

Connecting Through Exercise

Play is nature's remedy for stress! And connecting through exercise is one way increase your activity while making social connections to improve your overall health.

We've always known that exercise is good for us. But the latest evidence shows exercise not only strengthens your heart and can help with weight management, but regular physical activity can also slow the aging process and potentially add years to your life – especially if you are physically active with others.

A study from [Saint Luke's Mid America Heart Institute](#) indicates that exercising in a group may be better for extending your lifespan than exercising alone. Researchers tracked about 9,000 people for 25 years and found that playing tennis added an average of 9.7 years to life expectancy, followed by badminton (6.2 years) and soccer (4.7 years). These are all activities where social connections are happening playfully.

These results also correlate to other research that shows social connections are strongly linked to longevity. “For both mental and physical well-being and longevity, we’re understanding that our social connections are probably the single-most important feature of living a long, healthy, happy life,” says study co-author Dr. James O’Keefe. Not to mention that if something feels like fun, you’re more likely to do it. So give it a try! Here are some ways to connect through exercise, whether in-person or virtually.

In-person Exercise

- **Go for a hike:** Gather your friends and plan a day of fun and movement at a local, state, or national park. Pack a lunch, plenty of water, and your camera.
- **Team sports:** Recreational leagues are available for men and women of all ages and abilities. You’ll get together for practices and games and may even travel to tournaments. Check with your local parks and recreation department or search for pickleball, softball, baseball, soccer, volleyball, or tennis leagues online.
- **Join or start a walking club:** Let the conversation flow as you get your steps in and move toward better health. Walk around the neighborhood, at the mall, or a park. Take turns leading the walk, and encourage each member to map out a different course for variety. If time allows, enjoy a hot or cool beverage together after your walk.

- **Dust off your dancing shoes:** Even if you've never danced a step in your life, it's never too late to learn! Learning how to swing, tango, rumba, or do the hustle is a fun, energizing way to sneak in some exercise. Some communities offer dance clubs where members meet regularly to learn new steps and practice together.
- **Join a group fitness class:** Invite your friends to sign up for an exercise class together. There's an endless variety of formats to choose from including water aerobics, yoga, Pilates, martial arts, step, cardio kickboxing, cycling, boot camp, and more. You're sure to find something that makes you sweat and laugh.
- **Enjoy seasonal activities:** Make fitness a year-round habit by sharing fall, winter, spring and summer activities. Make a point to try new sports together and find some new favorites. From fishing and camping to snowshoeing and sailing, if you maintain an open mind and an adventurous spirit, you'll never run out of ideas for fun and fitness.

Virtual Exercise

- **Start a Walking Challenge:** Group challenges can be fun and are an excellent way to stay motivated, especially if your friends and family are competitive people. For example, set a weekly step challenge or see who can get the most steps on a particular day.
- **Workout on Zoom:** It's possible to get a great workout indoors, especially if the weather is unpleasant. You can set up a live video chat via FaceTime or Zoom and participate together. Try incorporating bodyweight exercises or follow the same workout on your respective devices.
- **Have a group call while you walk:** Start a group call before you all head out the door. You can take turns sharing funny stories or jokes, playing your favorite music or games like I Spy. Even if the call is a quick one, you'll get a boost of social wellness by checking in on each other.
- **Follow a Group Workout Plan:** Some people need a more structured training plan to be consistent and follow through with goals. Set up a few weeks of walking workouts on a spreadsheet and share it via email or Google Docs. Include goals such as step counts, distance, time, or weight loss and have everyone input their progress each week. This helps you all feel more connected and part of a team. Don't forget to celebrate the wins along the way!
- **Participate in a Virtual Event:** If doing a walking or running event is the type of motivation you need to stay fit, there are plenty of options available. Because of the pandemic, race organizers have shifted to more virtual walking and running events instead. Have family members select a local virtual walk or run in their

area. Afterward, you can share photos of T-shirts and finishing medals to feel connected and celebrate together!