

Past misdeeds haunt relationships when they feel recent, study finds

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If a partner's past transgression feels like it happened yesterday, even if it didn't, you are more likely to remember it during new, unrelated arguments, according to a new study.

A researcher at the University of Waterloo's Department of Psychology co-authored the work with a colleague at Wilfrid Laurier University. The researchers found that even if no one mentions the transgressions during arguments, just thinking about them could be enough to have a detrimental effect on the relationship.

"When memories feel closer to the present, those memories are construed as more relevant to the present and more representative of the relationship," said Kassandra Cortes, a [doctoral candidate](#) at Waterloo and co-author of the study with Professor Anne Wilson at Laurier. "If one bad memory feels recent, a person will also be more likely to remember other past slights, and attach more importance to them."

Bringing up past grudges during a new conflict can make arguing fairly challenging. Researchers call this kitchen sinking, since partners throw everything but the kitchen sink into the argument. But not mentioning those memories is not the solution either. The research indicates that just thinking of past transgressions during conflicts was an equally strong, and in some cases stronger, predictor of poor relationship outcomes than bringing them up. A person may feel confused and frustrated if they do not understand why their partner has become so upset over something so seemingly minor.

Cortes and Wilson found that those who reported thinking about past transgressions during a recent conflict said they reacted to the current conflict more destructively, reported having more frequent and intense conflicts with their partners and felt worse about their relationships in general.

The research found that people with high attachment anxiety—those who worry their partners don't love and care for them—are especially likely to think of past transgressions in new, unrelated contexts. To them, past misdeeds tend to feel closer to the present than for those who are more secure in their relationships.

"It may be useful for people to resolve an issue with their partner when it occurs, rather than pretending to forgive their partner or just letting it go when they are clearly upset. This way, the issue may be less likely to resurface in the future."

The study appears in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Exploring ways in which people can prevent bad memories from resurfacing is a topic for future research for the team.

Provided by University of Waterloo

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