

Is depression a barrier to communication in couples?

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A massive 6.7% of the US population are affected by depressive disorders. As well as pessimism, irritability, pain and exhaustion, depression is also proven to affect communication and ability to maintain relationships. This article in Communication Monographs explores depression and relational uncertainty within couples and the causal effect on communication behaviours.

Depressed individuals are known to withdraw from negativity or social challenge. Speculated motivations for avoidance include feelings of futility and inhibition; use as an emotional coping strategy; wish to preserve the relationship; and fear of conflict. This behaviour is detrimental to relationships causing lack of problem resolution, missed bonding opportunities, lack of closeness and questions over commitment.

Leanne K. Knobloch et al. seek to highlight uncertainty amongst depressed couples as a catalyst to communication barriers. Uncertainty about the future of relationships; the stability and significance to each person is known to cause topic avoidance amongst platonic relationships in friends and family. The authors hypothesise a likely similar effect on romantic couples affected by depression. Their study examined 126 couples, one or both of whom diagnosed depressed, most married and almost half parents. Subjects completed an online survey measuring depressive symptoms, relational uncertainty and topic avoidance on a point scale. Interestingly the majority of surveys, showed a positive association between relational uncertainty and topic avoidance.

Fascinating differences were observed between men vs. women, cohabiting vs. married and depressed vs. partner.

These novel findings show the combination of depression and uncertainty predicts topic avoidance and has ramifications for treatment methods and outcomes in securing the happiness and safety of both partners. The authors quote "Our results also have pragmatic value for suggesting that relational uncertainty may be a site of intervention for helping people with depressive symptoms be more comfortable discussing challenging issues...(and)... as a step toward unravelling the complexities of people's avoidance behaviour in the context of depression." They urge further research at the junction between [depression](#), [uncertainty](#) and communication to identify methods of halting the cycle.

More information: "The Role of Relational Uncertainty in Topic Avoidance among Couples with Depression." *Communication Monographs* [DOI: 10.1080/03637751.2014.998691](https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2014.998691)

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