

PROBLEM SOLVING

Friendly overture could help co-worker

Friday, July 2, 2010

SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

A colleague's 20-year marriage fell apart this year and, since the breakup, she has put on a lot of weight. This is the person I'm closest to at work and she has said she feels awful about how she looks. I go to the gym for weight training and spinning classes every day at lunch or after work. Should I ask her to come? Or would this seem like criticism?

– *Concerned Co-worker*

Dear Concerned,

Your hesitation shows a sensitivity to your colleague's feelings that should colour how you extend the invitation. But it shouldn't prevent you from asking. Invite her as your guest to try a class of her choice. She can always decline, and probably will. But if you renew your invitation every now and then she may decide to join you. A non-judgmental phone call or e-mail telling her that you would be happy to have her company can hardly be viewed as criticism.

The transition to being single is one of life's most punishing events, according to decades of research, so even if she doesn't join you, your attempt to make contact may be welcome. Though being single is more dangerous to a man's health than to a woman's, research shows that single women are more likely than married women to drink, smoke and abuse drugs; they are also more likely to become disabled as they age.

Loneliness can be as damaging to health as any of those classic self-destructive habits, and even predicts a decline in physical activity. A soon-to-be-published study of 229 middle-aged and aging men and women, who were monitored for three years by University of Chicago psychologists Louise Hawkey and John Cacioppo, found that loneliness causes people to exercise less. They found that it isn't how many people you know, but how existentially alone you feel that reduces your enthusiasm for physical activity. "If you're having a miserable day, you're less likely to exercise, and more likely to eat high-fat foods," Prof. Cacioppo noted. The endorphins released by exercise – not to mention the pleasure of doing it with a friend – will likely lift your colleague's mood as it improves her health.

We presuppose a degree of distance from colleagues' personal matters in the workplace, but increasingly, the line between the personal and the social, the professional and the private, even when it comes to physical and mental health, is being blurred. Colleagues notice when we're stressed and depressed, obviously, and so do managers. The best companies address the issue, often with onsite gyms, subsidies of gym memberships, sponsoring walk-a-thons, and so on.

Do friendly overtures from a co-worker actually help a person get off the couch? Anecdotal evidence and research studies say yes. For example, many runners would pound the pavement less, or perhaps not at all, if they weren't motivated by work-based running groups and marathons.

Ongoing research led by epidemiologist Abby King at the Stanford School of Medicine in California, first published in 2007, shows there is a hierarchy of prods that help us get moving. The project compared three groups of middle-aged subjects: those who received a computer-based reminder to exercise; those who were called by someone who asked how they were faring with their regimen; and those in a control group. For the first six months, the automated phone reminders increased physical activity almost as much as a personal trainer would. But by 12 months, the automated reminders paled compared with the effect of a real person on the end of the line.

As for reaching out to your co-worker, I agree with your first impulse, which also jibes with Dr. King's point of view. People faced with changing unhealthy habits often need more than will power. A caring nudge is worth the risk of being turned down. "A light touch," she says, "can have a lasting effect."

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*. Her blog on the science of human relationships can be found at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-open-mind>.