt their behaviors** too. Stacie, for example, heard about the concept of walking meetings at a conference and was immediately sold on the idea. When she returned to the office, she asked her assistant, "If I ever have a 30-minute meeting where you know I'm not going to need to take copious notes, please book it as a moving meeting and ask that person to bring comfortable walking shoes." But Stacie needed her co-workers to buy into the idea of walking meetings as well. Rather than mandating a change, she made sure she set expectations, gave lots of fair warning, and an opportunity to say no. Her colleagues gave it a try and, feeling more energized and alert, were sold on it themselves. Walking meetings became the norm for discussions with Stacie, and served as an important structure that helped her avoid endless stretches of sedentary behavior in the office. But she needed her co-workers to adapt their behaviors as well to make it work.

Stickiness makes the difference between an initial surge of enthusiasm that quickly peters out and an enduring set of practices for exercise and nutrition that affect lifelong health. Inevitably, we found that stickiness relied on relationships with others, such as the teammates who hold us accountable, family members who keep us honest about "non-negotiable" time commitments, those who celebrate our success, and the people who are open to changing their own behaviors to support a change in ours. They form a web of support that prevents us from backsliding and feeds ongoing enthusiasm and commitment.

Three actions to ensure stickiness:

- ☐ **Sit down with your calendar** and block out the time to hold sacred for exercise. Enlist your partner, an admin, or a friend to help you stick with it.
- ☐ **Find ways to get two-for-one** by involving people who are important to you in your health activities. Try going hiking with friends, joining a parent/child soccer team, or going to the gym with your spouse or partner while the kids enjoy the gym's kids camp.
- ☐ **Find small decisions that add up** such as going to coffee and socializing rather than rushing home after a spin class, or starting offsite business meetings an hour later so everyone can exercise in the morning.

4 Identity and social benefits reinforce for the long term

Our research found that positive health trajectories were also very often associated with two additional benefits that made them life-changing: formation of friendships/authentic connections and altered sense of identity.

We often heard interviewees describe how they formed new relationships with deep bonds of friendship and trust as a result of the vulnerability involved in things like training together for a grueling race or confessing weaknesses at a weight loss meeting. For example, Freida, the executive who trained with a group at work for a 100K walk, described to us how at first, the people in the group were mostly new to the company and didn't know each other well. But that changed as they struggled through miles and miles of walking together. "You could see people having their dark moments, and they would go quiet, and you would see the others having to pull them through." They learned about themselves and each other, and how they respond under duress, and to this day, people in the group remain close.

Connecting with others in vulnerable situations creates strong bonds and friendships that make people want to show up. Suddenly it's not all about burning off calories or gaining more muscle definition, but about being part of something with people who energize us. It can also put us in the context of others who come at life from very different places. Too often, we traffic in pockets of people like ourselves so we're not prompted to question our goals in life, change how we think about adverse moments, or keep perspective on what we have that is positive. Interacting with people who are different from us can open our eyes to new ways of looking at life. People often miss out on these relationships by not creating space for conversations before and after events such as a long run or bike ride, or classes such as spinning or yoga.

Connecting with others through athletic activities at work can also help people to broaden their networks. Supriya, a director of engineering, attended a workplace boot camp once a week at lunchtime. She described the people who do sporting activities at work as having the best networks: "They have different tentacles that you wouldn't normally develop through your regular job." Other interviewees described athletic pursuits outside the workplace similarly, meeting people who wouldn't normally enter their social circle but who happen to share an interest. By striving together to meet athletic goals, they got to know them well.

Supriya found connecting through athletics to be especially beneficial for women rising in the ranks. "Being a female senior director here, it's very hard for me to network with senior execs because generally they golf. And when they come here, there will be a round of golf or a rugby match, and I don't do either of those things." But she did run, and her CIO was a runner. So, when the CIO would be in town for a visit, Supriya would say, "You want to go for a run?" and they started running together. The list of senior executives that Supriya started running with expanded, and she found it a great way to spent informal time together and expand her network of relationships.

