



# Social Support

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Employers face an ongoing challenge to engage employees in healthy lifestyles. With surging healthcare costs, an aging population, and rising rates of chronic diseases, there's no end in sight to the pressure on profits.

On a positive note, irrefutable evidence shows certain simple, consistent steps can improve health. However, with crammed schedules, confusion about exactly what to do, and lack of support, many find it difficult to change long-established habits:

- Only 24.4% of US adults average at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables / day<sup>1</sup>
- 67% of Americans are overweight or obese<sup>2</sup>
- 40% of adults don't participate in *any* physical activity during their leisure time<sup>3</sup>
- Only 15% of adults in the US obtain the recommended amount of exercise.<sup>4</sup>

What can be done? Employers are in the perfect position to create a culture that encourages healthy habits and fosters an environment of support.

Social support through positive, health-promoting relationships can have a significant impact on motivation and long-term success.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise, the health risk can increase dramatically. For example, when someone close to a participant becomes overweight, their chances of becoming overweight increase 45%-171% (depending on the nature of the relationship).<sup>6</sup>

This paper focuses on the advantages of social support, with ideas for your organization to take advantage of these findings.

*Having others' encouragement boosts confidence, which plays a significant role in the effectiveness of behavior change.*



## Costs and Productivity are Affected

Employees who eat healthier and exercise have lower medical costs, fewer sick days, and improved productivity at work. Consider these findings:

- As waistlines continue to expand, so do healthcare costs — 1.9% higher for each BMI unit increase.<sup>7</sup>
- Physical activity is a vital part of any wellness program and its ability to decrease expenses. Healthcare costs drop 4.7% for every active day per week.<sup>7</sup>
- With each \$1 spent on medical and pharmacy costs comes an additional \$2.3 lost in health-related productivity.<sup>8</sup> When employees don't feel well, they miss work regularly; while they're at work, they don't function as effectively.

# Benefits of Social Support

While many methods exist to get employees engaged in wellness programs, one of the most successful is having them work together — with colleagues, family, and friends — to achieve goals. Social support adds to individual motivation and accountability in numerous ways, as described below.

## Boosts employee engagement.

Towers-Perrin research confirms that employers with a culture supportive of health convey the message of caring about employee well-being. This belief is strongly connected to employee willingness to invest extra effort in supporting the organization goals.<sup>9</sup>

**Enhances performance.** A study of young adult males competing in 1-4 rounds of golf found that social support improves task performance during highly stressful situations, primarily by increasing self-efficacy.<sup>10</sup>

**Reduces daily stress.** In a study assessing daily hassles, life events, perceived social support, dependence, self-criticism, and attitudes toward illness, individuals with daily stress perceived less support.<sup>11</sup> The study suggests that not having support can have a harmful effect on health by elevating stress and feelings of being unsuccessful.

## Increases confidence and motivation.

In a study of women with spinal cord injuries, ages 25-61, social support emerges as the factor that raises confidence and togetherness, expanding their motivation to participate.<sup>12</sup>

**Decreases depression.** Support can aid more than physical aspects of health. A review of the literature, including 20 studies, shows that group support augments participants' emotional state and quality of life.<sup>13</sup>

**Boosts self-efficacy.** Participants in a cardiac rehab program with high levels of social support are more confident in their ability to accomplish in-class exercises, fit classes into their schedule, and walk briskly — all keys to success. They also have higher health-related quality of life, energy, and general health status.<sup>14</sup>

**Lowers anxiety.** Cardiac patients satisfied with their level of social support, or those with larger social networks, have lower anxiety levels.<sup>15</sup> Anxiety causes bodily stress, which means negative health outcomes and higher healthcare costs.

**Adds to feelings of happiness.** Well-being increases with camaraderie, indicates a study among employees from 89 organizations in a wide range of industries.<sup>16</sup> Happiness is an important variable in improving performance.

