

The way you relate to your partner can affect your long-term mental and physical health, study shows

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The potentially lasting implications of day-to-day couple conflict on physical and mental well-being are revealed in a study published today in the journal *Personal Relationships*.

Until now research has concentrated on the immediate effects of romantic conflict, typically in controlled laboratory settings. In one of the first studies to look at the longer term, Professor Angela Hicks investigated the physiological and emotional changes taking place in [couples](#) the day after conflict occurred, specifically taking into account the differing styles of [emotional attachment](#) between participating partners.

"We are interested in understanding links between [romantic relationships](#) and long term emotional and physical well-being", said Professor Hicks. "Our findings provide a powerful demonstration of how daily interpersonal dealings affect mood and [physiology](#) across time."

Hicks' study involved a sample of 39 participants in established co-habiting relationships, who were tested for the association between conflict (assessed with end-of-day diaries) and sleep disturbance, next-morning reports of negative affect on mood, and cortisol awakening response. Prior to testing, the emotional attachment styles of all participants were measured according to how anxious they were in their relationship, and to what degree they avoided emotional attachment.

The study found that all participants across the sample as a whole experienced sleep disruption after conflict, bearing out the adage "don't go to bed angry". There was however the greatest degree of sleep disruption amongst individuals who were highly anxious in their relationship. The lowest degree of sleep disruption was found amongst individuals who strongly avoided emotional attachment.

Conflict was also found to have [repercussions](#) for next-day mood. However, some [participants](#) found their mood negatively affected more than others. Individuals more at ease with emotional attachment found their mood was affected more than did individuals less comfortable being intimate with others.

The researchers found no general association between conflict and the next morning cortisol awakening response (a physiological, stress-related preparation for the day ahead). Their findings showed a particular association only, amongst women who were highly anxious in their relationships, whose cortisol response was significantly dampened on days after conflict.

The results of this study have significant implications for the greater understanding of how routine relationship experiences influence emotional and physical health over time. "We already know from prior research that people in stable, happy marriages experience better overall health than do those in more conflicted relationships," said Professor Hicks. "We can now further conclude from our current research that individuals who are in insecure relationships are more vulnerable to longer-term health risks from conflict than are others."

Provided by Wiley

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