

Oxytocin: Love potion #1?

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Relationships are difficult and most of us probably think at some point that communicating positively with our partner when discussing stressful issues, like home finances, is an impossible task. What if there was a safe way to take the "edge" off these discussions? The biology of human social relationships is just beginning to emerge as groundbreaking research on social cognition conducted in animals is now informing research in humans.

In its May 1st issue, [Biological Psychiatry](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/biopsychiat) (<http://www.elsevier.com/locate/biopsychiat>), published by Elsevier, includes a paper by Swiss researchers that have investigated the effects of oxytocin, the "love hormone," on human couple interactions. They recruited adult couples who received oxytocin or placebo intranasally before engaging in a conflict discussion in the laboratory. Oxytocin increased positive communication behavior in relation to negative behavior and reduced salivary cortisol, i.e., their stress levels, compared to placebo.

"We are just beginning to understand the powerful effects of hormones and chemicals released by the body in the context of important social interactions," commented John Krystal, M.D., the editor of *Biological Psychiatry*. "As this knowledge grows, the question of how to best use our developing capacities to pharmacologically alter social processes will become an important question to explore."

Author Beate Ditzen, Ph.D., noted that this was the first study of its kind and important because it evaluated real-time natural couple behavior in

the laboratory. "[Oxytocin] might help us to pronounce the effects of a standard treatment, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, by possibly making the benefits of [social interaction](#) more accessible to the individual. But it probably will not replace these standard treatments."

They clarify that this study does not show that oxytocin should currently be used as a treatment itself and the effects of repeated administration have not been evaluated in humans. In addition, important ethical concerns will have to be addressed, such as to what extent it should be used as a "treatment" and whether developed treatments could become drugs of abuse in the form of "social enhancers."

More information: The article is "Intranasal [Oxytocin](#) Increases Positive Communication and Reduces Cortisol Levels During Couple Conflict" by Beate Ditzen, Marcel Schaer, Barbara Gabriel, Guy Bodenmann, Ulrike Ehlert, and Markus Heinrichs. Authors Ditzen and Ehlert are affiliated with the Department of Psychology, Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland. Ditzen is also with the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, Georgia. Schaer, Gabriel, and Bodenmann are from the Department of Psychology, Institute for Family Research and Counseling, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland. Heinrichs is affiliated with the Department of Psychology, Clinical Psychology and Psychobiology, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland. The article appears in *Biological Psychiatry*, Volume 65, Issue 9 (May 1, 2009), published by Elsevier.

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