

Jealousy can drive us to view ourselves more like our rivals

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If you see your partner flirt with someone else, you may feel hurt, angry, and jealous. The last thing you might expect is to start thinking of yourself more like your rival. New research suggests just that: that jealousy can prompt people to change how they view themselves relative to competitors for their partners' attention.

Previous research has shown that individuals often will change their self-views to be more similar to someone to whom they want to get closer, such as a romantic partner. "However, a rival isn't someone that individuals should like, let alone want to affiliate with," Erica Slotter of Villanova University. "This work was really novel in that we were looking at whether individuals would be willing to shift their self-views to be more similar to a romantic rival."

Across three studies published online today in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Slotter and colleagues tested what happens to people when in a jealous state. They predicted that individuals would only change their self-views if they thought their partner was interested in someone else. "This meant that individuals should not change their self-views if someone flirts with their partner, but the partner doesn't respond with interest," Slotter says.

In one of the studies, 144 romantically involved [men and women](#) completed an [online survey](#) about personal attributes, such as artistic, musical, or athletic ability . The researchers then asked the participants to imagine either that their partner expressed romantic interest in

someone else or not. In some of the scenarios, the other person expressed romantic interest in their partner, but the partner did not respond.

In one of the scenarios, for example, the participants would imagine walking through a [shopping mall](#) with their romantic partner when an attractive individual – of the sex their partner would be attracted to – walked by. The partner would then say "Did you see that guy/girl? That shirt looked really hot on him/her." In another condition, the partner would notice the attractive other but not express any interest, saying "Don't you have that shirt? It looks much better on you than on him/her."

The researchers then asked the participants how jealous they felt and then showed them a personality profile for the potential rival they had imagined in the scenario. "Importantly," Slotter says, "one attribute from the beginning of the study that participants had said was not true of them was in this personality profile." Finally, the participants would re-rate their personal attributes.

The researchers found that participants rated themselves to have personal attributes more like the perceived romantic rival than how they rated themselves before the scenario. "Individuals who thought their [romantic partner](#) was interested in someone who was athletic or musically inclined reported themselves as more athletic or musically inclined at the end of the study than they had at the beginning," Slotter explains.

To help ensure that people were reporting on themselves "accurately" – without trying to intentionally change their results, the researchers measured reaction times in people's assessments as well. "Because of the reaction time measure, we feel confident concluding that individuals in our study really were thinking of themselves differently – not just presenting themselves in a particular way to the experimenter," Slotter

says.

A next step, Slotter says, is looking at whether [jealousy](#) not only changes people's views of themselves but also their corresponding behavior. Her team is also interested in exploring how jealousy-based self-change may impact people's health and wellness. "If we change ourselves to keep a partner with a wandering eye, could this impact us negatively? We don't know," she says.

"We are also interested in looking into whether this self-change technique might actually help people to hold onto their partners," Slotter says. "The whole rationale behind this project is the idea that, if your partner is interested in someone else, he/she probably thinks that this other person has attractive traits. Thus, it might behoove us to take on these traits that our partner is attracted to. However, we have no idea yet whether or not changing yourself in this way would actually help keep a [partner](#)."

More information: The paper, "Changing Me to Keep You: State Jealousy Promotes Perceiving Similarity Between the Self and a Romantic Rival," Erica B. Slotter, Gale M. Lucas, Brittany Jakubiak, and Heather Lasslett, was published online on July 10, 2013, and is forthcoming in print in October 2013 in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, a journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP). psp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../08/0146167213492427

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