

## LIVING

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Photo: Corbis

# Play together, stay together

Exercising with your partner helps to reduce conflict in a relationship, writes **Zara Horner**

Some couples' idea of a romantic date is dining at an expensive restaurant followed by a trip to the theatre. But for husband and wife team, pilot Chris Wright and nurse Alison, working out together gives them a chance to work on their relationship.

The couple use their time hiking Hong Kong's mountains or lifting weights in the gym to catch up on each other's busy lives. "We've discussed and resolved many conflicts when exercising together," says Alison. "And we often save those all-important financial discussions for our hikes."

Working out with your partner means quality time together, plus the additional benefits of getting fit. Whether you head to the gym for an hour, tandem cycle, run or shape up at home with a Pilates DVD, working out with a significant other can turn an obligatory exercise session into something fun and rewarding.

"Every relationship has its issues but training together often helps overcome those," says Adam Menhennett, director of Physical Harmony Personal Training.

"It's a great way for couples to re-connect. Seeing each other work hard and improve is a very positive thing, maybe she likes the changes she sees in him, and vice versa. It can help get over a relationship hurdle," says Menhennett.

Psychiatrist David Lau says common interests are vital in nurturing a good relationship. "It's a good time to talk about any issues or problems within the relationship," says Lau. "Each person can concentrate on what's being said and on finding a resolution."

"Sharing the experience and feelings of exercise as a couple is a good thing which could spill over into all aspects of the relationship so that people get used to sharing and talking. There's no doubt that seeing your partner focus on getting healthy, watching their body change and noticing their self-confidence grow will enhance intimacy."

Emma Bruce, a teacher at Hong Kong's City University and her husband, Thorsten, general manager at a medical company, enjoy the time they spend together while exercising. "We always work out together. We go hiking and to

the gym, and run together." The pair ran the Phuket International Marathon last month. Bruce says having similar fitness levels and the same approach to the half-marathon helped.

"We chatted all the way. Committing together to do something was a good idea as it meant we had to do it. I'd get us out the door, but Thorsten would make us run further."

Bruce says exercising together has made her realise they make a good team. "I suppose our training times are opportunities for us to air any problems and resolve differences because it's just the two of us, with no distractions. It's a good chance to chat about issues at work or anything that might be bugging you. I know we managed to sort out quite a few things on our training runs together."

Personal trainer Louise Porter says the Bruces are successful because they ensure they have similar goals before starting an exercise programme. "It's stating the obvious, but men and women are different," she says.

"Physically, mentally, and how

they approach exercise, too. Often women want to lose weight and work the lower body while men want to bulk up, concentrating on the upper body.

"Then there's the ego issue with the man often insisting on lifting too much weight to impress the partner, and then giving the wife a hard time if she can't complete a set. It's important to resolve all these issues before they start," Porter says.

"Agreeing on the fitness goal is the first step, and if there's a physical limitation with one person, like hypertension or joint problems, the programme has to be modified to allow both parties to achieve that goal safely," she says.

"In a place like Hong Kong training couples can be challenging," says Menhennett. "You often have very motivated, focused and competitive people here, which can mean a great training session."

The professionals follow their own advice, too. Trainers Stephen Choi and his wife, Cat, have worked out together for more than a decade. "We love to be with each other. And we haven't experienced any

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Adam Menhennett,  
Physical Harmony Personal Training

problems with the set-up," says Stephen. "We work out for more than two hours every day and it keeps us close - we have so much more to talk about in our lives."

The couple devise programmes for each other, analyse, encourage and even criticise each other's form in the gym.

Working out with a personal trainer is another good way for couples to exercise together, provided they've discussed their individual goals and decided what type of training they want to do together. The class structure also works well, says Menhennett.

A spin, yoga or fitball class can provide the sort of non-competitive environment that's perfect for each partner to work at his or her own pace. "With running and cycling you'll never have a perfectly matched couple so it becomes a juggle to make it hard enough, yet safe enough for both partners to get a good workout without feeling bored or injuring themselves."

Another husband and wife team, vet Justin Choo and editor Erin Bowland, decided to take up dragon boat racing four years ago because it

was something they could share. "If only one partner is into a sport it takes a lot of time away from each other with training and competitions," says Bowland.

"We can sit and chat about training sessions, comment on each other's technique and generally share the excitement. It's good to share the same interests."

Trying something new together is also a great idea, says Porter, although it's important to make sure both partners want to do it to prevent feelings of resentment, and quitting. "Writing a list of every activity you'd like to try is a good start. You may find you're both curious about tai chi, for example, or wouldn't mind giving salsa dance lessons a go or learning to play tennis together."

It's also important not to make comparisons. "Men often lose weight and gain muscle quicker than women and that can be discouraging," says Porter.

"Having individual improvement markers - like increased flexibility and speed - is preferable. It all requires compromise, but then what aspect of a relationship doesn't?"

## Signposts: Believe it

Michelle Gabbe

"Whether you think you can do something or think you cannot, either way you're probably right." Those wise words came from innovator and philanthropist Henry Ford. It begs the question: in the midst of a crisis, who can harness the power of positive thinking?