Positive health trajectories can change not just what you do but who you are, and a number of our interviewees found themselves with both a different health regimen and an expanded sense of identity. As we pursue an objective and connect with others doing similarly, we start to identify with that group and that goal. By pursuing physical health, we become a healthy person; we make time to prepare a healthy meal rather than shortcut with fast food because it's part of who we are now. Or we become a basketball player and make sure we are there for our friends *and* eat healthier during business travel. Or we might have a craving for the 20-piece chicken nuggets and french fries for lunch, but then think about how that's going to make us feel during a Peloton ride two hours later. One healthy activity can become a gateway to embracing healthy behaviors in the larger scheme of life. For the people in our research, it wasn't just about achieving challenging athletic goals, but liking who they were more when they committed to being healthy.

Georgette, for example, was a hard-driving technology executive who after two decades in a high-pressure, always-on job made a major career change, downshifting to an individual contributor role. The change created something of an existential crisis for her. "I didn't know who I was anymore. It was the strangest thing. I used to be a very strong Type A personality. I worked all the time. I always felt I had to do more, I had to go further, I had to save the day." Going to a yoga class almost daily introduced her to a group of women who were supportive, not competitive. "It was so freeing to be in an environment where it was not only okay to be imperfect, but where we recognized the beauty in the failure. Thanks to yoga, I am more balanced now. I'm pretty good at saying*, I can't* or *I won't*. I'm okay with my own imperfections and limits." The principles of yoga became infused in the ways Georgette approached both her work and her life.

Three actions to ensure success in the long-term:

- ☐ **Find out what health and fitness activities your company offers,** and consider joining one where you're likely to connect with a diversity of people, such as the company boot camp or a yoga class.
- ☐ **Don't shy away from going through the more challenging aspects of training with others;** it's where you can develop deeper, more authentic ties.
- ☐ **When undertaking an activity that is new or uncomfortable got you, commit to trying it at least three times.** Be present and meet at least one new person each time.

TOOL FOR DRIVING POSITIVE HEALTH TRAJECTORIES THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

The tool below can help you create a positive health trajectory in your life by engaging with supportive relationships. Start by identifying a health goal that you'd like to elevate as a priority. It could be something like getting back into running, going to the gym, or losing five pounds—anything that's important to you. Then walk through the steps of creating visibility and stickiness, picking out the recommendations that work best for you and the goal you've chosen. Finally, reflect on how the planned changes will affect you in terms of your identity and additional social benefits that are likely to come your way. Then reach out and get started!

FOR EACH STAGE, WHAT DO YOU PLAN TO DO AND WHO WILL YOU INVOLVE?	
Stage	**What and who**
1. Priority	**Elevate physical health as a priority.** Describe a physical health goal that's important to you. ***Example:*** *Going to the gym three times a week, build better speed and wind, lowering your cholesterol, losing five pounds.*
2. Visibility	**Create visibility.** Who will you share your goal with and in what ways? ***Example:*** *Talking with your spouse/partner or family about it, signing up with a group of co-workers for an event, posting in a virtual forum.*
3. Stickiness	**Build supportive structures.** Are there ways you can arrange your calendar or benefit from the pre-arranged structures of teams or clubs? How can you support your goal by setting aside non-negotiable time for it? Who will keep you honest about your commitment to preserving that time? Who will you need to approach about changing their behaviors so you can change yours? ***Example:*** *Asking your assistant to schedule twice-weekly sessions directly with your trainer, or setting a schedule for cycling with Peloton. Setting aside Thursday nights for basketball and enlisting your spouse to make sure you don't renege. Giving people notice that you'd like to do walking meetings and asking if they would being comfortable shoes.*

Establish a sense of accountability towards others. Can you join a group or club, or enter a program with others so that you feel accountability for showing up and being there to support them? What groups or programs can you engage with? What small decisions can you make that will deepen your connections with others?

