

The Partner Paradox: 'Outsourcing' Self-discipline

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My wife and I go to spinning class a couple mornings a week. It's something we like to do together, and I feel like I benefit from having a regular workout partner. Some days I'm just lazy, or I don't want to venture out in the pre-dawn cold, but having a supportive partner motivates me. She bolsters my self-discipline when it flags.

Or does she? Is it possible that having a supportive partner might have the opposite and paradoxical effect, actually undermining effort and commitment to health and fitness goals over the long haul? Perhaps we conserve our limited supply of self-control, "outsourcing" our effort when we know that a close friend or partner is in the wings, helping us achieve a goal.

Two psychological scientists have been exploring this novel idea in the laboratory. Grainne Fitzsimons of Duke University and Eli Finkel of Northwestern suspected that moral support might have a flip-side, namely emotional dependence. If we know someone has our back, isn't it possible that we unconsciously rely on that support to help us reach our goals—and thus slack off? Here's how they tested this idea in a couple different studies.

Fitzsimons and Finkel recruited a group of 30-something women, all of whom were in a romantic relationship, for an online experiment. They gave half of them an exercise intended to deplete them mentally. Then they asked some of the women to think of an example where their partner had helped them achieve their long-term health and fitness goals—like picking up the slack at home or being a workout partner. The other volunteers also thought about their partners' support, but not specifically in the area of health and fitness; these served as controls. Then, finally, the scientists asked all the volunteers a series of questions about the commitment to health and fitness and how much time and effort they planned to spend on these goals the following week.

The idea was to see if thinking of a partner's support depleted personal effort and commitment—and that's just what the scientists found. Those who were aware of a partner's helping hand planned to commit less time and work to health goals. What's more, this effect was strongest among those who had been mentally depleted, suggesting that the women were outsourcing the work when they had less self-discipline in reserve to draw on.

The scientists wanted to double-check these findings, and they did so in an interesting way. They again had only some of a group of volunteers—in this case both men and women—think about a way in which their romantic partner helped with their goals. Then they gave them an opportunity to either work on that goal or to procrastinate on an entertaining—but unproductive—puzzle task. The results were consistent: Those who were aware that they had a reliable partner in the wings procrastinated much more, apparently unconcerned about depleting their mental energy on mere entertainment.

So this sounds like it's a disadvantage to have a wingman (or woman). But not so fast. Fitzsimons and

Finkel ran one more version of this experiment, but in this one they also measured the volunteers' level of commitment to their partner. As [reported in the on-line version of the journal *Psychological Science*](#), they found that those who outsourced their effort to a significant other were more committed to that partner. In other words, relying on a partner for help with a goal might diminish the personal effort we devote to that goal—yet benefit the relationship overall.

This last result has important implications for how we think of dependence in relationships. We tend to think of dependence in terms of intimate and sexual needs, but these findings suggest that dependence might also arise from a partner's unique ability to help with life's goals. Indeed, long-term partners may develop a shared self-regulatory system, relying on one another for help with the discipline needed for success in facing life's challenges. We might rely on a partner for help with self-control in one arena, ironically undermining our short-term commitment to that specific goal but conserving our overall supply of discipline for all our shared goals—and mutual benefit in the partnership.

Wray Herbert's book, [*On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-Wired Habits*](#), was recently published by Crown. Excerpts from his two blogs—"We're Only Human" and "Full Frontal Psychology"—appear regularly in *The Huffington Post* and in *Scientific American Mind*.