

Relationship recall: Attachment style may affect memories of relationship events

January 27 2010

Following an argument or a particularly heated discussion with our partner, they may remember details of the conversation very differently than we do. This may lead to even more arguments, as we try to convince the other that our recollection of the argument is more correct than theirs. It can be frustrating when our partners remember things differently than we do, but according to new research from *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, they are not trying to be difficult, but personality may affect how they (and we) remember relationship events (such as discussions).

Research has shown that our specific attachment style (that is, how anxious or avoidant we are in relationships) may affect many facets of our relationships. Psychological scientists Jeffry Simpson from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus; W. Steven Rholes of Texas A&M University; and Heike A. Winterheld from California State University, East Bay wanted to investigate how attachment styles affect memory for [relationship](#) events. Couples participating in this experiment completed [personality](#) assessments and also listed problems in their relationship. They were videotaped as they discussed the two highest-ranking problems (one from each partner's list). Following the discussions, each participant completed a questionnaire on how supportive and emotionally distant they themselves felt immediately following the discussions. Then, the couples returned to the lab a week later and completed the same questionnaires, recalling how supportive and emotionally distant they had felt following the original discussions. In addition, independent observers watched the discussions and rated the

behavior of each partner according to how supportive, emotionally distant, and anxious they seemed to be.

Analysis of the results reveals that the way highly anxious and avoidant individuals remember certain events is based on their needs and goals for the relationship, but only if they were distressed when the memories were created. More avoidant individuals remembered being less supportive one week following the discussion than they initially reported, but only if they been distressed during the discussions. Less avoidant individuals remembered being more supportive than they initially reported, but only if they had been distressed during the discussions. The authors observe that "these findings are consistent with the needs and goals of highly avoidant people, who yearn to limit intimacy and maintain control and autonomy in their relationships." The authors add that these findings are also consistent with needs of less avoidant (that is, more secure) individuals, who want to increase intimacy in their relationships.

Less anxious individuals remembered being more distant than initially reported if they had been distressed during the discussions. More anxious individuals remembered being closer to their partners than they initially reported if they were distressed during the discussions. The authors note that these results are consistent with anxious individuals' need for closeness and security.

These findings indicate that what individuals respond to in relationships is not what was actually said or done during an interaction with their partner. Instead, what they respond to may be the memories of the interaction, as interpreted due to how anxious or avoidant they are.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Relationship recall: Attachment style may affect memories of relationship events (2010, January 27) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-01-relationship-recall-style-affect-memories.html>

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