Example: *Signing up for a race with co-workers, joining a cycling club, starting a weight loss program with friends, going to coffee rather than rushing home after a spin class.*

Get two-for-one. How can you involve the people important to you so you have both quality time together and engage in healthy activities?

Example: *Going hiking with friends, joining a parent/child soccer team, or going to the gym with your spouse while the kids are enjoying the gym's kids camp.*

Manage negative enablers. Are there people who influence you in the direction of poor health behaviors? If so, how can you manage these relationships?

Example: *Recruiting these people to help you meet your goal; shifting the relationship so you spend more time together in contexts where they exert a positive influence (e.g., the gym) and less where their influence is negative (e.g., restaurants and bars.)*

4. Identity

Reflection. How do you envision these changes will affect your sense of values and self?

Example: *Gaining a better sense of balance in life by connecting with people in your yoga class who embrace imperfection; creating identity as someone who is "aging healthy" by participating in challenging sports activities.*

5. Social Benefits	**Reflection.** Wil these changes expand your relationships in ways that will benefit you personally or professionally? Will they help to create deeper or more authentic relationships? Give you perspectives that you wouldn't otherwise have?
	Example: *Connecting with a greater diversity of colleagues by joining the company boot camp; developing deeper, more authentic ties by going through a grueling race together.*

EXAMPLE:

Tamera was feeling sluggish, like her energy was depleted and her synapses weren't firing as fast as they should. She had always been an active, healthy person but between her career and trying to be the best mother she could, there was little time for self-care or the sports she used to enjoy. When she went to the doctor for her regular check-up, it was a shocker: 10 pounds heavier than she had ever been and her blood pressure had spiked. But there seemed no way fit exercise into her life, unless it meant fewer hours of sleep or sacrificing time with her kids.

By happenstance, she ran into a colleague who was glowing at 8 a.m., with a smile on her face and unbounded enthusiasm for the trainer she was working with each morning in the company gym. It gave Tamera a spark of optimism that maybe, if this busy up-and-comer could do it, she could too.

Looking at the Tool for Driving Positive Health Trajectories, Tamera decided her goals were to feel fit again, lose the extra weight, and gain her old energy and acuity. But gym workouts early in the morning held no appeal. She wasn't a morning person, hated weights, and couldn't see how she could fit anything else into morning scramble to get everyone out of the house. Instead, Tamera reached back to the passion she had in college for basketball. She wasn't sure if she could find a team but started talking with some friends about her idea, and one of them pointed her towards a group playing at the local community center.

Playing with the team would require that Tamera carve out time for practices and games. She had a sit-down with her family and shared with them her excitement about playing basketball again but her concerns about how to fit it all in. She needed some structure. Her kids thought it was cool that she would be playing hoops again, and everyone had thoughts about how to make it work. They would set aside Wednesday nights, when practices were held, as "Dad and kids" night, and it would be their special time for pizza and a movie. It would also be a way to hold Tamera to her commitment to Wednesday night practices, even when she was tired—no moms allowed home on Wednesday nights! They would also join the community center as a family. That way, everyone could show up for Tamera's Sunday morning games, and either watch or swim in the pool. Afterward, they would all go for brunch. And Tamera would get two-for-one: family time and a good workout.

After joining the team, Tamera met a whole new group of people, some professionals like herself but others from different walks of life. Coincidentally, there was another woman working in biomedical research, similar to Tamera. They would often take a few minutes after practice to catch up and share what was going on in their labs. Everyone on the team shared the common bond that they loved basketball, and it gave them an intrinsic connection that could then open up to all sorts of other topics: raising kids, juggling work, social justice, the environment, anything. It was an outlet for Tamera, and a way to feel better in touch with reality, rather than existing in her own bubble. Tamera looked forward to games and practices, so would rarely miss them, and knew that if she did, she would get endless grief from her teammates.

