

Keep romance alive with double dates

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Going on a double date may be more effective at reigniting passion in your own relationship than the classic candlelit dinner for two.

According to new research, striking up a friendship with another couple in which you discuss personal details of your life will bring you closer to your own partner.

"Passionate love is one of the first dimensions of love to decrease in couples over time as the newness of a relationship begins to wane," says Keith Welker, a doctoral student at Wayne State University.

"Relationships have widely been thought to flourish and develop in a broader network of social relationships, while emerging research has suggested that novel, arousing experiences can increase feelings of passionate love."

The new research fuses together the two research areas, showing that novel, high-self-disclosure interactions with other couples can increase feelings of passionate love. Such interactions, the researchers say, may cause us to perceive our partners and the relationship in a new light.

Indeed, perception is vital in a relationship, according to a range of new studies to be presented this week at the [Society for Personality and Social Psychology \(SPSP\) annual conference in Austin](#). Whether we perceive a long-term commitment as marriage versus merely cohabitating can change how we respond to stress, according to one study, while our perceptions of how much our partner truly wants the best for us predicts psychological health over 10 years in another study.

Double dates to reignite passionate love

Welker, with his adviser Rich Slatcher, had previously studied how self-disclosure increased closeness within couples. They wanted to extend the research to investigate how self-disclosure between couples affects closeness and feelings of passionate love.

"We were expecting that the formation of a friendship between two couples in the lab would increase closeness and relationship satisfaction," Welker says. "However, we found the robustness of the effects on passionate love surprising."

In two studies with about 150 couples, the researchers used the "Fast Friends" activity, originally developed by Arthur Aron of Stony Brook University, a co-author on the new study. Over 45 minutes, couples answered basic "get-to-know-you" questions, such as "What is your idea of a perfect day?" or "Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?" The questions progressed to much deeper, personal topics such as "What was the most embarrassing moment in your life?" or asking for advice on personal problems. "This task has been repeatedly shown to make both strangers and friends closer to each other," Welker says.

In one of the studies, couples who met each other through the high-disclosure Fast Friends activity reported higher feelings of passionate love than those assigned to a low-disclosure task, which involved non-emotional, small-talk questions. In a second study, the researchers found that how responsive another couple was to personal disclosure predicted the increase in passionate love following the Fast Friends task.

"The more that the other couple responds to your self-disclosures in a validating and caring way when on a double date, the more passionate you feel about your own relationship," Welker explains. "Although we

still need to investigate why responsiveness from other couples predicts increases in passionate love, one possibility is that having another couple respond positively to yourself and your partner may provide you with a fresh, positive view of your partner and relationship."

In the meantime, this Valentine's Day, Welker suggests picking a double-date activity that facilitates personal disclosure. "Any setting where couples can talk, exchange information about each other, and respond to each other in a validating, thoughtful manner could apply," he says. "One very practical application could be going out to dinner with another couple." But he says to opt for dinner at home, as that will engender more disclosure than a date at a public restaurant.

Marriage signals in the brain

How you view your partner and the commitment level of your relationship significantly affects your health. Researchers have found that being married confers [health benefits](#) above mere cohabitation but it may just all be in our heads. It turns out that merely regarding your relationship as a marriage can confer the same benefits, even if you haven't actually tied the knot.

Over the past 20 years of studying relationships, including how couples regulate each others' emotions, Jim Coan of the University of Virginia became interested in the "cohabitation effect" – the idea that cohabiting couples, compared to [married couples](#), are less stable, show fewer health-related benefits, and may even be more likely to divorce if they ultimately marry. "I've always felt personally skeptical of these findings, not really for any strong empirical reason, they just felt intuitively wrong to me," he says.

So Coan set out to explore the effect by comparing how married couples, cohabiting couples, dating couples, and friends handle stress together. He

specifically looked at how holding hands during a potential threat can decrease activity in the hypothalamus – a potential neurophysiological marker for the effect of stress on health. The work builds on past evidence that hand-holding helps people regulate their emotions. "Hand-holding is special," Coan says. "It has special symbolic value over and above, say, holding an elbow or an ankle."

