

Experience with family verbal conflict as a child can help in stressful situations as an adult

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The holiday season gives people the opportunity to reconnect with friends and family each year. Sometimes these interactions can be stressful, especially around the Thanksgiving table where a heated debate can occur. How come some people are better at handling these stressful interactions than others? A recent study published in the journal *Human Communication Research* by researchers at Rollins College and The Pennsylvania State University found that individuals who were exposed to intense verbal aggression as children are able to handle intense conflict later in life.

Lindsey Aloia (Rollins College) and Denise Solomon (The Pennsylvania State University) published their findings in the journal *Human Communication Research*. Aloia and Solomon studied 50 romantically involved couples and found that the more intense the [conflict](#) interaction was rated between the couples the stronger the physiological stress response to the conflict. This relationship, however, was weakened for individuals who reported a higher level of childhood exposure to verbal aggression.

For the experiment the couples provided saliva samples to determine their baseline cortisol levels. They were then interviewed separately about the most stressful areas of conflict in their relationship and filled out a questionnaire that asked about their childhood experiences with [verbal aggression](#). Following the interview, partners were asked to sit

together and discuss an area of conflict alone for 10 minutes. The sessions were videotaped. After the discussion the couples were separated again and provided two additional saliva samples over a period of 20 minutes after the conflict. Trained judges then watched video recordings of the couples and rated the intensity of the conflict communication of each couple. Finally, [cortisol levels](#) were calculated to evaluate experiences of stress using the collected [saliva samples](#).

Previous research has examined the experience of conflict within a multitude of relationships. These studies make it clear that conflict can produce a number of negative outcomes. For example, exposure to conflict has been linked to depression, distress, and anxiety; feelings of hurt and anger; relationship dissatisfaction; and subsequent physical violence. Recent efforts point to the role of physiological processes in understanding the variation in individuals' experiences of interpersonal conflict. Considering the physiological implications for stress and viewing interpersonal conflict [interactions](#) as potential stressors highlights how experiences of conflict are shaped by both the demands of the interaction and people's adaptive capacity to handle that stressor.

"Conflict experiences can be beneficial, by alleviating tension and avoiding conflict escalation, reducing communication apprehension, and contributing to closeness within the relationship," said Aloia. "Given the diversity of outcomes associated with [interpersonal conflict](#), efforts to understand variation in the experienced negativity of conflict experiences are extremely important in helping people navigate these interactions."

More information: "Conflict Intensity, Family History, and Physiological Stress Reactions to Conflict Within Romantic Couples," by Lindsey Aloia and Denise Solomon; *Human Communication Research*, 2014.

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