Over time, Tamera started to shed some of the extra pounds and felt her energy and enthusiasm returning. She felt less like someone who was beaten down by the challenges of work and home, and more like someone who was taking it in stride and thriving. She was a basketball player once again.

How to Enlist a Network for Physical Health

Some things you can't change, such as the northeast winter storms that make cycling outdoors in January near-impossible or the bakery located right next to the office building that offers daily temptation. But engaging a network in our health goals is something anyone can do with simple changes to how we interact. **The following five steps are a good place to start.**

1. **Be transparent with your goals or struggles**
2. **Make small decisions that add up**
3. **Get two-for-one: Engage the people closest to you in healthy activities**
4. **Actively manage the negative enablers**
5. **Create supportive structures**

1 Be transparent with your goals or struggles

You might feel like caring for your physical health is your responsibility alone, or that you don't want to make your goals public in case you fall short of meeting them. Or, you might feel like telling people you want to become more fit only emphasizes what a sloth you are today. It can take courage to put our goals out there, especially if we've tried and failed on a particular health goal in the past. But sharing that we're trying to drop a few pounds or that we're struggling to keep Thursdays sacred for basketball can enlist the help of others. We can casually share in conversation or state explicitly that this will be hard and we're asking for back-up. We saw this work often when our interviewees would share their goals with family, friends, or co-workers. Family members would adjust schedules for wake-up or early morning child care, or take turns going to the gym. Spouses would make an effort to pick up fresh produce on the way home from work and cook healthier meals. Co-workers would make healthy lunch options a regular topic of conversation.

The best case is when others then jump in to share the goal themselves. Terrell, a manager in a technology company, was trying to eat more nutritious meals and getting fed up with the pizza that was delivered for all the office meetings. He thought he was the only one who objected to a steady diet of carbs and grease but when he became more open, jokingly at first, he found a surprising number of colleagues who felt likewise. Collectively, they were able to change the conventions and put healthier foods such as fruits and salads in reach. By sharing his personal desire to eat healthy, Terrell was able to modify the food habits of the department, creating a more supportive environment that made it easier for him to stick with his goal. Engaging others doesn't mean that we can abandon inner resolve; rather, it helps to create a supportive environment and replenish our resolve along the way.

Think about a health goal that you have. *Have you shared it with others who might be supportive? Who might be able to play that role?*

2 Make small decisions that add up

We don't have to swing for the fences when it comes to focusing on building better health. Small, incremental decisions can solidify our routine and add to our support system without major disruptions.

For example, after a Saturday spin class, do you rush off to run errands, or do you go for coffee with others from the class and laugh about how lame you felt getting up that last virtual hill? If you're doing the latter, you're more likely to be building the sense of camaraderie and accountability that will help you stick with the classes. Small decisions, like spending just a few minutes to hang out either before or after the class and get to know the other participants personally, can add up.

The small but impactful decisions we can make are limitless. One manager gained 10 pounds after the company decided to provide free (junk food) snacks in the common area. She decided to label it the "Shelf of Temptation" and joke about it with her team, reporting in regularly to tell them, "I haven't touched the Shelf of Temptation today." Another manager decided to walk with a colleague to the train stop farther from the office rather than using the station right around the corner. These small decisions add some mileage or cut some calories, and over time add up to health and social practices that can be easily embedded in busy lives.

What small decisions might make a change in your health? *Are there ways you can add more movement to your day or switch out unhealthy foods for healthy ones? Who might share that interest?*

3 Get two-for-one: Engage the people closest to you in healthy activities

People often feel like they face a zero-sum game between exercise and time for family and friends: if we opt for one, we lose out on the other. But it doesn't have to be that way. We can get two for one, both quality time with people important to us and physical exercise, by combining the two.

