

Fewer friends, lower self-esteem can lead to distorted perceptions of life challenges

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Being with friends can make climbing a hill feel less daunting.

(Medical Xpress)—People who have fewer social resources, such as friends and family, literally see challenging objects and events in a more exaggerated way than do people who feel emotionally supported, according to research by Kent Harber, associate professor of psychology at Rutgers-Newark.

"Those with fewer friends, with lower self-esteem and with less opportunity to disclose their emotions tend to visually amplify threats," Harber said. "Their perceptions are exaggerated, and disturbing things appear higher, closer, of greater duration or more intense than they actually are."

According to Harber's thesis – a theory known as the Resources and Perception Model (RPM) – psychosocial resources can prevent this

[amplification](#), leading to more accurate perception. In a study published in the *The Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Harber and colleagues from the University of Virginia enlisted passersby who were alone or with a friend and asked them to estimate the angle of a steep hill on the U.Va campus. "Those with friends saw the hill as less steep, and the longer they knew their friend or the closer they felt toward their friend the less steep the hill appeared to them," Harber said.

His latest study, published in the journal *Emotion*, tested whether the resource of self-worth affected distance perception to a live tarantula. Subjects were first asked to recall one of the following: a personal success, a neutral chore or a personal failure. Next, they used a reel to pull a clear plastic cart toward their face and estimate how far away it was from them. For some people, the cart contained a harmless cat toy; but for others it contained a live tarantula.

"As expected, feeling good, neutral or bad about oneself had no effect on distance to the cat toy but did affect distance to the tarantula," Harber said. "Those who felt bad about themselves saw the tarantula as looming closer than it was; those who felt good about themselves were strikingly accurate."

Another study tested how high a ledge appeared depending on one's frame of mind. Researchers brought subjects to the fifth floor of a building and estimate how high up they were. One group could put their hands the railing, while the other was prevented in doing so by paper handcuffs. For those who could hold onto the rail, self-esteem had no effect on height [perception](#).

"They were all pretty accurate in their height estimates," Harber said. But self-esteem did matter for the subjects who couldn't hold the railing; the hand-cuffed subjects with high esteem did as well as did subjects who could hold the handrail.

"Those with high levels of self-worth could 'get a grip' internally," Harber said. But handcuffed subjects who lacked self-esteem "had neither an external nor an internal resource. They saw the distance to floor as much greater than did all other subjects," Harber said.

Why would our mind's eye play these tricks on us? According to Harber, the distortions can be useful. "When we lack resources, the potential costs of engaging with hazards are greater and we need to adjust our behavior accordingly. Our psyches might be nudging us toward caution by exaggerating the visual aspect of challenging things, when our resources are low."

But for people who chronically lack resources, there may be a serious downside. "Those who are isolated, who often lack self-worth, or who are in other ways bereft of resources might live in a more threatening world where mole hills look like mountains."

The remedy, suggests Harber, is not to be super-popular or in a perpetually happy mood (in fact, mood has little influence on his studies). Rather, it's about having a sufficient number of good friends and a core level of self-acceptance. "It's not about seeing the world through rose-colored glasses," Harber says. "It's about having the resources to see things clearly, as they are."

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