**Improves exercise attendance.** Limited time is one of the most common reasons for not exercising regularly. Among breast cancer survivors, research shows that support from physician, spouse, and friends escalates exercise class attendance, even when limited time is an issue.<sup>17</sup>

**Develops positive shopping practices.** Grocery shoppers interviewed about what encourages them to buy produce state social support amplifies the likelihood. In fact, social support is the primary predictor for having fruit available in the home.<sup>18</sup>

## Supports healthy eating habits.

During a 7-week worksite health promotion program, supportiveness from friends, family, and coworkers helped participants exercise more and eat less fat.<sup>5</sup>

**Enhances enthusiasm.** Satisfaction with peer support raises performance motivation. Identification with a unit also affects the relationship between peers.<sup>19</sup> Individuals who know that others support them are more inspired to be successful themselves, especially when they're part of a bigger picture.

**Promotes higher participation rates.** In a 15-week exercise group of individuals with partial paralysis, participants improve health-related fitness, establish social contacts, and have an almost perfect attendance rate. They find exercising in the group motivating and rewarding — enhancing their quality of life.<sup>20</sup> In addition, a study of primarily blue-collar workers reveals these factors affect participation in a workplace wellness center:

- Convenience
- Need for social support
- Perceived benefits, physical barriers, psychological barriers, and self-efficacy.<sup>21</sup>

**Deepens commitment.** Being on a team engages college students, enabling them to better learn study materials. While part of a team, each member is held accountable for the group's outcome, which improves their performance.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, when learning how to begin a healthy lifestyle, having others there to answer questions, offer explanations, and share experiences helps enhance understanding of the importance of healthy habits.



***Social support not only affects physical behaviors; it can also affect psychological state. The impact on mental and emotional variables can directly influence the drive to live healthfully.***

# Sources of Support

Each source of support has unique contributions to health commitment

## Family

The family has an exceptional ability to affect health behaviors. For example, family members usually spend more time with one another than anyone outside the household, so if the primary grocery shopper regularly buys unhealthy foods, everyone else eats them. And if watching TV is the only way to engage with others, it becomes difficult to avoid. On the other hand, when the family regularly enjoys physical activities together and makes a conscious effort to eat right, the entire family becomes healthier.

Research examples supporting the benefits of family support follow.

**Enhances ability to lose weight.** In a study among college women, receiving support from family and friends helps participants lower their body mass index.<sup>23</sup>

**Facilitates glucose monitoring.** In a cross-sectional survey of individuals with diabetes, support from family and friends raises the likelihood of testing blood glucose levels.<sup>24</sup> It can be difficult to remember testing, especially when it's a new behavior. When others are helping, it becomes routine.

**Increases exercise participation.** For hospital employees enrolled in a 7-week worksite health promotion program, supportive friends, family, and coworkers help keep participation up and fat consumption down.<sup>5</sup>

**Maintains healthy behavior changes long term.** One of the biggest challenges with healthy behaviors is maintenance. An 8-week program with 309 employees in a large company found that including family support helps participants begin healthy behaviors and continue them at a 1-year follow-up.<sup>25</sup>

## One on One

Some individuals need a person they can talk to or meet with regularly — someone who'll help when they're having a difficult time with new behaviors, have questions, and need advice or an extra push. The benefits are described below.

**Decreases pain medication use and hospital stays.** Men with positive social support who had coronary bypass surgery take less pain medication and are released sooner from the surgical intensive care unit and hospital.<sup>26</sup> With hospital and pharmacy charges so high, this has the potential to reduce medical costs significantly.

**Heightens self-efficacy and reduces depression.** A group of 72 men with one-on-one peer support shows significantly increased self-efficacy and decreased depression.<sup>27</sup> Having confidence in the new behaviors can create a positive attitude.



## Teammates celebrate each other's successes and help each other over hurdles as they strive to achieve common goals.

**Lessens pain.** According to a review of 16 studies, including over 13,000 women, having social support during labor results in shorter labor, a higher possibility of natural childbirth, and a lower likelihood of using pain medication.<sup>28</sup> In another study, those with social support have lower pain ratings than those without support.<sup>29</sup> Less pain leads to lower healthcare costs and more likelihood of performing healthy habits such as exercise.

