



e-quilibrium

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Modeling

One of the aspects of being in a close relationship with another person is to care about that person's well being, including his/her health. In my clinical practice, I will often have a client express concern about how a significant other person in her/his life either continues to practice a negative health behavior (e.g., smoking) or is unwilling to adopt a positive health behavior (e.g., exercise).

A reasonable assumption when it comes to relationships is that we cannot change someone else's behavior; we can only change our own. Depending upon what the specific behavior is, a change in one's own behavior may at least require a different response from others. In some cases, there is a direct effect of one person's behavior on others. For example, if the family member buying groceries doesn't buy ice cream, others in the household will have to do something other than open the freezer if they want to eat ice cream. Or, parking further from the store for the additional walking means the other riders will need to walk further as well. In other cases, there is no direct effect of one person's behavior on others. Choosing to order lower fat entrees at a restaurant has no direct impact on what others at the table order.

One specific type of relationship that has been the subject of much research regarding the behavioral influence of one person on another is marriage. Interestingly, a 2004 report from the Centers for Disease Control indicated that married persons were healthier across population subgroups, a finding that has been corroborated in other research. (An exception was that

married persons tended to have more weight problems, especially men.) While one possible contributor to this pattern could be that healthier people are more likely to get married, the prevailing explanation is that persons who are married tend to have better health behaviors. There is research evidence that some men and women decrease use of substances when they marry. A significant event in a marriage, such as the birth of a child or a health scare, may also be a trigger for positive changes in health behavior.

A recent study reported in the journal *Health Services Research* found that improvement in the health behavior on the part of one spouse was frequently associated with a similar improvement in the other spouse. The pattern was strongest with smoking cessation and reducing alcohol consumption, but also evident in increasing physical activity, having cholesterol screens, and getting flu shots.

If a person wants to see a positive change in the health behavior of a spouse, being a model for the desired behavior is an important place to begin. This certainly doesn't mean that the other person will automatically follow, but there is research evidence indicating that the odds of the other person making the change improve in the presence of a spousal model for the behavior.

While the research I've mentioned has been done with married couples, being a healthy model for others makes good sense in other relationships as well. When it comes to having concern about the health behavior of a significant other person, the idiom "actions speak louder than words" is a useful rule of thumb.

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