Using fMRI, Coan and colleagues collected brain activity from 54 couples—half of whom were married, the other half cohabiting—as they viewed "threat" or "safe" cues in the scanner. Threat cues signaled to subjects that they faced a 20 percent chance of electric shock to their ankle, while the safe cues signaled a 0 percent chance of shock. Some of the time, subjects held the hand of their partner, while other times, they either held the hand of a stranger or faced the cues alone.

Married couples, but not cohabiting couples, had reduced hypothalamic activity in response to threat cues while holding hands with their partners. "The most surprising thing about this is that our cohabiting couples are matched for age, relationship duration, and relationship satisfaction," Coan says. "So why should they respond so differently to supportive hand-holding?"

The answer, he thinks, lies in data he collected with same-sex couples. Coan conducted a parallel study with 26 same-sex couples, none of whom were legally married but half of whom described their relationship as a marriage. They found the same difference in hypothalamic regulation by hand-holding between self-described married and self-described cohabiting same-sex [couples](#). "So whatever the ultimate explanation, I do not think the phenomenon is real," Coan says. "I think it has to do with the conceptualization of one's relationship."

"It may not even be about marriage, per se, but about asserting

cohabitation instead," he explains. "Asserting cohabitation is basically asserting that one is not 'locked in' to a commitment."

Marriage is a signal, Coan says, that is intended to convey dependability and predictability. "So I think the take-home implication is that our brains are sensitive to signs that the people we depend on in our lives are predictable and reliable," he says. "And our brains will depend upon—will, in effect, outsource to—those we feel are most predictable and reliable for our emotion-regulation needs."

Health benefits from perceived support

Another big factor in how relationships affect our health is how much we believe our partners care for, understand, and appreciate us. This factor predicts everything from personal growth to emotional stability—above and beyond initial well-being—according to a new longitudinal study.

"The effect of relationships on our psychological and physical health is much stronger than any other factor you can think of," says Emre Selcuk of Middle East Technical University in Turkey. "For instance, the effect of the existence and quality of close relationships on mortality is larger than that of cigarette smoking."

Selcuk and Anthony Ong have been trying to figure out which unique aspects of relationships contribute to this effect. Specifically, they are interested in "perceived partner responsiveness" – the extent to which you think your partner genuinely wants the best for you. This perceived support is distinct from how much support you actually receive from your partner.

Past research has shown the more partner support someone receives, the more at risk that person is for all-cause mortality. However, [work by](#)

[Selcuk and Ong](#) demonstrated that this effect disappeared completely for individuals who perceive their partner as responsive to their needs. Moreover, the new longitudinal study, analyzing a national U.S. sample of more than a 1,000 married or cohabiting people surveyed in 1995/6 and then again in 2005/6, shows that the more perceived support, the better our psychological well-being 10 years later.

These findings come down to perception: "The effectiveness of received support depends on the perceptions of the recipient rather than the amount of actual support enacted," Selcuk says. If you do not perceive your partner as responsive to your needs, "even the best-intentioned support behavior may backfire and lead to worse outcomes," he says. "But if you perceive your partner as really caring for, understanding, and appreciating you, then your romantic [relationship](#) will make you a happier and healthier person in the long-term."

The research follows [past work](#) by Selcuk and colleagues showing that just a reminder of a responsive romantic partner – such as viewing a photo of your partner – helps someone cope with emotions induced from recalling an upsetting past event. Those who benefited the most from viewing their partner's photograph experienced fewer psychological and physical health problems in their life even weeks after the experiment. The latest analysis found that people who perceived their partner as responsive experienced higher life satisfaction and purpose in life, and lower depression, among other positive psychological attributes, 10 years later.

"Our findings clearly show that having someone in our life whom we perceive as genuinely caring for us, understanding and appreciating our needs, concerns, and goals enhances our ability to recover from negative emotions, improves our psychological well-being, confers protective health benefits, and even affects the very length of our life," Selcuk says. "So anyone who has not chosen their [partner](#) yet should do it very wisely

because it may very well turn out to be the most important decision they will ever make."

More information: Welker, Coan, and Selcuk are presenting their research at the SPSP annual conference in Austin, Feb. 13-15, 2014.

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