Wade, for example, plays soccer every Sunday with a group of dads and their kids. Every Saturday, they put out a call for the game and play with whoever shows up. Wade says, "It's an elegant solution because it hits that important time with friends, which is one of my important roles in life. And time with family, which is another. And at the same time, getting exercise and taking care of my health." Other interviewees described going running with their spouse or partner and using that time to talk about the plan for the day ("What are we going to have for dinner? Who's doing pick-up?"), or hiking with friends rather than going out for drinks and dinner. What they all have in common is they get the best of both: time with people near and dear to them, and a routine for physical health.

When you get together with friends and family, what are your typical activities? *Can you think of a time when you've done physical activities together, such as a hike, bike ride, or a game of touch football, and it created happy memories? Where do you have opportunities to engage people important to you in activities that involve exercise?*

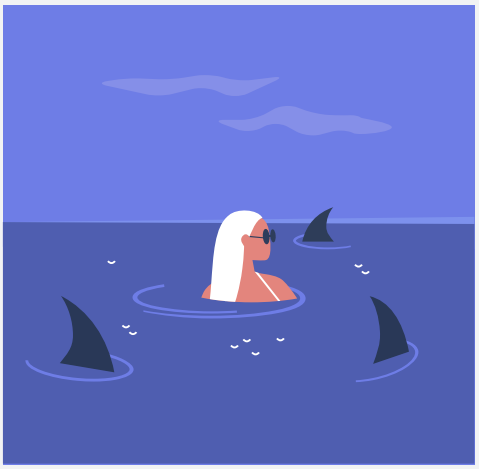
4 Actively manage the negative enablers

Yes, relationships are positive enablers of good health, but it's also possible that some of the people around us can have a negative influence as well. (See insert on *Negative Ties: You've Seen the Enemy and It's Not Who You Think*.) And people are not necessarily all positive or all negative. The friend we love and enjoy spending time with, and who meets us at the gym twice a week can also foster over-imbibing on a Friday night. We can consider several ways to manage negative enablers:

- Be explicit about the health behaviors you're trying to change, and ask for their help in making it happen. At the same time, you may have to navigate changes or friction in your relationship, if it was largely dependent on the negative health behaviors.
- Shift the nature of your interactions so that you're spending more time together in contexts where they exert a positive influence (e.g., the gym) and less where their influence is negative (e.g., restaurants and bars.)
- Involve a third party or group whose health interests align more with your own and who will exert a moderating influence. For example, if you always end up drinking too much when you go out with one particular friend, invite another friend who is more likely to call it quits after two glasses of wine and suggest you all go out for a walk.
- As a last resort, prune relations so that you're spending less time together.

Think about whether there are people in your life who influence your health behaviors in negative ways. *What role does the negative health behavior play in your relationship? Is it the sole basis or do you have other things in common? Are there ways you can shift the behaviors yet retain the relationship?*

NEGATIVE TIES: You've Seen the Enemy and It's Not Who You Think



When we talk about social connections, we often default to thinking about them as positive. But negative ties—ones that cause stress or conflict in our lives—abound and can have a disproportionate impact on us. Negative, non-supportive social interactions have been reported as one of the major sources of daily stress and in fact, negative qualities of relationships may have a stronger impact on health and well-being than positive qualities.[29,30] One study finds that it takes seven positive relationships to compensate for one negative relationship.[22]

We might assume that the relationships causing us stress and conflict are those with the unreasonable co-worker or the relative whose political opinions are in opposition to our own. But often, the people creating stress for us or enabling poor health behaviors are friends, children or spouses.[22] Marriage, for example, is one of the most salient sources of both support and stress for many people,[31] and poor marital quality has been associated with depression and impairment to immune and endocrine functions.[32] Friends who undertake risky health behaviors often bring us along for the ride and can contribute to increased alcohol consumption, obesity or unhealthy approaches to dieting.[18,33,34]

It is important, then, to recognize that the people you enjoy or are close to may not necessarily exert a positive influence on your health. Or, that they can be a positive influence in some ways but a negative influence in others. Think about the important people in your life. In what ways do they help you to be healthy, though things like exercise, good nutrition, or healthy sleep habits? In what ways do they foster unhealthy behaviors?

