

Maintaining healthy relationships: Studies identify a promising way

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Thinking about the future helps overcome relationship conflicts, according to a University of Waterloo study just published online in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

"When romantic partners argue over things like finances, jealousy, or other interpersonal issues, they tend to employ their current feelings as fuel for a heated argument. By envisioning their [relationship](#) in the [future](#), people can shift the focus away from their current feelings and mitigate conflicts," said Alex Huynh, a doctoral candidate in psychology and lead author of the study, which he published with Igor Grossmann from the University of Waterloo, and Daniel Yang from Yale University.

Previous research has shown that taking a step back, and adopting a distanced fly-on-the-wall-type of perspective can be a positive strategy for reconciliation of interpersonal struggles. For example, prior research by Grossmann and colleagues suggests that people are able to reason more wisely over issues of infidelity when they are asked to do so from a third-person perspective. Huynh and his collaborators investigated whether similar benefits in reasoning and relationship well-being can be induced by simply stepping back and thinking about the future.

Study [participants](#) were instructed to reflect on a recent [conflict](#) with a romantic partner or a close friend. One group of participants were then asked to describe how they would feel about the conflict one year in the future, while another group was asked to describe how they feel in the present.

The team examined participants' written responses through a text-analysis program for their use of pronouns - such as I, me, she, he. These choices of pronouns were used to capture participants' focus on the feelings and behaviour of those involved in the conflict. Written responses were also examined for beneficial reasoning strategies - for example, forgiveness and reinterpreting the conflict more positively.

The researchers found that thinking about the future affected both participants' focus on their feelings, and their reasoning strategies. As a result, participants reported more positivity about their relationship altogether. In particular, when [study participants](#) extended their thinking about the relationship a year into the future, they were able to show more forgiveness and reinterpret the event in a more reasoned and positive light.

The way people respond to conflict is an essential component for relationship maintenance, say the researchers.

"Our study demonstrates that adopting a future-oriented perspective in the context of a relationship conflict - reflecting on how one might feel a year from now - may be a valuable coping tool for one's psychological happiness and relationship well-being," said Huynh.

The research also has potential implications for understanding how prospection, or future-thinking, can be a beneficial strategy for a variety of conflicts people experience in their everyday lives.

Provided by University of Waterloo

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