

## Couples have trouble identifying partner sadness, study finds

March 6 2018, by Margaret Allen

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Credit: Southern Methodist University

How well do couples pick up on one another's feelings? Pretty well, when the emotion is happiness, says a psychologist at Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

But a new study finds that [couples](#) do poorly when it comes to knowing their [partner](#) is sad, lonely or feeling down.

"We found that when it comes to the normal ebb and flow of daily emotions, couples aren't picking up on those occasional changes in 'soft negative' emotions like sadness or feeling down," said family psychologist Chrystyna D. Kouros, lead author on the study. "They might be missing important emotional clues."

Even when a [negative mood](#) isn't related to the relationship, it ultimately can be harmful to a couple, said Kouros, an associate professor in the SMU Department of Psychology. A spouse is usually the primary social supporter for a person.

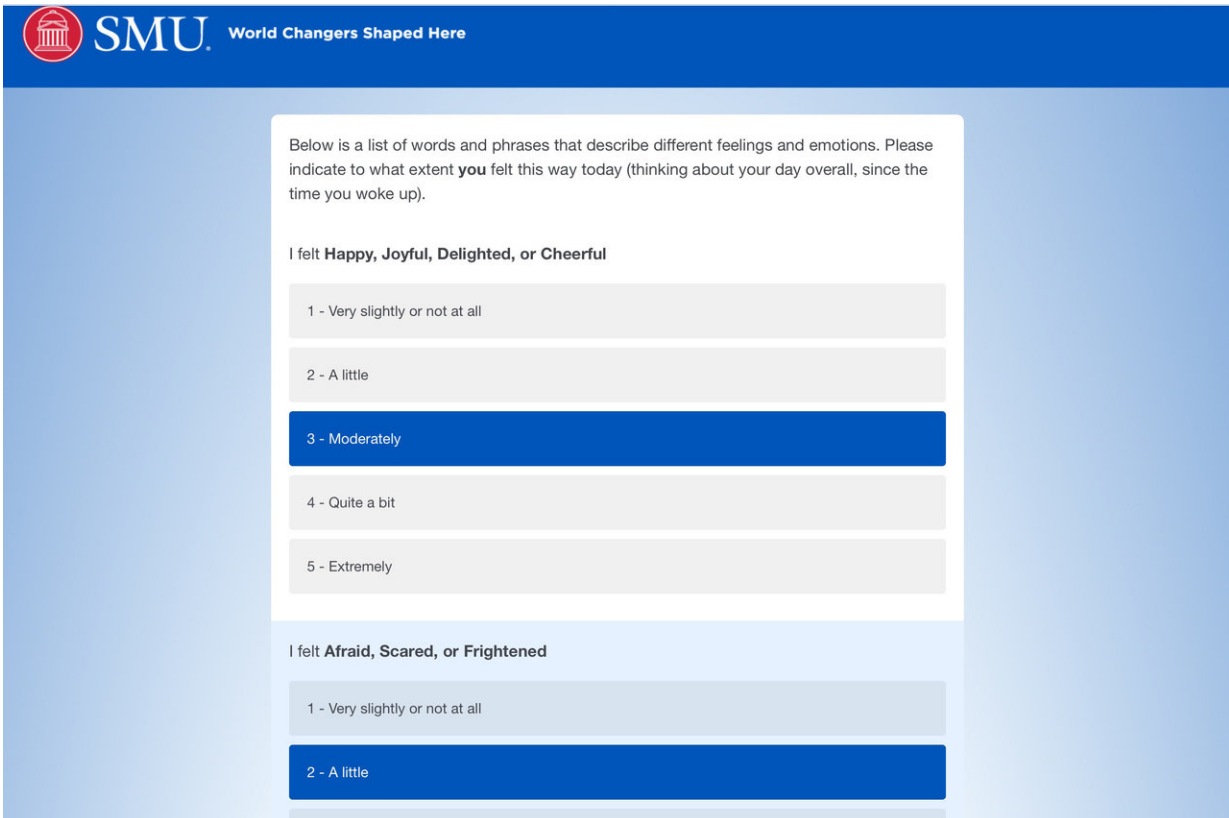
"Failing to pick up on negative [feelings](#) one or two days is not a big deal," she said. "But if this accumulates, then down the road it could become a problem for the relationship. It's these missed opportunities to be offering support or talking it out that can compound over time to negatively affect a relationship."

The finding is consistent with other research that has shown that couples tend to assume their partner feels the same way they are feeling, or thinks the same way they do, Kouros said.

But when it comes to sadness and loneliness, couples need to be on the look-out for tell-tale signs. Some people are better at this process of "[empathic accuracy](#)"—picking up on a partner's emotions—than others.

"With empathic accuracy you're relying on clues from your partner to figure out their mood," Kouros said. "Assumed similarity, on the other hand, is when you just assume your partner feels the same way you do. Sometimes you might be right, because the two of you actually do feel the same, but not because you were really in tune with your partner."

Co-author on the study is relationship psychologist Lauren M. Papp at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



SMU World Changers Shaped Here

Below is a list of words and phrases that describe different feelings and emotions. Please indicate to what extent **you** felt this way today (thinking about your day overall, since the time you woke up).

I felt **Happy, Joyful, Delighted, or Cheerful**

1 - Very slightly or not at all

2 - A little

**3 - Moderately**

4 - Quite a bit

5 - Extremely

I felt **Afraid, Scared, or Frightened**

1 - Very slightly or not at all

**2 - A little**

Participants for the SMU study were 51 couples who completed daily diaries about their mood and the mood of their partner for seven consecutive nights. The study veers from conventional approaches to the topic, which have relied on interviewing couples in a lab setting about feelings related to conflicts in their relationship. Credit: Southern Methodist University

Kouros and Papp reported their findings in the peer-reviewed journal *Family Process* in the article "Couples' Perceptions of Each Other's Daily Affect: Empathic Accuracy, Assumed Similarity, and Indirect Accuracy."

## **Couples should assume less about one another, observe more**

The problem isn't one for which couples need to seek therapy, Kouros said. Instead, she advises couples to stop assuming they know what their partner is feeling. Also, pay more attention to your partner, and communicate more.

"I suggest couples put a little more effort into paying attention to their partner—be more mindful and in the moment when you are with your partner," she said.

She cautions, however, against becoming annoying by constantly asking how the other is feeling, or if something is wrong.

"Obviously you could take it too far," Kouros said. "If you sense that your partner's mood is a little different than usual, you can just simply ask how their day was, or maybe you don't even bring it up, you just say instead 'Let me pick up dinner tonight' or 'I'll put the kids to bed tonight.'"

Even so, partners shouldn't assume their spouse is a mind-reader, expecting them to pick up on their emotions. "If there's something you want to talk about, then communicate that. It's a two-way street," she said. "It's not just your partner's responsibility."

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Kouros and Papp will also present the research findings March 23 at the 2018 biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Human Development.

**More information:** Chrystyna D. Kouros et al. Couples' Perceptions of Each Other's Daily Affect: Empathic Accuracy, Assumed Similarity, and Indirect Accuracy, *Family Process* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/famp.12344](#)

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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