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Are sportier people better friends? New research looks at physical activity and close relationships

Every day, sports and physical activity help support a healthy mindset for loads of people. But it might be in more ways than you expected. Like did you know working out could make you more adept at resolving conflicts? Or that it may help you have better relationships with the people you are close to?

In Professor [Nancy Collins's](#) Close Relationships Lab in UC Santa Barbara's Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences, researchers are looking at just that: how social and cognitive processes shape close relationships in adulthood, and the impact that these processes have on health and well-being across one's lifespan. One such researcher, graduate student Paige Harris, is exploring the ways in which physical activity and sports impact romantic relationships and friendships. Her dissertation on the effects of physical activity on psychological, physiological and social processes recently received a National Institute of Social Sciences dissertation award for 2023.

"Sports and physical activity have served many utilities throughout my life — a hobby, an escape from school, a place to hang with friends, a way to exert my energy, a chance to compete, and a place to think and find peace," Harris said. "Physical activity leads to a myriad of intrapersonal benefits, including increases in positive affect and mental health, enhancements in cognition and brain health, and

improvements in physiological processes and sleep.”

In the Close Relationships Lab, Harris is conducting studies that look at romantic partners and friendships. Her dissertation poses the question: “Given that physical activity promotes individual health and well-being, can it also help people develop happier and healthier close relationships?” Physical activity restores emotional, cognitive and physiological resources that then enable individuals to engage in pro-relationship behaviors, which in turn, improve relationship and social outcomes. Her studies will look to further develop this theoretical framework.

“Although there is a large literature on the benefits of physical activity for *personal* health and well-being,” said Collins, who is Harris’s advisor in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, “Paige’s hypothesis is that physical activity also helps individuals be better *social partners* — more attentive, more patient and better able to regulate their behavior and respond to the needs of others.”

Harris’s argument, Collins noted, is not that physical activity is, itself, socially engaging (although this is an important benefit of being physically active) — but that “physical activity builds and restores cognitive, emotional, self-regulatory and physiological resources within the individual, which then translate into being a more patient, attentive and caring person.”

“If her carefully planned research provides evidence in support of her hypothesis, then her program of research would have very important implications for models of relationship maintenance and interpersonal thriving,” added Collins.

Harris was inspired to pursue this line of study by her own passion for health and well-being which started when she was young.

“Growing up, I loved being active and was fortunate to play a variety of sports,” she said. During college, her academic training in psychology led her to think more scientifically about the benefits of physical activity beyond being healthy and feeling good.

After graduate school, Harris plans to get a job in research and data analytics. “I hope to apply my research and the skills that I’ve learned in my future career to better understand and foster well-being,” she said.

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