

A HEALTHY PARTNERS

Honor your commitment to your partner by making these **lifestyle changes** together

Check It Off



When it comes to achieving greater health as a couple, try making a list. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services offers an easy-to-use guide for recommended screening tests. Visit healthfinder.gov and search "stay healthy at any age" for separate men's and women's checklists.



BY STEPHANIE R. CONNER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF NEWTON

You promised to love each other in sickness and in health. But if the unhealthy days seem more prevalent, it's time to do more than just honor your vows. It's time to commit to a healthy lifestyle—together.

“Your spouse is one of the people you spend the most time with. So your attitude about health and your ability to help or to undermine your spouse’s health has a huge impact,” says Michelle May, M.D., chair of the Americans in Motion Advisory Panel for the American Academy of Family Physicians and author of *Eat What You Love, Love What You Eat*. “You should look at this as literally a partnership for life.”

By helping your partner make better choices—and making better choices yourself—you can work toward a long and healthy life together. Don’t worry, you don’t need a marriage license to make this commitment. Here are some simple ways any couple can get started.

PROBLEM: Your partner has turned into a couch potato.

SOLUTION: Hit the gym together, or make a plan so both partners have time to exercise.

It’s not unusual for couples to slowly retire the gym membership after the honeymoon phase wears off, and maybe those love handles have gotten easier to grab as a result. Help your mate get back on track by creating a regimen you can enjoy together.

“Studies show that what your spouse does is a key predictor in how much you’re going to exercise,” says Edward M. Phillips, M.D., coauthor of *ACSM’s Exercise Is Medicine™: A Clinician’s Guide to Exercise Prescription*.

You might choose to exercise together—play tennis at the local park, hike on the weekend or simply carpool to the gym. Whatever it is, take your commitment seriously.

“If you’ve agreed to exercise together and you don’t hold up your end, then it’s easier for the other person to blow it off as well,” May says.

Everyone has different exercise personalities, she explains, so supporting your spouse in a program may not necessarily be about working out together. It might be about setting up a system—such as taking turns getting the kids ready for school or for bed, so your partner has a chance to hit the gym or go for a walk.

PROBLEM: Your other half is a ball of stress.

PROBLEM: Your mate hasn't kicked that smoking habit. (And maybe you haven't either.)

SOLUTION: Commit to quit together.

If you're both smokers, kicking the habit is a significant change, and one, Phillips says, in which you should include your partner. Why? Because when one partner quits and the other doesn't, it can cause separation.

"Talk about what you're willing to do as a unit," he says.

If you've already quit, May offers this reminder: "Quitting smoking is not something you can do to or for someone else." She advises not nagging your spouse to quit, and to make sure he knows you are there to support him in whatever way you can.

But, unlike diet and exercise, smoking is a situation in which your partner's habits have a direct effect on your health because of the risks of secondhand smoke.

"This is an area where I would set boundaries," she says. Ask that your spouse not smoke in the car, in the house or around the kids. "These are appropriate and fair boundaries to set, because it does put you at a direct health risk."

Phillips adds that a key to smoking cessation is identifying the triggers and removing them. That might mean eliminating certain foods from the house, not going to the neighborhood pub or even switching cars.

"The keyword is being supportive—and creative," he says. "Be prepared to reward your spouse ... with some sort of recognition for the effort that they're making."

One idea is to agree to take the money that he has been spending on cigarettes and put it into an account. If your spouse has a \$10-a-day smoking habit, "after 100 days, you'd have \$1,000," Phillips says. Match the funds, and before long, you've saved for a fun, healthy vacation!

SOLUTION: Ask how you can share some of the load.

Stress is not only uncomfortable but also inflammatory, says Debbie Mandel, M.A., author of *Addicted to Stress: A Woman's 7 Step Program to Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life*, and stress management expert for Lance Armstrong's Live Strong website. Stress is a contributing factor to heart disease, gastrointestinal problems, headaches and more.

Women often neglect their own health and peace of mind in favor of their families, work and other responsibilities.

If you see your wife taking on too much, offer to get groceries or do the housework. Urge her to go out with friends while you stay home with the kids for the afternoon, Mandel suggests.

She also advises making sure you take time for vacations. It doesn't have to cost a lot of money, but it's important to take a break from work.

"There's great productivity in rest," she says.

PROBLEM: Your partner refuses to go to the doctor—even when he doesn't feel well.

SOLUTION: Be supportive, and remind him how much you care.

While both partners should encourage each other to get medical care when they need it, let's face it—men tend to need more prodding.

A 2008 survey, commissioned by Solvay Pharmaceuticals Inc., of women with husbands or male partners older than 40, found that women were twice as likely as men to encourage their mates to get annual health exams.

But Phillips says nagging doesn't work. "Support should be offered and can be very effective," he says. "Otherwise, it's just criticism."

If you need help coaxing your mate, try Mandel's approach: "Tell him, 'I want you to be around for a long time. I need you.'"

In some couples, making the appointment for your spouse can work.

Mandel also recommends inviting yourself along. "Say you're coming with him. Then say, 'I'm concerned, and I want to allay my fears.'"

And make sure you both get routine screenings. If it helps, schedule your mammogram and his prostate test for the same week, or go together to get your blood work done for heart-health checks.

Reward yourselves for keeping up with annual exams and screenings by going to your favorite restaurant or enjoying a couple's massage.





PROBLEM: Your companion thinks pizza is the base of the food pyramid.

SOLUTION: Take the kitchen duties seriously.

The first step to helping a partner change, May says, is modeling that behavior. “Changing and addressing our own behavior first is critical,” she says. “Beyond that, ask, ‘How can I support you?’ ”

If you’re the primary grocery shopper in the family, for example, it might be a simple change, like not buying certain treats. Or you might make a slight change in the way you prepare foods.

May also suggests getting up five to 10 minutes early to make healthy lunches to pack for work. Or suggest taking a healthy-cooking class together.

What if you’re trying to make changes, but aren’t sure everyone else in the house will follow suit? Mandel suggests slowly introducing healthier foods.

If you make macaroni and cheese, use two-thirds white pasta and one-third whole wheat. Each time, modify the proportions until it’s 100 percent whole wheat. You can do the same thing with mashed potatoes by using skim milk and adding cauliflower.

“Eventually, people’s taste buds change,” she says. ➡

SAY IT RIGHT

A nag. It’s the last thing we want to be, but when you care about your spouse, it can sometimes be hard to avoid this unfortunate label.

Nagging is one way we can unintentionally undermine our partner’s health, says Michelle May, M.D., chair of the Americans in Motion Advisory Panel for the American Academy of Family Physicians.

“It’s important to understand that spouses are like every other human being,” she says. “They’re motivated by positive small-steps approaches.”

Your approach, however, can make all the difference. May suggests using “I” statements, not “you” statements. Using phrases like “You need to” and “You should” can put your spouse on the defensive.

“I” statements, May says, are phrases like “I love you so much, and I really care about your health,” “I want you to be healthy for me and our children,” and “I’d love for you to go to the doctor. I can go with you if you want.”

“They can still say no,” she says, “but there’s no argument. They have to be able to respect that.”

When looking to motivate your spouse, May suggests using the following types of statements:

- + “Let’s spend some time together getting ready for our vacation. Let’s train for hiking!”
- + “Let’s work to get in shape so that we have more energy when we retire.”
- + “Let’s start packing healthy lunches for work the night before, so we don’t feel the urge to hit the fast-food drive-through anymore.”