5 Create supportive structures

Supportive structures can be anything that creates rules or boundaries protecting the time allocated for health activities, or ensuring that healthier choices are made. The key is making them as non-negotiable as possible, so we rarely if ever let health decisions suffer when work pressures or temptations arise. These structures work best when other people play a role keeping us true to the boundaries we've set.

If your interest is cycling, for example, you can join a club rather than cycling alone and benefit from the sense of accountability and camaraderie you're likely to develop with other group members. Many of our interviewees created non-negotiable time and enlisted their assistants to keep the discipline. Sarah, for example, wanted to ensure that she kept up with her twice-weekly sessions with her trainer at the gym. She gave her assistant full responsibility for working directly with the trainer to schedule them. It might be 8 a.m. or 2 p.m., but twice a week those sessions were scheduled. Family members can play a similar role, laying on the guilt if you're tempted to slack off.

Some of the people we spoke with created structure through apps and virtual connections. Whether it was Peloton, P90X, Nike Training Club or any other virtual program, it provided a schedule and system for workouts, and connected them with others following the same routines. One interviewee, Milo, confessed to being totally captivated by the culture of Peloton. He has the app on his phone and each time he works out, he gets a little blue dot on the calendar for that day. He wants to get a blue dot every day, so if he looks at the last thirty days and doesn't have a lot of blue dots, he makes sure to get on the bike. Even though he doesn't talk to people, Milo engages with other riders through high fives or tracking the stats of people he knows. He finds it motivating when the instructor gives shout-outs, and when he and his wife got to their 100th ride, they decided to do a live ride rather than a pre-recorded one so that the instructor could call out their names. Milo admits to these things being silly but nonetheless, they keep him on track.

Are there structures that you can create around your health goals? *On the days when it feels impossible, what would help you stick to your goals? Think about other people you could involve—whether family members, friends or co-workers, or groups you could join to keep you on track.*

CORPORATE WELLNESS PROGRAMS SHOULD CONSIDER NETWORKS

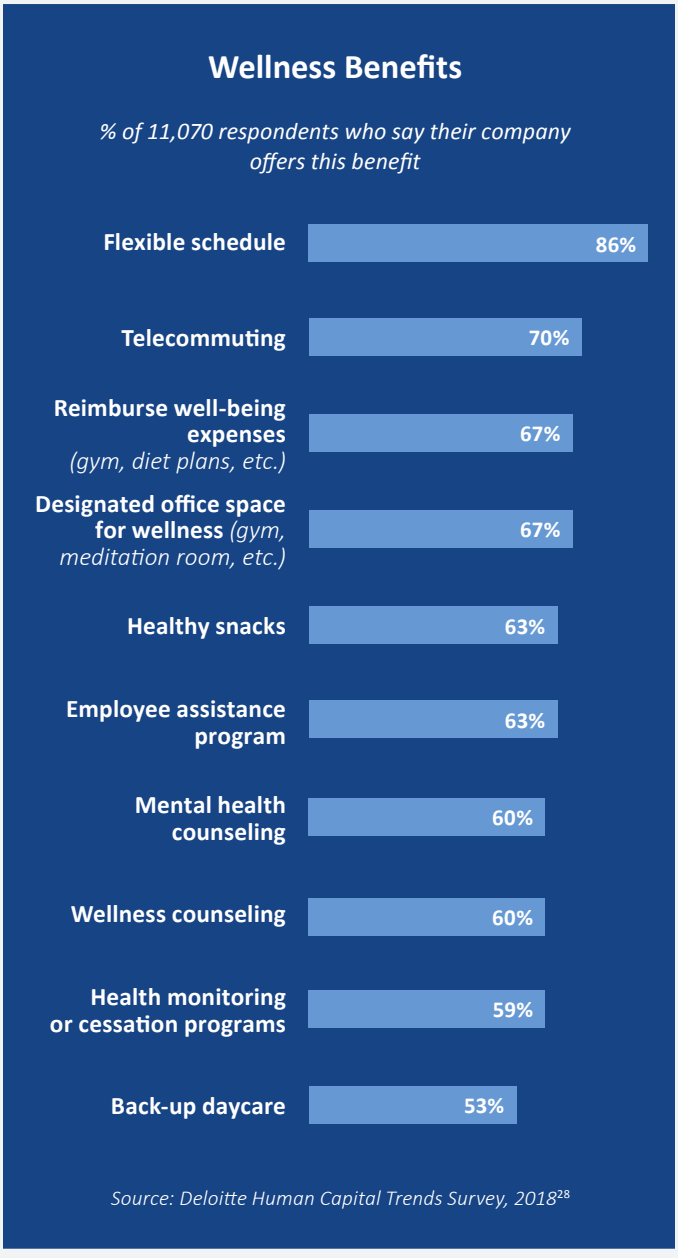
Companies seeking ways to improve employee well-being offer a range of services, including access to gyms, diet plans, counseling, and healthy snacks. But what is often overlooked is the role of networks in helping employees to stick with their gym routine or partake of the healthy snacks rather than the candy bars. Friends and spouses or partners can have a stronger influence on health behaviors than co-workers, so the networks that need to be considered reach beyond the boundaries of the firm.[22]

