

For your health, pick a mate who is conscientious and, perhaps, also neurotic

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University of Illinois psychology professor Brent Roberts led a study that found that having a conscientious spouse can improve one's health. Credit: Photo: Thompson-McClellan

Conscientiousness is a good thing in a mate, researchers report, not just because it's easier to live with someone who washes the dishes without being asked, but also because having a conscientious partner may actually be good for one's health. Their study, of adults over age 50, also found that women, but not men, get an added health benefit when paired with someone who is conscientious *and* neurotic.

This is the first large-scale analysis of what the authors call the "compensatory conscientiousness effect," the boost in health reported by those with conscientious spouses or romantic partners. The study appears this month in [Psychological Science](#).

"Highly conscientious people are more organized and responsible and tend to follow through with their obligations, to be more impulse controlled and to follow rules," said University of Illinois psychology professor Brent Roberts, who led the study. Highly neurotic people tend to be more moody and anxious, and to worry, he said.

Researchers have known since the early 1990s that people who are more conscientious tend to live longer than those who are less so. They are more likely to exercise, eat nutritious foods and adhere to vitamin or drug regimens, and are less likely to smoke, abuse drugs or take unwarranted risks, all of which may explain their better health. They also tend to have more stable relationships than people with low conscientiousness.

Most studies have found a very different outcome for people who are highly neurotic. They tend to report poorer health and less satisfying relationships.

Many studies focus on how specific [personality traits](#) may affect one's own health, Roberts said, but few have considered how one's personality can influence the health of another.

"There's been kind of an individualistic bias in personality research," he said. "But human beings are not islands. We are an incredibly interdependent species."

Roberts and his colleagues at the University of Illinois and the University of Michigan looked at the association of personality and self-reported

health among more than 2,000 couples taking part in the Health and Retirement Study, a representative study of the U.S. population over age 50. The study asked participants to rate their own levels of neuroticism and conscientiousness and to answer questions about the quality of their health. Participants also filled out a questionnaire that asked them whether or not a health problem limited their ability to engage in a range of activities such as jogging one block, climbing a flight of stairs, shopping, dressing or bathing.

As other studies have found, the researchers found that those who described themselves as highly conscientious also reported better health and said they were more able to engage in a variety of physical activities than those who reported low conscientiousness.

For the first time, however, the researchers also found a significant, self-reported health benefit that accompanied marriage to a conscientious person, even among those who described themselves as highly conscientious.

"It appears that even if you are really highly conscientious, you can still benefit from a spouse's conscientiousness," Roberts said. "It makes sense that regardless of what your attributes are, if you have people in your social network that have resources, such as conscientiousness, that can always help."

A more unusual finding involved an added health benefit reported by women who were paired with highly conscientious men who were also highly neurotic, Roberts said. The same benefit was not seen in men with highly conscientious and neurotic female partners. While both men and women benefit from being paired with a conscientious mate, Roberts said, only the women saw a modest boost in their health from being with a man who was also neurotic.

"The effect here is not much larger than the effect of aspirin on cardiovascular health, which is a well-known small effect," he said.

Asked whether women looking for long-term mates should choose a man who is conscientious and neurotic over one who is simply conscientious, Roberts said, "I wouldn't recommend it."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

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