

Women happier in relationships when men feel their pain

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Men like to know when their wife or girlfriend is happy while women really want the man in their life to know when they are upset, according to a new study published by the American Psychological Association.

The study involved a diverse sample of couples and found that men's and women's perceptions of their significant other's [empathy](#), and their abilities to tell when the other is happy or upset, are linked to relationship satisfaction in distinctive ways, according to the article published online in the *Journal of* [Family Psychology](#).

"It could be that for women, seeing that their male partner is upset reflects some degree of the man's investment and emotional engagement in the relationship, even during difficult times. This is consistent with what is known about the [dissatisfaction](#) women often experience when their [male partner](#) becomes emotionally withdrawn and disengaged in response to conflict," said the study's lead author, Shiri Cohen, PhD, of Harvard Medical School.

Researchers recruited 156 [heterosexual couples](#) for the experiment. Of those, 102 came from the Boston area and were younger, urban, ethnically and economically diverse and in a committed but not necessarily married relationship. In an effort to find couples who varied in the ways they resolved conflicts and controlled their emotions, they also looked for couples with a history of domestic violence and/or [childhood sexual abuse](#). The remaining participants, from Bryn Mawr, Pa., were older, suburban and middle-class [married couples](#) with strong

ties to the community. In all, 71 percent of couples were white, 56 percent were married and their average length of relationship was three-and-a-half years.

Each participant was asked to describe an incident with his or her partner over the past couple of months that was particularly frustrating, disappointing or upsetting. The researchers' audio recorded the participant making a one- to two-sentence statement summarizing the incident and reaction and then brought the couples together and played each participant's statements. The couples were told to try to come to a better understanding together of what had happened and were given approximately 10 minutes to discuss it while the researchers videotaped them. Following the discussions, the participants viewed the videotape and simultaneously rated their negative and positive emotions throughout, using an electronic rating device. The device had a knob that moved across an 11-point scale that ranged from "very negative" to "neutral" to "very positive."

Using these ratings, the researchers selected six 30-second clips from the videotape that had the highest rated negative or positive emotions by each partner. The researchers showed the clips to the participants and had them complete questionnaires about their feelings during each segment as well as their perceptions of their partner's feelings and effort to understand them during the discussion. They also measured the participants' overall satisfaction with their relationships and whether each partner considered his or her partner's efforts to be empathetic.

[Relationship satisfaction](#) was directly related to men's ability to read their female partner's [positive emotions](#) correctly. However, contrary to the researchers' expectations, women who correctly understood that their partners were upset during the videotaped incident were much more likely to be satisfied with their relationship than if they correctly understood that their partner was happy. Also, when men understood that

their female partner was angry or upset, the women reported being happier, though the men were not. The authors suggest that being empathetic to a partner's negative emotions may feel threatening to the relationship for men but not for women.

The findings also show that the more men and women try to be empathetic to their partner's feelings, the happier they are. The authors suggest that this research should encourage couples to better appreciate and communicate one another's efforts to be empathetic.

More information: "Eye of the Beholder: The Individual and Dyadic Contributions of Empathic Accuracy and Perceived Empathic Effort to Relationship Satisfaction," Shiri Cohen, PhD, Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts General Hospital; Marc S. Schulz, PhD, and Emily Weiss, Bryn Mawr College; and Robert J. Waldinger, PhD, Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts General Hospital; *Journal of Family Psychology*, online.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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