The Power of Two: Health habits and the social dynamics of couples

Hello dear readers. In this issue of *XRDS*, we hope to bring you a fresh set of perspectives on technology, this time through the lens of global cultures. Our esteemed Guest Editors, Lynn Kirabo and Judeth Choi, have assembled a compelling set of stories that offer critical takes on technology and its potential to influence (and likewise be shaped by) the cultural context where it is embedded. We hope you enjoy this perspective-changing issue.

Now... to something completely different!

Last week, my partner and I celebrated our wedding anniversary (yay!). As part of celebrating this milestone, we reflected on our growth throughout the years. No doubt that we've become better versions of ourselves

by virtue of being in a trusting and supportive environment. Throughout this partnership, one of the things that I've been fascinated by is how my partner has slowly but surely nudged me toward a healthier lifestyle. Today, I take more steps, I close my Apple Watch rings more often, and I am eating more vegetables.

This fascination and curiosity has led me to conduct a high-level survey on this quirky topic. It turns out this phenomenon is backed by research. Among the general population affected by health risks, couples prove to be a critical segment. Couples not only influence each other, but their own habits play an important role in influencing the health habits of their household. For example, marital status is associated with improved

health, e.g., either by lowering mortality [1] or promoting smoking cessation [2]. Longitudinal studies reveal health factors such as body mass index (BMI) are highly correlated among people sharing a living environment [3], most notably among couples. They exhibit remarkably strong social dynamics, making them well equipped to motivate each other. For example, research has shown couples have a higher chance of accomplishing a goal when they collaborate, as opposed to achieving the same goal as individuals [4, 5]. In addition, couples' habits also play an important role in influencing the health habits of their children. As a result, shared activities among couples can help develop stronger relationships that can lead to other health and long-term benefits.

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CASE STUDIES

Numerous studies have examined the strong social dynamics of couples (e.g., cohabitation and marriage) and its effects towards health-related goals. It applies across diverse contexts and domains including decreased drug use [2], weight gain [3], food habits [6], diabetes management [7], and adherence to fitness programs.

Food habits. In “Dynamics of Food Habits of Newly Married Couples,” Craig and Truswell interviewed 60 couples at three pivotal marriage milestones: before marriage, 5 months of marriage, and 2.5 years of marriage [6]. Along each point, they studied food habits and how they change at the time the partners begin living together. The studies reveal several interesting results. For example, after 2.5 years of marriage, there was an observed decrease in the amount of shared meals, except for dinner. Corollary to this finding, dinner remained the central meal to influence a partner’s eating habits. This hints on the distinctive role of partners and dining opportunities in influencing how households can change their eating habits, and by extension their overall health and fitness.

Type 2 diabetes management. For people living with diabetes, adhering to increased exercise is often reported as one of the biggest challenges [8]. However, in “The Role of Collective Efficacy In Exercise Adherence,” Beverly et al. explored the powerful effect of the social dynamic of couples in increasing exercise adherence among patients with Type 2 diabetes [7]. Analyses (via focus groups among 30 couples, $n = 60$) revealed three major themes leveraged by couples. In all, “collective support” (a perception of encouragement), “collective motivation” (shared motivation to exercise), and “collective responsibility” (sharing responsibility) all play major roles in influencing adherence to exercise programs. These findings are extremely relevant, because they provide insight on the nature of how couples are mutually empowered to assume responsibility for their health-related goals. By teasing out these three overarching themes, designers of partner-based online net-

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works can incorporate “collective” efficacy schemes into their programs.

Licit and illicit drug use. In “Cleaning Up Their Act,” Duncan et al. reveal the noticeable changes of cohabitation and marriage on harmful vices such as binge drinking, smoking, and drug use [2]. In this study, the researchers analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.¹ Specifically, the authors reveal both marriage and cohabitation are accompanied by decreases in risky behaviors, with the largest reductions associated with marriage (as opposed to cohabitation). Upon further reflection, the authors hypothesize the institutionalized norms associated with marriage provides couples with the ability to “co-monitor” their partner’s health-related behaviors. In many ways, these implications are consistent with “collective efficacy,” and it suggests the mere presence of a partner offers noticeable influence on behavior change.

Spousal adherence to fitness programs. Wallace et al. specifically examine the effect of spouses on exercise program adherence [5]. The authors examine healthy couples’ behavior based on a 12 month fitness program (i.e., they contrasted behaviors between 30 married-singles versus 32 married pairs). Their results reveal statistically significant differences: At the end of the study, 6.3 per-

cent of the married pairs had dropped out of the program, compared to 43 percent of the married singles. These findings are consistent with previous research, and they point to the notion that social support in the form of “spousal participation” exerts beneficial effect on adherence towards fitness programs, or in general, most types of health-related joint endeavor.

PARTING THOUGHTS

Partners not only influence each other, but by extension, their own habits play an important role in influencing those around them. Because of the strong social dynamics that couples exhibit, they have the propensity to motivate each other. Couples have a higher chance of accomplishing a goal when they collaborate, as opposed to achieving the same goal as individuals. When partners work toward achieving health goals, they develop stronger relationships and collective support that can lead to health and long-term benefits.

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1 <http://www.bls.gov/nls/nlsy79.htm>