

Close relationships can perpetuate individual health problems

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Human problems rarely occur in a vacuum, but persist as part of ongoing social interaction in which causes and effects are interwoven. One person's behavior can set the stage for what another does. A new study in the journal *Family Process* reveals that smoking can promote emotional connection for couples when both partners smoke. Health-compromising behaviors, such as smoking or weight gain, may sometimes persist because they preserve stability in a vital close relationship.

Researchers led by Michael J. Rohrbaugh and Varda Shoham of the [University of Arizona](#) had 25 [couples](#) discuss a health-related disagreement before and during a period of actual [smoking](#), then use joysticks to rate how they had felt from moment to moment (from very positive to very negative) while watching themselves on video. One partner in each couple smoked despite having a heart or [lung problem](#), and in some [couples](#) the other partner was a smoker as well.

The joy-stick ratings of [partners](#) in dual-smoker couples became more positive and more synchronous contingent upon lighting up - as if they were dancing to the same emotional tune. In single-smoker couples, however, both partners (smokers and non-smokers alike) report decreased positive emotions and less affective synchrony.

While most people think of health-compromising habits like smoking as a purely individual matter of motivation or addiction, this study shows that social factors beyond the smoker are important as well.

Having a partner who also smokes makes a huge difference in how smoking fits the couple's relationship (e.g. as an irritant or an ally), which in turn has implications for helping one or both partners quit.

This study is published in the March 2009 issue of *Family Process*.

Source: Wiley

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