

Partners in crime: When do friends conspire to eat more chocolate?

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As a human race we strive for perfection, knowing that no one is perfect. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* offers insight into why we surround ourselves with people who help bring out our best but don't make us feel terrible when we stray from perfection.

"In a situation requiring two people to use self-control, either both indulge, both abstain, or one indulges while the other abstains. Our research looks at how these different outcomes impact people who are friends," write authors Michael L. Lowe (Texas A&M University) and Kelly L. Haws (Vanderbilt University).

In one study, the authors randomly grouped individuals into pairs and placed them in a room with instructions to watch and evaluate a short film. A bowl of candy was placed on a table between the two participants and a hidden camera was used to monitor if (and how) the candy was consumed. Participants who ate just a few candies each later reported liking their partner more than when the study began. Conversely, participants who said they ate too much candy reported liking their partner less than when the study began.

Results show that matched decisions, whether in virtue or vice, typically result in enhanced affiliation between the decision makers. However, the type of matched decision that provided the biggest boost in affiliation depended on how serious the consequences were perceived to be. When the stakes were high, people bonded through moral support. When the consequences were a little less severe, people improved their friendship

through partnering in crime.

Understanding that consumers prefer to make small indulgences in pairs can help brands offering 'friends and family' promotions. Public policymakers can also benefit from the understanding that as perceived severity increases, so too do the social benefits of mutually abstaining from behaviors like overspending, drug use, or overeating.

"Our findings provide insights into how consumers can most effectively use others for accountability in trying to achieve important goals, while potentially enhancing their well-being through managing guilt and being able to enjoy smaller indulgences in the company of [friends](#)," the authors conclude.

More information: Michael L. Lowe and Kelly L. Haws. "(Im)moral Support: The Social Outcomes of Parallel Self-Control Decisions." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2014.

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