

**SOLE**

**MATES**



**LOVE ME, LOVE  
MY WORKOUT?  
WHY CROSS  
TRAINING (AND  
KALE) CAN  
BRING COUPLES  
CLOSER**

BY GINNY GRAVES  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
JOEL STANS

"I've been a difficult partner from day one," says Ashley Pettit, 33, a personal trainer in Chicago. By that she means she follows a strict diet—she's gluten- and dairy-free and can be a little fanatical about exercise. (Before her wedding in 2009, she worked out twice a day for months.) Her spouse, Noah, is a steak-loving foodie. So, four years ago, when she told him she'd decided to go vegan, she wasn't shocked when his response was "Why? You're already the healthiest person I know!"

Still, she plunged forward. When Noah wanted to go out to dinner, she'd beg off for fear she wouldn't find food she could eat. When she tried to woo him with tasty vegan meals, he'd lie awake with an upset stomach from all the raw veggies. Eventually, he started socializing more without her, and their time together dwindled. "I could see it wasn't good for us," Pettit recalls. Then, while they were planning a trip to Italy, Noah said, "Look, this isn't going to be any fun. Italy is all about the food." She knew he was right. Besides, she'd also grown slightly weary of her strict regimen. "We went out that night for a celebratory steak dinner—and relaxed together for the first time in a while," she says. "I realized how much stress my diet had caused."

Pettit isn't the first well-intentioned woman to discover a surprising truth: Healthy habits can be anything but for a relationship. "We establish patterns with our partners, and when one of you suddenly veers in a different direction, it can set off a seismic shift in your lives," says Susan Shapiro Barash, author of *The Nine Phases of Marriage*.

That's not to say that if you take up tennis, he should brush up on his backhand for the sake of your bond. But studies show that supporting each other's new interests, even if you don't share them, might be important for

your overall happiness. New Zealand researchers followed 47 couples for a year and found that those who supported each other's goals were more likely to achieve their objectives *and* rated their relationship quality higher than less encouraging couples. That study dovetails with a tested insight known as the Michelangelo phenomenon—the theory that romantic partners sculpt each other's behavior—and shows that those who promote the best in each other are often the closest.

Abigail Dougherty, 30, a registered dietitian in Tampa, Florida, can confirm this from both professional and personal experience. When she met her future husband nine years ago, she smoked, drank and had a poor diet. "Patrick, on the other hand, was a super healthy doctor," she says. As they got to know each other, he never criticized her bad habits, she says. Instead, he led by example. "He cooked healthy food and exercised every day, and it inspired me to make changes."

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## "IF HE'D NAGGED ME, OUR RELATIONSHIP WOULDN'T HAVE SURVIVED."

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First, she started eating better. Then she took up running. By the end of a year, she'd dropped a jeans size and was healthier than ever. "I was so hooked that I went back to school to pursue a nutrition degree," she says, adding, "If he'd nagged me, our relationship wouldn't have survived. But he showed me what good health looked like and let me figure out my own approach to it."

Dougherty's husband provided what researchers call invisible support, which often works better than overt

encouragement, says Yuthika Girme, a researcher at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. Suggesting that your partner go to the gym or eat more vegetables can backfire, Girme says. "Direct support is effective when your partner is clearly distressed and wants help."

That said, change isn't always easy. When Daphne Mallory, 38, lost a lot of weight two years ago, she expected her husband, Bob, to embrace her new 125-pound self. And he has—to a point. "He's proud of me," says the Twin Falls, Idaho, business consultant. "But losing weight has altered more than my appearance. I'm more confident and assertive, and I've started doing more public speaking. Now that I'm engaging with the wider world, he feels insecure and less trusting. We're working on it, but it came as a surprise to both of us."

This conflict is actually not uncommon, says Lynsey K. Romo, Ph.D., assistant professor of communication at North Carolina State University, who published the results of a 2013 study tracking changes among 21 couples in which one partner had lost 30 pounds or more. While most said their relationships benefited, she has seen less rosy outcomes, from jealousy to sabotage (such as when one partner tempts the other with high-calorie treats or discourages exercise). "Weight loss can expose underlying problems and insecurities in a relationship," Romo says.

