



Strength in Numbers

Gloria Gladd, 63, has been active her whole life but has never loved solo exercise. She shudders remembering a free visit to one gym that looked like “a graveyard of equipment” for lonely treadmills and weight lifters.

Instead, she goes five or six times a week to a Fitology club in State College, Pennsylvania, where she might join a group spin class one day, an intense whole body group workout the next, and a group weight-lifting session the day after that.

She’s always trying new things, Gladd says, and working out with others makes that easier. She remembers the day she got new spin shoes and struggled to attach them to her bike: “Three people jumped off their bikes to help me,” she says.

Gladd likes the idea that if she doesn’t show up for classes, people will ask where she’s been. “There are a lot of regulars, so there’s a lot of accountability,” says the just-retired medical office assistant.

Gladd has discovered something well supported by research. When we exercise alone, we can get a good workout—but when we exercise in a group, many of us get an added boost.

“We are greatly influenced by the company we keep,” and when our exercise mates push us to do one more squat or sweat for five more minutes, that can be a very good thing, says Cedric Bryant, president and chief science officer of the American Council on Exercise (ACE).

Benefits of a Group



A group can drive us to work out harder—perhaps because we want to measure up or do our part for the team. It's an example of the well-known Köhler effect, seen in everything from business to mountain climbing. When working on a task with others, many of us will put in extra effort. The effect is named after German industrial psychologist Otto Köhler, who first demonstrated it in experiments with rowing teams in the 1920s. But working harder is not the only benefit of working out in a group. Studies have suggested that:

- Exercisers who join a group or a partner are more likely to make exercise a habit;
- Group exercise may do more than solo exercise to reduce stress and increase quality of life;
- Group exercisers who synchronize their movements may develop higher pain tolerance and greater endurance than those who work out alone; and
- People who exercise in groups or pairs might even live longer.

That's right. A recent study of nearly 8,600 people in Denmark found that all varieties of exercise, as expected, were associated with longer lifespans. But the biggest boosts—ranging from five to 10 years of extra life—were seen in people who choose activities that are typically social, rather than solo, with tennis, badminton, and soccer players outliving runners, swimmers, and cyclers (and exercisers of any sort outliving couch potatoes).

The study did not prove that exercising in pairs or groups made the difference in longevity, but it did account for income, education, age, and other factors that might skew results. The findings held up even when the researchers looked only at college graduates, reducing the odds that the results merely reflect the advantages of those who play certain sports, says study co-author James O'Keefe.

"I really think the social aspect of it may be the most important part," says O'Keefe, who is director of preventive cardiology at the Mid America Heart Institute at Saint Luke's Health System in Kansas City. To get the most out of exercise, including the most fun, he says, "we need to embrace our identities as very social creatures." In other words, O'Keefe says, we need to "play with our friends."

Not All Groups Are Equal

If you have ever been to an exercise class where everyone walks in, takes a spot, and then wordlessly follows along with an instructor—then you've been to a class with a low level of what researchers call *groupness*.

On the other hand, if you've been to a class where participants set goals together, work as teams, cheer one another on, and bond in other ways, you've been to a class with a high level of groupness—and probably better results, researchers say.

What the recent research has shown is that the higher the level of groupness, the higher the level of exertion, enjoyment, and satisfaction. And the higher the intention to do it again," says Jinger Gottschall, an associate professor of kinesiology at Pennsylvania State University. Gottschall also



founded the Fitology club in State College and is a scientific advisor to ACE, the exercise council.

Gladd, who has taken fitness classes from Gottschall, describes the ideal “group vibe” this way: “It’s like being at a sporting event, but you’re participating in it.”

The bonding in a group class can begin even before anyone starts sweating, says John Ford, a New York City personal trainer who works with individuals, couples, and small groups. In a cohesive group, people might be “touching, high-fiving, giving pats on the shoulder” as they greet one another, triggering the release of “feel-good hormones” that can give people more energy and make exercise more enjoyable, he says.

And the bonds can last beyond class, Ford says. That’s why he offers corporate team-building sessions where co-workers might crawl, lunge, and shuffle through a relay competition and perform push-ups in waves—seeing how long they can keep the fun going.

And, Ford emphasizes, the group activity should be fun and conducted in a way that no one gets hurt, physically or otherwise. If not, it can be counterproductive, souring people on exercise. In a country where just one in five adults meets recently updated physical activity guidelines, no one wants that.

Different Workouts for Different Folks

JC Cassis, a 35-year-old musician and podcast producer who lives in Brooklyn, spends much of each day working alone in her house. At some point, she very much needs to get out and see people, and a trip to a nearby gym for some Pilates, yoga, or high-intensity interval training is a way to combine exercise and social contact, she says.

“I’m definitely an extrovert, so the actual human contact is non-negotiable for me. This is the way I’m wired,” she says. “I love seeing the same people over and over again.”

But not everyone likes to exercise in a crowd—and that’s just fine, Gottschall says. “Some people like to go for meditative walks in the woods by themselves,” she says. “And I know some moms who are like, ‘I just want to go for a jog by myself—it’s my me time.’”

“People who have had bad experiences with group exercise in the past—who felt humiliated in high school gym classes or sports settings, for example, can lack the confidence to try again,” Ford says. “But finding a trainer or a group with a positive, supportive vibe can make all the difference,” he says.

Among other ideas for people who are shy, short on time, or living in areas with limited options: virtual exercise partners and online classes.

There are now apps that connect real runners, bikers, and others with online buddies who can share stats and compete. Researchers also are working to improve digital “exergames” to make them



more like working out with supportive friends (ideally, friends who motivate you by being just a little fitter or faster than you are). And some exercise studios now offer live streaming classes along with recorded classes on demand. “There really is something for everyone,” Gottschall says.

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