Thoughts come first, then emotions, followed by behaviour, which feeds back into more thoughts. Because we're only able to hold the picture of one conscious thought at a time, our conscious thoughts contribute greatly to the way we feel.

We know we can make ourselves feel bad, or even sick, by dwelling on a disastrous situation. Often we have the notion that if we just suffer long enough, stewing in our own juices, we'll then have earned the right to feel better. Actually, stewing in your own juices is exactly the right way to describe what's happening. Every recurring thought sends out a biochemical message to the body to do something. In simple terms, the body is a slave to your mindful instructions, making whatever you say true for the body. So if you find yourself repeatedly saying, "It doesn't matter what I eat, I cannot lose an ounce", this becomes a message to the body to enact metabolic wizardry that allows it to hold on to your excess weight no matter what.

We're all familiar with the effects of adrenaline, the stress hormone we can call on for a quick blast of energy or a last-minute surge of creative brilliance. Adrenaline junkies seem to be "on" all the time, and describe themselves as performing better under pressure. But this is not the only hormone at your disposal.

Oxytocin, sometimes called the hormone of love, is best known for labour induction. Scientists recognise that its soothing, anti-stress effects speed wound healing, reduce pain and counteract sexual impotence. Your body is stimulated to produce oxytocin naturally whenever you give selflessly or feel loved, and during yoga, exercise, spiritual practice and affectionate touching of people or even pets.

One client describes nearly every work project as "a complete and utter disaster." And sure enough, his business is littered with crises. He has high blood pressure and gets angry whenever his employees dare to challenge his negative outlook.

I usually ask him to derail his hopeless train of thought with phrases such as, "What if I suddenly had a flash of insight into this situation? What if all parties wanted to make as much money as I do on this deal? What if there were 10 different solutions to this problem?" So, recognising the destructive effects of negative thinking, how can you switch from fearful pessimism

to calm optimism in tough times? Try the following techniques.

Try turning your attention to your breathing. Breathe in for five counts, then allow yourself to exhale naturally and slowly. Imagine watching the air flow in and back out. After 10 breaths or so, don't be surprised if you feel a huge yawn well up and out - it's a good sign that negative energy is being released. You might also get a sudden flash of insight, or a solution you hadn't previously thought of.



Smile. Think of someone you love who makes you laugh. Failing that, force a smile. Research has shown that even faking the facial movements that produce a smile signals the body to secrete feel-good endorphins which strengthen the immune system. And if you fake-smile for long enough, chances are your thoughts will drift over to something amusing anyway.

Write. Coaches often ask their clients to act as if something they desire has already happened. It's a way of tricking the subconscious into believing that an experience has been had and can easily be repeated. Find a piece of paper and a pen and quickly fill up a full page describing the situation - how you feel, whose fault it is, what you fear will be the outcome and so on. Shred or even burn that piece of paper. Now do the opposite. Create a second page detailing how you would like the situation to be if everything and everyone involved were perfect. You have just magnetised yourself to attract what you desire.

For those of you who tend to get clarity by hearing yourself talk through an issue, replace the writing process by sharing your story with a non-judgmental friend who is willing to listen.

Michelle Gabbe, PhD, is a member of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community (info@coachinghk.org)

## Vet's casebook: Beat the heat

### What precautions should I take when exercising my husky in summer?

Dogs stand a real risk of getting heatstroke in the summer months. They lose most of their excess body heat via evaporation of saliva from the tongue when panting, but humidity makes it more difficult for evaporation to occur.

Vets in Hong Kong see a number of heatstroke cases each year, some resulting in the death of the dog. Often, people are unaware of the signs until it's too late.

We usually see heat stress or heatstroke in dogs that have been exercised outdoors on a hot or humid day, or in animals that have been left in cars. Heatstroke is common in fat dogs, brachycephalic dogs with flat faces, such as the bulldog, pug and Pekinese, and in dogs with collapsing tracheas (a problem often seen in Yorkshire terriers, Pomeranians, Maltese). Dogs with thick coats, such as chows, huskies, samoyeds and Poms also heat up easily.

The dog will be panting - often intensely and harshly. The eyes may be wide and staring, the gums can often look pale or greyish and dry. There may be salivation, and the dog may stagger or appear weak. As the situation worsens, he may collapse and lose consciousness.

Heatstroke can result in brain, heart or kidney damage.

If your dog is panting excessively and you suspect he may be suffering

from heatstroke, try to take his rectal temperature with a thermometer. If the temperature is above 40.2°C hose him down with cool running water in the bath or shower. Work it through his coat to cool the skin and remember to hose his belly and inner legs as well. Splash a little into his mouth to wet his tongue. You can stop the shower when his temperature is back down to about 39.5°C.

Take him to your vet straight away for a checkup. If your pet is staggering around, or has collapsed, pour water over him and rush him to the vet. Call ahead so medication is ready.

To prevent heatstroke never leave a pet in a car, or tied outdoors with no shelter or water. When walking your dog in the country parks in warm weather, carry plenty of water, allow rest time to cool off, and try to end your walk where he can be rinsed down. It's also important to give your long-haired dog a trim.

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