

Relationship science: How can couples keep moving forward

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Credit: Anna Langova/public domain

For some couples in romantic relationships, just staying together is good enough. But others want to see their relationship move forward—to get better and better—and are willing to put in the effort to get there.

Family studies researchers at the University of Illinois who study the science behind maintaining romantic relationships focus their work on

the central organizing unit—the [relationship](#)—rather than on the individual. Through their work, they hope to find out what works and, maybe, what doesn't in keeping a relationship moving forward.

"We know relationships are key," says Brian Ogolsky, associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at U of I. "We spend all of our time in these relationships. Whether we are at home, with our siblings, our parents, or our colleagues, these are all extremely important. And consequently we spend very little time alone with our thoughts. So it's critical that we carefully and methodically understand what's going on in relationships and what is unique that two individuals bring that you can't get from studying person 'x' and person 'y' separately."

In a recent study published in the *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, Ogolsky and his research team discuss romantic [relationship maintenance](#) and the two primary motives behind a couple's attempts at staying together: [threat](#) mitigation and relationship enhancement.

Ogolsky calls these "macro-motives," or the main reasons people maintain their relationships. In their study, the researchers provide a visual framework of how relationships may be maintained by staving off threats or moved forward by relationship enhancement strategies, which involve putting effort into the relationship for the pleasure of it. For the most part, relationships include a combination of both.

"Threats to the relationship come from all kinds of different places," he explains. "Generally, there are many threats early in relationships that can cause problems, but that is not to say that these disappear later. We know couples cheat in the long-term, people end up in new work places and in new situations where possible alternative partners show up, conflicts arise, or a lack of willingness to sacrifice time for your partner emerges."

Some threat mitigation tactics can actually become enhancement strategies over time, Ogolsky says, but adds that the reverse is not usually true. "We get to a place where we are pouring energy into the relationship simply because we want to keep the relationship moving forward rather than just mitigating threats."

In their integrative model of relationship maintenance, the researchers also illustrate individual versus interactive components of maintenance. "This question of 'is this an individual thing or is this a couple-level thing' often goes unanswered. But as we were doing this review, we started noticing that there are ways to maintain the relationship that we can characterize as 'more or less in our own heads.' We are doing something to convince ourselves that this is a good relationship and therefore it's good for our relationship," Ogolsky explains. "Things like positive illusions, the idea that we can believe our relationship is better than it is or that our partner is better than he or she is. We can do that without our partner."

Mitigating conflict, however, is something that partners must do together. "Good conflict management or forgiving our partner for doing something wrong is an interactive process. When a threat comes in, we can do one of two things: we can ditch our [partner](#) or forgive them over time."

The same is true of enhancement strategies: partners can do things individually or interactively. "Individually, even the act of thinking about our relationship can be enhancing. Whereas engaging in leisure activities together, talking about the state of our relationship, these are all interactive," Ogolsky says.

But why study relationship maintenance as a science?

While Ogolsky rarely offers direct interventions to couples, he explains

that he tends to study the positive side of relationships because of what can be learned from people who are going through what, he says, is inherently a very turbulent thing.

"Relationships have ups and downs. I never go into my work saying people should stay together or they should break up. Relationships are individualized, a unique pairing of people that comes with a unique history. What we are talking about here are processes that exist across different kinds of couples, some of which work very well for some people, some of which may not work for some people. I am interested in understanding processes that keep relationships moving."

For the review, Ogolsky and his team searched for previous research, regardless of discipline, dealing with relationship maintenance. They eventually discussed about 250 studies in the paper (reviewing more than 1,100) that deal with romantic relationships and that met their criteria. Ogolsky hopes the review will bring together relationship scholars from across many disciplines.

The paper, "Relationship Maintenance: A review of research of [romantic relationships](#)," is published in the *Journal of Family Theory and Review*.

More information: Brian G. Ogolsky et al, Relationship Maintenance: A Review of Research on Romantic Relationships, *Journal of Family Theory & Review* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/jftr.12205](https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12205)

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