### Support Groups

A group who relies on each other for information, help, and other forms of support can also improve success in a program. Having group members provide advice and encouragement based on personal experience offers numerous advantages like these.

**Enhances quality of life.** A review of 44 studies shows that cancer support groups improve quality of life and morale. Participants report feeling less alone, better understood, and more hopeful after support group sessions.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes knowing we're not the only one going through a tough situation makes all the difference.

**Fosters accountability.** Among 224 children, those in groups are more accountable to their peers; they demonstrate more acceptable behaviors, especially older children.<sup>31</sup> Accountability leads to consistency; with consistency, health behaviors become habits.

**Improves psychosocial well-being.** Through peer group support, 326 orphans with AIDS experience less anxiety, depression, and anger. In the control group, however, orphans feel

more depression and anger as well as lower self-esteem.<sup>32</sup>

**Lowers healthcare costs.** Among a group of breast cancer patients, those in an intervention with group therapy have lower healthcare utilization — producing a 23.5% reduction in billing.<sup>33</sup> In addition, workplace group programs dealing with stress and coping reduce healthcare utilization by 34%; participants also report fewer sick days.<sup>34</sup>

### Teams/Competitions

Organizations have long used group activities like retreats, sports, and internal competitions to build camaraderie and enthusiasm. Such shared experiences forge bonds that can translate into better coordination and results. In the same way, employees who team up to accomplish a fun, yet meaningful, wellness goal get to know each other better — and stronger relationships lead to better performance, as described below.

**Builds relationships.** Teams that set goals together increase cohesiveness, according to a study among high school sports teams,<sup>35</sup> which makes success more likely.<sup>36</sup> Groups are more effective at achieving goals; however, regardless of a group's success in a competition, relationships between teammates still improve.<sup>37</sup>

**Drives sustainable weight loss.** The power of group dynamics helps individuals achieve specific health goals. During a 4-month weight loss program, participants recruited with friends are more likely to complete programs and keep off the weight.<sup>38</sup> A 16-week Internet-based team

competition to increase physical activity shows significant weight loss — with participants maintaining most of it even 6 months after the program ended.<sup>39</sup>

**Enhances problem solving.** When individuals hit a road block, the team can help get around it. Collaboration improves problem solving and decision making for individuals — by at least 20% for many.<sup>40</sup> It works for workplace productivity and for healthier lifestyles.

**Leverages pooled knowledge.** A team includes more than collective perspectives of the individuals.<sup>41</sup> Team members can share what they know, think, feel, and experience — creating a synergy that's hard to beat. Teammates celebrate each other's successes and help each other over hurdles as they strive to achieve common goals.

**Reinforces team citizenship.** One study found promotion of teamwork by leaders, along with team commitment and support, positively affects organization dynamics by changing individual behavior.<sup>42</sup> When each person works together as part of a unit to enhance wellness, everyone wins.

**Strengthens motivation and accountability.** Seeing and understanding goal-directed behavior can inspire others to do the same.<sup>43</sup> This effect increases when individuals are part of a group.<sup>44</sup> A sense of team pride and belonging, as well as accountability, is vital to improving individual effort and performance.



## Conclusions

- Negative health habits hurt your organization, primarily by increasing healthcare costs and decreasing productivity.
- Research showing the benefits of social support abounds, and is one successful way to engage employees in positive, healthy habits.
- While many sources of support exist, all contribute differently to foster a culture of health, for the workplace and beyond.

