

Want to help your mate beat the blues? Show them the love

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Credit: George Hodan/Public Domain

The more depressed your romantic partner may be, the more love you should give them, according to new University of Alberta research.

It can be tempting to pull back, but tough as it may be, helping your loved one stick it out through a bout of depression can help their future [mental health](#), said relationships researcher Matthew Johnson.

"Efforts from a [partner](#) to help alleviate [stress](#) may prevent the development or worsening of [mental health problems](#) and, in fact, could help keep the relationship healthy."

Stress takes a toll on physical and mental health, as well as close relationships, so that support can help a person better cope with it.

"When we experience stress, especially high levels of stress, we are particularly vulnerable and perhaps that's why partner support in those times is so impactful and long-lasting," said Johnson, a professor in the U of A's Faculty of Agricultural, Life and Environmental Sciences.

The study, published in *Developmental Psychology*, surveyed couples on their levels of depression, self-esteem and mutual support. Researchers found that the support given when a mate was feeling stressed was linked to future feelings of self-worth and depression.

For example, men's feelings of self-esteem got a boost from supporting a depressed partner.

"Giving to their partner made them feel better about themselves," Johnson said.

For women, receiving support from their partner led to increased self-esteem and reduced depression in the future.

The study also showed that women with higher-self-esteem and men with fewer symptoms of depression received more support from their partners in times of stress.

"Those who have better mental health to start with may have the capacity to reach out for support when needed and are better able to manage stress on their own, but they are likely not the people who would benefit

most from a partner's help," Johnson noted.

But giving support to a partner who needs it most can be difficult, he added.

"When someone is depressed or has low-self-worth, they may lash out. A partner offering support reaffirms feelings of [depression](#) and helplessness, of the feeling that they have to pick up the slack," Johnson said.

Lend an invisible helping hand

In the face of negative reaction, Johnson suggested offering "invisible support."

"Studies suggest offering support your partner may not even be aware of, but would still be a helpful gesture, like taking care of a sink full of dirty dishes they haven't seen yet. You can offer [support](#), just don't draw attention to it."

Other ways to help a partner struggling with feelings of sadness or self-doubt include lending an empathetic ear if they want to express themselves and on a more practical level, "handling the logistics of daily life by offering to take on tasks that aren't normally yours," such as planning meals or driving children to school, Johnson added.

More information: Matthew D. Johnson et al. Pathways Between Self-Esteem and Depression in Couples., *Developmental Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/dev0000276](https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000276)

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