

Seeing our spouses more negatively might be a positive

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While our relationships with children and best friends tend to become less negative as we age, we're more likely to see our spouses as irritating and demanding.

That's according to a University of Michigan study that analyzed long-term patterns of relationship negativity among more than 800 adults ages 20 and older.

"There's been a lot of research showing that marriage and other close relationships enhance well-being," said Kira Birditt, a research fellow at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR). "But less work has focused on the negative aspects of close relationships.

Viewing our spouses more negatively over time may not be all bad, Birditt says. In fact, it might even be, well, positive. "As we age, and become closer and more comfortable with one another, it could be that we're more able to express ourselves to each other. In other words, it's possible that negativity is a normal aspect of close relationships that include a great deal of daily contact."

For the analysis, presented late last year at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Birditt and colleagues Lisa Jackey and Toni Antonucci looked at individual changes over time and also at differences among people at different stages in life— young, middle-aged and older adults. Participants in the study were interviewed first in 1992 and again in 2005.

Participants were asked about the negativity of their relationships with three key people in their lives: their spouse or partner, a child, and a best friend. Specifically, they rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following two statements about each relationship: “My (spouse/partner, child, friend) gets on my nerves” and “My (spouse/partner, child, friend) makes too many demands on me.”

At both points in time, older adults (age 60-plus) had the least negative relationships with spouses, children and friends. According to Birditt, this finding is consistent with other research showing that older adults are likely to report less conflict than do younger adults in their relationships.

Participants in their 20s and 30s reported having the most negative relationships overall.

For all age groups, including adults in their 40s and 50s, the spousal relationship was seen as the most negative and it tended to increase in negativity over time.

“The increases in negativity over time may be indicative of learned patterns of interaction which have been reinforced and tend to persist over time,” Birditt said. “Other studies have found that negative communication increases over time and relationship quality decreases, especially after having children.”

“Interestingly, as relationships with spouses become more negative, relationships with children and friends appear to become less demanding and irritating over time.”

In future research, Birditt plans to study how the way we respond to negativity influences well-being. “How we respond to negativity in close relationships affects every aspect of our lives – at work and at home,”

she said. “In fact, it’s likely that how we deal with it – not whether it exists – is what really matters. One thing I’m interested in exploring is how avoidance affects negativity over time. All kinds of research show that older people have less negative relationships. And we also know that older adults are more likely than younger people to report that they try to deal with conflict by avoiding confrontations, rather than by discussing problems.

“That may be another reason that negativity tends to increase over time in the relationship with a partner or spouse – when you’re living together, it’s a lot harder to avoid each other.”

Source: University of Michigan

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