## Social Support Ideas

1. Promote team-oriented health promotion programs, like *Feel Like a Million*, *NutriSum*, and *Great American Fitness Adventure* available from HES. These interactive programs engage participants in health behavior change through team competitions and individual challenges.
2. Lead the formation of activity groups like walking, training for a fun run, yoga, softball, and basketball. Help people connect with each other while boosting fitness and camaraderie. Use online tools like *MapWalk* ([www.mapwalk.com](http://www.mapwalk.com)).
3. Create an online identity for your wellness program using Facebook, Twitter, or other social networking media. Invite employees, plus family and friends, to join for program updates, inspiring quotes, and other motivating content.
4. Host wellness events that encourage teamwork, like brainstorming sessions to address common fitness challenges, or luncheons where teammates can share public praise (Most Inspirational, Ms. or Mr. Congeniality, Team Comedian). Challenges like briefcase relays, zucchini races, or tug-of-wars are always popular and great for team-building.
5. Offer opportunities for wellness team leaders to expand leadership skills through workshops, lunch 'n learns, or virtual training.
6. Get your organization together for a cause. Find an active charity event that everyone can believe in (Relay for Life, AIDS walk), and help raise money and awareness. Invite employees to bring family and friends to the event.
7. Run a team spirit contest where each group decorates a door or workstation area, creates a motivational movie clip, or produces a wellness-themed podcast.
8. Call for volunteers to serve as wellness ambassadors and train them to offer support and encouragement to individuals and teams.
9. Point employees to internal resources that offer health behavior support, such as nurse advice lines, employee assistance programs, and health management services. Update an online list of links to community support resources relevant to your population.
10. Publicize and comment on team and individual program standings — build excitement by calling attention to those who come from behind to place higher in the ranking. “Looks like the 3rd Street Striders are gaining on the Finance Fitness Warriors — who’s going to end up in first place this week?”
11. Sponsor a weekly or monthly onsite or virtual support group. Give it an energizing name; invite coworkers and their families to join in and share successes, challenges, and solutions for healthier lifestyles. Schedule potluck lunches, with themes aligned to your wellness program — they’re a great way to share ideas and healthy recipes.
12. Host monthly family nights, where employees, family, and friends can have fun being healthy. During winter and summer Games, have mock Olympics events. Give medals, plus wellness-themed prizes — step counters, recipe books, water bottles, etc.

# Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov))
- Developmental Psychology ([www.apa.org/journals/dev](http://www.apa.org/journals/dev))
- Families, Systems, & Health ([www.apa.org/journals/fsh](http://www.apa.org/journals/fsh))
- Health Communication ([www.tandf.co.uk/journals/HHTH](http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/HHTH))
- Health Education & Behavior ([heb.sagepub.com](http://heb.sagepub.com))
- Health Psychology ([www.apa.org/journals/hea](http://www.apa.org/journals/hea))
- Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology ([www.apa.org/journals/abn](http://www.apa.org/journals/abn))
- Journal of Advanced Nursing ([www.journalofadvancednursing.com](http://www.journalofadvancednursing.com))
- Journal of Aging and Health ([jah.sagepub.com](http://jah.sagepub.com))
- Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology ([www.apa.org/journals/ccp](http://www.apa.org/journals/ccp))
- Journal of Experimental Social Psychology ([www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp))
- Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine ([www.joem.org](http://www.joem.org))
- Journal of Occupational Health Psychology ([www.apa.org/journals/ocp](http://www.apa.org/journals/ocp))
- Journal of Personality and Social Psychology ([www.apa.org/journals/psp](http://www.apa.org/journals/psp))
- Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology ([www.guilford.com/pr/jnsc.htm](http://www.guilford.com/pr/jnsc.htm))
- Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology ([www.humankinetics.com/jsep](http://www.humankinetics.com/jsep))
- Journal of the American Dietetic Association ([www.adajournal.org](http://www.adajournal.org))
- Journal of the American Medical Association ([www.jama.ama-assn.org](http://www.jama.ama-assn.org))
- Military Psychology ([www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/08995605.asp](http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/08995605.asp))
- NeuroRehabilitation ([iospress.metapress.com/content/103177](http://iospress.metapress.com/content/103177))
- The New England Journal of Medicine ([content.nejm.org](http://content.nejm.org))
- Obesity ([www.nature.com/oby](http://www.nature.com/oby))
- Occupational Therapy Journal of Research ([www.otjonline.com](http://www.otjonline.com))
- Psychosomatic Medicine ([www.psychosomaticmedicine.org](http://www.psychosomaticmedicine.org))
- Social Science & Medicine ([www.elsevier.com/locate/socscimed](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/socscimed))

## End Notes

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