

Verbal snippets offer insights on well-being amid separation, divorce

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A new study from the University of Arizona shows that people in the midst of a divorce typically reveal how they are handling things - not so much by what they say but how they say it.

In fact, data revealed that even complete strangers were able to figure out how people were coping with their emotions using relatively small amounts of information.

The study, "Thin-Slicing Divorce: Thirty Seconds of Information Predict Changes in [Psychological Adjustment](#) Over 90 Days," published online in the journal [Psychological Science](#), is one of a number of relatively recent person-perception studies that examine interpersonal distress, in this case when a marriage ends.

"We wanted to know how much information people actually need in order to know how another person is coping," said Ashley Mason, a UA doctoral student who conducted the research. "There's been a lot of person-perception research in terms of perceiving a stranger's personality or intelligence. And data have shown that we really don't need much."

Mason's study evolved from a larger study on [divorce](#) by the article's co-author, David Sbarra, an assistant professor and director of the clinical psychology program at the UA. The study was funded by grants from the National Institute on Aging and the National Institute of Mental Health.

Men and women who had recently experienced a romantic separation were recruited for the study. They completed [questionnaires](#) and also provided [audio recordings](#), stream-of-consciousness thoughts and feelings about their former partner and former relationships. The first 30 seconds of the recordings were saved as sound files and written transcriptions. A number of the subjects repeated the same questionnaire three months later.

Students were recruited into the study to judge the subjects' reactions. Two groups of judges - those who only read transcripts and those who only listened to recordings - evaluated the ability of the subjects to control their emotions, cope with their separations, handle stress and negative aspects of post-separation life and the subjects' thoughts about the relationship. None of the judges had any visual contact with the subjects.

Both groups of judges largely agreed with the subjects' assessments of their separations, based solely on those 30-second audio clips or written statements.

Significantly, though, Mason said, it was the judges who listened to the sound clips, as opposed to those who read the transcripts, who were more likely to accurately predict the psychological adjustments that subjects reported later on.

Mason said the findings held up after accounting for key variables such as length of the relationship, who initiated the end of the relationship and time since the separation at the start of the study.

"It's important to know that it is not about what people are saying. It's how they're saying it that is tipping us off to how they're doing, and more importantly, how they're going to do," Mason said.

"That gives us insight that may affect how we interact with these people," she said. "Do I need to call more often or provide more social support? Should I recommend psychotherapy? Not everyone has an organized social support system, and these data shed light on how we interpret what others need from us."

Provided by University of Arizona

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