

Comparing your partner to someone else's? Find yours comes up short?

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When Julie compares her husband George to her friend's husband Sam, she can't help but notice that Sam is better at helping his children with homework. But rather than be upset about George's shortcomings in the children's homework arena, Julie reasons that since she enjoys doing homework with their children, it's not that important that George do it.

What Julie has just done is protect her partner (and their [relationship](#)!) from the negative implications of her own comparison. But not all members of a couple engage in these justifying explanations of their partner's behaviours or characteristics.

According to new research, whether or not someone protects a partner from the negative implications of comparisons depends on the degree to which they view themselves and their partner as one unit. This phenomenon has been dubbed 'self-other overlap' by psychologists.

"People who are high on self-other overlap will attempt to protect their partner and minimize the threat by rating the trait or skill that they compared their partner on as less important," said University of Toronto psychology PhD candidate Sabrina Thai. "Furthermore, these people are able to maintain positive views of their partner in spite of unfavourable comparisons. They still see their partner as being close to their ideal partner, which has positive implications on their relationship."

Thai's finding, "Comparing You = Comparing Me: Social Comparisons

of the Expanded Self," was published in the July issue of the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* and co-written by U of T psychology professor Penelope Lockwood.

"Our studies provide the first evidence that people do compare their partner to others with significant consequences for the relationship," says Thai. "People who are low in self-partner overlap have difficulty maintaining positive partner perceptions following threatening comparisons of their partner to others. This may be a key source of stress and conflict in people's relationships.

"Moreover, by highlighting the benefits of high self-partner overlap, this research may identify a possible future intervention technique. Perhaps temporarily boosting someone's perceptions of self-partner overlap may help them cope with and overcome the negative outcomes of comparing their [partner](#)."

Provided by University of Toronto

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