

Studying couples to improve health, better relationships

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It is not always best to forgive and forget in marriage, according to new research that looks at the costs of forgiveness. Sometimes expressing anger might be necessary to resolve a relationship problem – with the short-term discomfort of an angry but honest conversation benefiting the health of the relationship in the long-term. The research is part of a larger effort to better understand the contexts in which some relationships succeed and others fail, and also to understand how close relationships affect our health.

A popular research trend in recent years, positive psychology has offered the promise that with forgiveness, optimism, kindness, and positive thinking, people can turn around their relationships even after a serious transgression. But as James McNulty of Florida State University investigated positive psychology and well-being, he began to see a different trend: "I continued to find evidence that thoughts and behaviors presumed to be associated with better well-being lead to worse well-being among some people – usually the people who need the most help achieving well-being."

McNulty therefore set out to examine the potential costs of positive psychology. In a set of recent studies, he found that forgiveness in marriage can have some unintended negative effects. "We all experience a time in a relationship in which a partner transgresses against us in some way. For example, a partner may be financially irresponsible, unfaithful, or unsupportive," says McNulty, who is presenting his research at the APA annual convention this week in Orlando. "When these events occur,

we must decide whether we should be angry and hold onto that anger, or forgive." His research shows that a variety of factors can complicate the effectiveness of forgiveness, including a partner's level of agreeableness and the severity and frequency of the transgression.

"Believing a partner is forgiving leads agreeable people to be less likely to offend that partner and disagreeable people to be more likely to offend that partner," he says. Additionally, he says, anger can serve an important role in signaling to a transgressing partner that the offensive behavior is not acceptable. "If the partner can do something to resolve a problem that is likely to otherwise continue and negatively affect the relationship, people may experience long-term benefits by temporarily withholding [forgiveness](#) and expressing anger."

"This work suggests people need to be flexible in how they address the problems that will inevitably arise over the course of their relationships," McNulty says. "There is no 'magic bullet,' no single way to think or behave in a relationship. The consequences of each decision we make in our relationships depends on the circumstances that surround that decision."

How attachment affects our health

Psychologists have known for decades that close relationships are critical to a person's health and well-being. However, the exact processes that govern these health effects have not been well understood. Recent studies show that the attachment processes between two individuals in a close relationship dramatically affect health domains ranging from pregnancy and birth defects to cancer and chronic disease.

"We know that having relationships in general and being socially integrated is associated with a reduced risk of mortality," says Paula Pietromonaco of the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, who is

also presenting at the APA convention. "Our research follows from attachment theory, which suggests that there is one primary person that people turn to for comfort when they are distressed or frightened." In adulthood, that person is often a romantic partner or spouse, she says. "These sorts of relationship partners are especially important when people are faced with a stressful event because they have the potential to comfort and calm the person who is experiencing distress or to hinder that person's efforts to feel better."

In an ongoing longitudinal study of 225 newlywed couples, for example, Pietromonaco's team is finding that the way people feel attached to each other affects cortisol levels in response to stress – and can possibly predict depression or anxiety over time. Funded by the National Cancer Institute, the study has preliminarily shown that among couples that include a wife who is more anxiously attached – who desires a great deal of intimacy and seeks reassurance and support – and a husband who is more "avoidantly attached," cortisol levels spike in anticipation of a conflict discussion followed by a sharp decline in cortisol. "In addition, these same anxious wife/avoidant husband couples appear to have more difficulty in discussing the conflict, and their behavior suggests greater disengagement from the discussion."

These patterns, Pietromonaco says, may signal difficulty with emotion regulation, and it is possible that individuals in these couples will be at greater risk for symptoms of depression and anxiety over time. The researchers are following these couples over the first 3 to 4 years of marriage, and will be examining the extent to which the patterns they see now predict changes in emotional health over the early years of [marriage](#)

Pietromonaco and colleagues also recently conducted a review of studies that examine the effects of two-person relationships on a range of health topics in order to create a better framework for future investigations. For

example, they point to several studies that show that greater prenatal social support predicts more optimal fetal growth, higher infant birth weight, and reduced risk of low birth weight. But, they caution that such studies need to be replicated and expanded to take into account both perceived support as well as actual support interactions among both partners.

In general, Pietromonaco says that [relationship](#) science studies must look at the expectations, beliefs, and experiences of both partners in predicting emotional and physical health. "Although research on psychology and health has begun to consider these sorts of 'partner effects,' they are often not incorporated into studies designed to intervene to help people cope with chronic diseases such as cancer or diabetes," she says. "As Lynn Martire [Penn State] and her colleagues have noted, many couple intervention studies include both partners but assess psychological adjustment for the patient only. Yet how the patient's caregiver, who is often a spouse, is adjusting and coping may be very important in predicting how patients themselves cope."

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