Exercise disparities can be equally destabilizing, says Lori Schade, Ph.D., a couples therapist in Salt Lake City. Allie Burdick, 39, a competitive runner in Ellington, Connecticut, says the hours she spends training and racing are a challenge in her otherwise happy marriage. "We've had fights about my training routine and the number of races I do," she says. Over the years, she's learned that **SOLE MATES > 100**

## THE FACE OF CHANGE

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toward a community-organizing class. Russell ended up interviewing more than 50 grassroots artists for her thesis about public art and political power.

Recounting her story, Russell has become animated. She makes rapid-fire references to “cultural hegemony” and to academic papers she’s “obsessed” with. Another irony of her modeling career is that, though clients don’t hire her for her brain, she’s well informed in part because she spends so much time on planes, flying to and from shoots, burning through e-books. “I’ve downloaded 200 or so,” she says. Her inspirations these days are not politicians or even artists but poets and writers like Audre Lord and J.M. Coetzee.

When she’s not reading, Russell runs and does yoga—though she’s loath to connect either to her modeling career. “That’s a dangerous path,” she says. “I work out because it makes me feel good.” While at Wellesley, she and a friend ran the Boston marathon; they trained for just three weeks. “Sports are totally mental,” she says with a shrug.

Though she’s a vegetarian who enjoys making soufflés for her younger sister, Linnea, a hospital research coordinator who lives with Russell in Manhattan, she’s stumped when I ask whether she has to watch what she eats. “I have the same chicken legs as my 88-year-old grandmother, so I really think it’s genetic,” she says finally.

In 2013, inspired by the extraordinary response to her TED talk, Russell launched a magazine called *Interrupt* to help empower artists, feminists and activists working outside the mainstream media. “I am constantly thinking, How can I make space for other people?” she says. Anyone can apply to guest-edit

*Interrupt*. A recent issue, branded the “The LGBT Love Issue,” is edited by a Pan-African queer collective called HOLAfrica! and a youth program called Project S.O.L. Russell’s face is nowhere to be seen until you flip to the back. She’s sitting with her fellow staffers at a table with laptops and coffee cups, her hair piled messily on her head, her grin wide and stunning.

Russell is also on the board of Hollaback!, an international movement to end street harassment, and Art & Abolition, which supports survivors of sex slavery in Kenya. That she doesn’t yet know where all of this is headed doesn’t concern her. “I feel like our society is moving away from this notion of one career,” she says. “Now we’re all, like, a million things.” What she has realized: “Those moments when I don’t have to think about how I look make me happiest. Think about it—the times when you were on vacation, or in some cabin in the woods.” She smiles again—impassioned, electric. “Weren’t you happy?” ●

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things are smoother if she warns her husband about upcoming races and explains her workout schedule. “Fortunately, that conflict doesn’t spill over into the rest of our lives. He doesn’t complain about having sex with an athlete,” she says.

Improved sex is a happy outcome that Romo’s weight loss study bears out. “Several couples said sex got better,” she says. “The people who’d lost weight felt more confident about their bodies, and many initiated healthy activities outside the bedroom, from cooking to going to the gym. Sharing enjoyable activities

promotes emotional intimacy, which in turn promotes physical intimacy.”

Case in point: Marissa Vicario, 36, a holistic health coach in New York City, who eased her now-fiancé, David, into her routine—cooking at home, eating leafy greens and exercising daily—after they started dating six years ago. Now they’re training for marathons and obstacle-course races together. “When it’s cold and rainy on a Saturday morning, it’s incredibly nice to know I don’t have to get out of bed alone,” says Vicario, who also knows that the benefits go beyond better health. “Working out together has given us insight into each other,” she adds. “At times I’m plagued by self-doubt, especially before races—and that attitude crops up in my work as well. When David sees me going to that place emotionally, he jumps in and reminds me of all the times I’ve been successful.”

Being on the same page about health habits is no guarantee of increased unity,

though. Alyssa James, 25, a freelance writer, thought she’d met her match when she bonded with a fellow weight lifter a few years ago. “At first it was great. Then we started getting competitive, and that led to teasing,” she says. “Eventually we started cutting each other down in front of friends. It tore our relationship apart.”

This raises an important issue. “Having similar values toward fitness and nutrition can solidify a connection with your partner, but how that plays out in real life can look different from couple to couple,” Barash says.

Pettit, the former vegan, can vouch for that. Her husband has embraced her healthier lifestyle—in his own way. And that’s a positive thing. “His more laid-back, adventurous approach is good for me,” Pettit says. “I have a tendency to get stuck in routines. He provides balance. We complement each other, and for us, that’s far better than being exactly alike.” ●