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Changes in Romantic Partners' Feelings Over Time May Affect Health—and Even Lifespan

Having a partner who you feel understands, cares about and truly appreciates you is linked to better health and a greater sense of meaning in life, research shows. But relationships, like the people in them, can change over time. And how long-term changes in primary relationships may affect health or the risk of dying has gone mostly unexplored so far. It's frontier scientific territory.

Now a pathbreaking study sheds light on exactly how the course of our closest liaisons can make a significant impact on our health and even the risk of death over 20 years. The study, posted online ahead of print, will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Psychosomatic Medicine*, journal of the American Psychosomatic Society.

The researchers tracked 1,208 adults, 25 to 74 years old at the start, over 20 years. All had spouses or live-in partners. The participants took part in a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults.

At the start and 10 years later, they answered questions about how much they felt their partner understood, cared about and appreciated them. Then, at the 10-year point everyone filled out daily records over eight days telling whether they'd experienced common stressful events such as problems at home or work, interpersonal conflicts or perceived discrimination. They also answered questions about how often they'd felt a wide range of emotions—for example, hopeless, frightened, frustrated or nervous at the negative end and cheerful, calm, satisfied and proud on the more positive side. Finally, 20 years after the study began, researchers identified participants who had died.

Perceived changes in their partner's responsiveness over the first 10 years turned out to be important, but change per se wasn't directly tied to any greater risk of death. Those who reported a significant drop in partner responsiveness over the first decade also reported more negative reactions to common daily stresses at the 10-year point, and it was these unpleasant reactions (fear, frustration, etc.) that predicted a greater likelihood of dying 20 years from the start of the study.

This makes sense because intense negative emotional reactions to stressful events have been linked to more inflammation in the body, chronic health problems and a higher risk of death, says lead study author Sarah C.E. Stanton, Ph.D., Lecturer in the Psychology

Department at University of Edinburgh in Scotland. The second author is Emre Selcuk of Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey.

But how much does this greater negative reaction to stressful events, coupled with viewing a partner as less caring over time, really matter for health? Those who had significantly stronger than average negative reactions to stress were about 42 percent more likely to have died 10 years later. “It’s robust—a small but mighty effect,” says Stanton.

The health promoting take-home message for couples is to find ways to prevent the declines in responsiveness that may come with time, or even to strengthen empathic bonds as the years go by. Couples research suggests “it involves an effort to take the other person’s perspective, to actively listen,” says Stanton. And a reciprocal cycle of positive feedback really helps, she adds. “Keep noticing and appreciating when your partner is responsive, express gratitude, and keep the cycle going.”

Study Link:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1097/PSY.0000000000000618#aps>.

Faculty Page:

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