As the chart below shows, much of what companies provide for employee well-being falls into one of three categories:

1. *Informational programs, such as those providing advice on nutrition, exercise, or preventative health measures.*
2. *Programs targeting the individual—such as flexible schedules or reimbursing gym expenses—and not the connections around them.*
3. *Wellness efforts like mindfulness that teach people how to better persist in the system of expectations they have built around them.*

Few are leveraging the power of social connections or showing people how to improve their success through relationships with others. But imagine if they did. Think of what the morning spin class would look like. Rather than people showing up groggy-eyed, working out individually and then rushing off to shower, the class could pair people up for co-suffering or for sharing goals or encouragement, and build in some space for connecting between the most arduous sprints.

One large employer took a network approach when launching a site-wide effort to get people up from their desks and add movement to their day. Recognizing the perils of sedentary behavior (such as heart disease, diabetes, spine and stability problems, leg disorders, decrease in brain function and early mortality) and the benefits of movement throughout the day (such as enhanced energy, focus, mood, and productivity), they decided to undertake an initiative to promote movement on the job. But they knew sedentary behaviors were highly ingrained and it would take more than the usual corporate communications and incentives to change. The site did a network analysis that provided two key pieces of information: (1) sitting behaviors were highly related to network ties and (2) the organization had a group of "influencers" who were highly connected to others in terms of health behaviors, and could help to promote movement on the job. The movement-on-the-job program became a grass-roots undertaking driven by the influencers. The company engaged these influencers in a series of brainstorming sessions to identify strategies for change. The influencers served as the main spokespeople for the program, and took responsibility for implementation and role modeling behaviors such as standing up while on the phone, walking over to talk to colleagues, communal stretch breaks set to music, and "tag you're it" email chains, asking peers to move with them at certain times—small changes that nonetheless broke up long stretches of sitting and could make a difference to health. By working through the network of connections among people, the company was able to "go viral" with new behaviors—some of which continued to spread even beyond the borders of the original site.



The Company You Keep

Even with the best of intentions and plans, staying fit and eating healthy can be a challenge, given the pace and demands of everyday life. Most people blame themselves when they fall short of meeting their fitness goals, and figure they'll succeed the next time around if they can only have more self-discipline. What they miss is the critical role played by the network of people around them. So next New Year's Eve, when you're making that resolution to drop five pounds or regain your washboard abs, remember to involve the network that can help you do it.

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