

# Men feel worse about themselves when female partners succeed, says new research

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Deep down, men may not bask in the glory of their successful wives or girlfriends. While this is not true of women, men's subconscious self-esteem may be bruised when their spouse or girlfriend excels, says a study published by the American Psychological Association.

It didn't matter if their significant other was an excellent hostess or intelligent, men were more likely to feel subconsciously worse about themselves when their female partner succeeded than when she failed, according to the study published online in the *APA Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. However, women's self-esteem was not affected by their [male partners'](#) successes or failures, according to the research, which looked at heterosexual Americans and Dutch.

"It makes sense that a man might feel threatened if his girlfriend outperforms him in something they're doing together, such as trying to lose weight," said the study's lead author, Kate Ratliff, PhD, of the University of Florida. "But this research found evidence that men automatically interpret a partner's success as their own failure, even when they're not in direct competition"

Men subconsciously felt worse about themselves when they thought about a time when their female partner thrived in a situation in which they had failed, according to the findings. The researchers studied 896 people in five experiments.

In one experiment, 32 [couples](#) from the University of Virginia were

given what was described as a "test of problem solving and [social intelligence](#)" and then told that their partner scored either in the top or bottom 12 percent of all [university students](#). Hearing that their partner scored high or low on the test did not affect what the researchers called participants' explicit self-esteem – i.e., how they said they felt.

Participants were also given a test to determine how they felt subconsciously about their partners' performance, which the researchers called implicit self-esteem. In this test, a computer tracks how quickly people associate good and bad words with themselves. For example, participants with high implicit self-esteem who see the word "me" on a computer screen are more likely to associate it with words such as "excellent" or "good" rather than "bad" or "dreadful." [Click here to see a sample of the test.](#)

Men who believed that their partner scored in the top 12 percent demonstrated significantly lower implicit self-esteem than men who believed their partner scored in the bottom 12 percent. Participants did not receive information about their own performance.

Findings were similar in two more studies conducted in the Netherlands. The Netherlands boasts one of the smallest gender gaps in labor, education and politics, according to the United Nations' Gender Equality Index. However, like American men, Dutch men who thought about their romantic partner's success subconsciously felt worse about themselves than men who thought about their partner's failure, according to both studies. They said they felt fine but the test of implicit self-esteem revealed otherwise.

In the final two experiments, conducted online, 657 U.S. participants, 284 of whom were men, were asked to think about a time when their partner had succeeded or failed. For example, some participants were asked to think about their partner's social success or failure, such as

being a charming host at a party, or a more intellectual achievement or failure. In one study, participants were told to think of a time when their partner succeeded or failed at something at which they had succeeded or failed. When comparing all the results, the researchers found that it didn't matter if the achievements or failures were social, intellectual or related to participants' own successes or failures – men subconsciously still felt worse about themselves when their partner succeeded than when she failed. However, men's implicit self-esteem took a bigger hit when they thought about a time when their partner succeeded at something while they had failed.

Researchers also looked at how relationship satisfaction affected self-esteem. Women in these experiments reported feeling better about their relationship when they thought about a time their partner succeeded rather than a time when their partner failed but [men](#) did not.

**More information:** "Gender Differences in Implicit Self-Esteem Following a Romantic Partner's Success or Failure," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2013.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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