

Two stressed people equals less stress

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Does giving a speech in public stress you out? Or writing a big presentation for your boss? What about skydiving? One way to cope, according to a new study from Sarah Townsend, assistant professor of management and organization at the USC Marshall School of Business, is to share your feelings with someone who is having a similar emotional reaction to the same scenario.

Townsend said that one of her study's main discoveries is the benefit gained by spending time and conversing with someone whose [emotional response](#) is in line with yours. Such an alignment may be helpful in the workplace.

"For instance, when you're putting together an important presentation or working on a high-stakes project, these are situations that can be threatening and you may experience heightened stress," said Townsend. "But talking with a colleague who shares your [emotional state](#) can help decrease this stress."

For "Are You Feeling What I'm Feeling? Emotional Similarity Buffers Stress," in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, Townsend and co-authors Heejung S. Kim of UC Santa Barbara and Batja Mesquita of University of Leuven, Belgium, had 52 female undergraduate students participate in a study on public speaking.

Participants were paired up and asked to give a speech while being video-recorded. However, prior to this, the pairs of participants were encouraged to discuss with each other how they were feeling about

making their speeches. Each participant's levels of the stress-related hormone cortisol were measured before, during and after their speeches.

The results "show that sharing a threatening situation with a person who is in a similar emotional state, in terms of her overall emotional profile, buffers individuals from experiencing the heightened levels of stress that typically accompany threat," according to the study. In other words, when you're facing a threatening situation, interacting with someone who is feeling similarly to you decreases the stress you feel, said Townsend.

"Imagine you are one of two people working on an important project: if you have a lot riding on this project, it is a potentially stressful situation," Townsend said. "But having a coworker with a similar emotional profile can help reduce your experience of stress."

Townsend, who recently launched the Culture, Diversity, and Psychophysiology Lab at Marshall, noted that motivating her research is the importance of cross-cultural understandings in the global marketplace. She hopes to continue her work by examining how developing emotional similarity can benefit people from different cultural backgrounds who must learn to function together in the workplace or the university classroom.

Ambitious professionals take note: According to Townsend, "We've found that emotional similarity is important. So now the question is: How do we get people to be more similar? What can you do to generate this emotional similarity with a coworker? Or, as a manager, how can you encourage emotional similarity among your team?"

So the next time you go skydiving, remember to buddy up with someone who feels the same way about it that you do.

Provided by USC Marshall School of Business

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