

We're emotionally distant and that's just fine by me

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When it comes to having a lasting and fulfilling relationship, common wisdom says that feeling close to your romantic partner is paramount. But a new study finds that it's not how close you feel that matters most, it's whether you are as close as you want to be, even if that's really not close at all.

"Our study found that people who yearn for a more intimate partnership and people who crave more distance are equally at risk for having a problematic relationship," says the study's lead author, David M. Frost, PhD, of Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. "If you want to experience your relationship as healthy and rewarding, it's important that you find a way to attain your idealized level of closeness with your partner."

Results will be published in the April issue of the [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#), and will also appear ahead of print online on February 13.

A sample of 732 men and women, living across the U.S. and Canada, completed three yearly surveys online. They answered questions about relationship closeness, [relationship satisfaction](#), commitment, break-up thoughts, and [symptoms of depression](#). Current and ideal closeness were assessed by choosing from six sets of overlapping circles; varying degrees of overlap signified degrees of closeness. This well-established psychological measure of closeness is known as Inclusion of Other in Self and indicates a couple's "we-ness" or shared identity, values,

viewpoints, resources, and personality traits.

More than half of respondents (57%) reported feeling too much distance between themselves and their partner; 37% were content with the level of closeness in their relationship; and a small minority (5%) reported feeling too close. The degree of difference between a respondent's actual and ideal—their "closeness discrepancy"—correlated with poorer relationship quality and more frequent symptoms of depression. The effect was the same whether the respondent reported feeling "too close for comfort" or "not close enough." Surprisingly, the negative effects of closeness discrepancies were evident regardless of how close people felt to their partners; what mattered was the discrepancy, not the closeness.

Over the two-year study period, some respondents' experiences of closeness became aligned with their ideals. In such cases, their [relationship quality](#) and mental health improved. The inverse was also true. Those who increasingly felt "too close" or "not close enough" over time were more likely to grow unhappy in their relationships and ultimately break up with their partners.

Closeness discrepancies could shape new approaches to psychotherapy, both for couples and individuals, because it takes seriously real differences in the amount of closeness people want in their relationships, says Dr. Frost, a psychologist and professor of Population and Family Health at the Mailman School.

"It's best not to make too many assumptions about what constitutes a healthy relationship," he says. "Rather, we need to hear from people about how close they are in their relationships and how that compares to how close they'd ideally like to be."

Ongoing studies are looking at the issue of closeness discrepancies from both sides of a relationship to see how someone's sense of [relationship](#)

closeness might differ from their partners, whether someone's closeness discrepancy affects their partners, and how it affects their sex life. The concept could also be extended to non-romantic relationships such as co-workers, parent-child, and patient-provider interactions.

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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