

Can your friends make you thin?

Recent Harvard study asserts that social circle affects weight

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Terri Falsetta and Suzanne Radassao of Washingtonville have been friends since their daughters were in nursery school — 17 years ago.

"When I was younger, I was physically fit," says Falsetta. "But then I had two daughters ... and got caught up in life. We neglect ourselves taking care of everyone else."

Well-needed rejuvenation was often found at a restaurant over a sumptuous lunch. "It's a lot easier to go shopping and out to lunch than exercise," says Radassao. "Sure, I lifted children and ran up and down the stairs, but I didn't really do anything for years. I had gained some weight. ..."

Falsetta admits that she gained some weight as well. This wouldn't surprise researchers at Harvard University, whose recently published study indicates, among other things, that friends may be impacting one another's weight.

"This may be because ideas about food portions, exercise and what counts as a normal body size all seem to be influenced by the people to whom we're connected," according to a recent StatePoint Media Wire article.

"That makes sense," says Janice L. Wolf, M.D., an internist with a subspecialty in bariatric medicine. Her New Windsor practices, respectively, are Valley Medical LLC and, for the past 11 years, Physician's Weight Solutions LLC. "If you want to lose weight, you need to prepare the environment to help you."

Especially women. "Men typically eat, say, their meat and potatoes because it tastes good," says Wolf. "If they say they're going on a diet, they tend to be more focused and stick to it."

For women, it's emotional

"Women eat more for emotional satisfaction — besides the fact that it tastes good. We base a lot of what we do on what's going on around us. We need to find other things that satisfy and pacify."

And men tend to do things without seeking the support of others, she says, although they are usually encouraged by their families.

Radassao's husband has always been an avid exerciser. "Me, no," she says.

She did take a Zumba class with Nancy Pagan, a ballroom dance instructor and personal trainer who was in the management end of the medical field for the first half of her career.

"I saw what happens after the fact," Pagan says of the effects of unhealthy lifestyles.

Two years ago, Pagan opened Feminine Fun Fitness LLC in Monroe, an all-women's fitness center with a different approach. "Our philosophy is not just about weight loss, but emotional and spiritual well-being," she says.

While there are a few pieces of gym equipment, women who range from their teenage years into their 80s, have 42 classes to choose from.

'Inspiring all shapes and sizes'

"We're motivating and inspiring all shapes and sizes," says Pagan, the mother of four children who had her daughter at the age of 41. Those extra 20-30 pounds made a difference on her 5-foot-2 frame, and she knows the importance of good nutrition.

"When you're in your 20s, you can get away with a workout and eating what you want. When you're over 40, you can't consume the same number of calories," she says. "I recommend getting rid of the 'white stuff,' eating three meals and two snacks — starting with breakfast — that are natural foods from the earth and not processed. I tell people to plan ahead, and 'cheat' one day a week."

Pagan sits down with all her members, discusses their goals and reviews them every two months or so.

"It's about being healthy and feeling energized," she says. "And knowing that people care."

"And you're a winner just for trying," underscores Wolf, who says that sometimes declaring an intent to lose weight can be a double-edged sword. "If you feel overweight, you're already feeling guilty that you have failed at taking care of yourself properly. If you fail at your diet, you feel even worse ... and then everyone starts to add their suggestions."

The buddy system

A year ago, Radassao joined Feminine Fun Fitness with another friend and, three weeks later, encouraged Falsetta to give it a try.

"I inched my way back in because of Suzanne," says Falsetta, who says her confidence was knocked to the floor because of the weight gain and a medical issue. "I wasn't myself. Today, I am who I used to be, although I can't expect the results at 47 that I could at 25."

Both women credit the nonjudgmental and encouraging atmosphere of the fitness center — and each other — for their stick-to-itiveness, lending credence to the researchers' findings.

"If Suzanne hadn't gotten me started, I'm not sure where I'd be," says Falsetta, who's lost 20 pounds and improved her stamina. "The other night, a woman I've met there begged me to stay for the next class as I was getting ready to leave. So I stayed — and tried belly dancing."

"Terri and I go every day, five days a week. We encourage each other," says Radassao, pleased with the inches — and pants size — that have melted away.

"I was just joking with Suzanne that this is not going to end; it's for life," says Falsetta. "And I'm OK with that."

And yes, they still go to lunch.

But now, they look at the menus more carefully and make better choices.

Although sometimes, you just gotta have that burger.

State Point Media Wire also contributed to this report.

IS OBESITY CONTAGIOUS?

Can you "catch" obesity from your friends? And if you have thin friends, can this help you lose weight?

According to new research at Harvard University, friends might, indeed, be impacting one another's weight.

The Harvard scientists assert that adult obesity might result because people tend to be influenced by others in their social circles.

However, researchers also found that when one person loses weight, others around them lose weight, too. It's to your advantage to involve friends and family in weight management. For instance:

- Get a gym buddy or walking partner and use the time to connect as well as exercise.
- Be willing to have open, nonjudgmental conversations about your struggles and accomplishments in losing weight - and gently share what helps and what doesn't.

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