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## USC Study Finds Social Interaction Key to Get People Walking

By Robert Kittle



A new University of South Carolina study has found that getting people to start walking to improve their health is as simple as getting them to know their neighbors.

The trial study, called PATH, for Positive Action for Today's Health, is published in the latest issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

The study, by USC psychology professor Dawn Wilson, showed that a social marketing approach to implementing a walking program is feasible and effective. The study focused on African-American communities in Sumter, Florence and Orangeburg, where there are higher rates of high blood pressure, obesity, poor nutrition and inactivity.

Each community was given a slightly different intervention. Florence and Sumter both had police-patrolled walking programs, while Sumter also got an additional social networking component.

Community liaison Barney Gadson says, "We used door hangers, we did callings, we had folks go out and knock on doors and just invite their neighbors to come out." He says getting to know their neighbors, and walking with them consistently, led to more people sticking with the program, because on days when someone might not feel like walking, she's more likely to do it anyway when someone else is expecting her to be there.

Josephine Young was one of the walkers, who says the program got people to open up. "You find out a lot about people that they were afraid to talk about, some things that they're dealing with as far as health problems, and they are realizing that you're not the only one," she says.

Otis Butler started walking when the trial study began, and has continued for several years now. "I started out, walk one day out of the week. And I started, I got good, I started walking two days a week, and then I went to three days and ended up walking five days a week. And before we stopped (the trial) I started walking six days a week." He's continuing to walk today, even though the trial study has ended.

In South Sumter, which had the social networking component, as many as 494 people walked in a month. By comparison, Florence, which did not have the social networking aspect, saw only about 40 people a month walking as part of the program.

Some people had not been willing to walk before because of fears about crime, so part of the study included police involvement, in which officers would patrol the walking route or walk themselves.

Gadson says, "We wanted to make sure that there was a neighborhood connectedness, so that neighbor would begin to know neighbor. That, in turn, is why the police department came out, because what it did was it helped us to form bonds where we knew each other and we would also look out for one another."

Wilson said the key to replicating the study in other impoverished communities is to build relationships and trust and understand that residents know what's best for their communities. Researchers across the country have contacted her about implementing the PATH program in underserved communities.

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