

When ignoring your spouse can help your relationship

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It is a classic relationship stalemate: One partner asks the other to change something and the partner who is asked shuts down. But that type of response may actually be beneficial for the relationship of lower-income

couples, according to research published by the American Psychological Association. Conversely, withdrawing can negatively affect higher-income couples' relationship satisfaction, the study found.

"Consider this example: A wife requests that her husband ask for a raise at work. For a husband in a low-wage job with less job security, that is a risky proposition. By showing reluctance to ask for the raise, he can preserve his self-esteem and lessen emphasis on the couple's vulnerable financial situation," said Jaclyn M. Ross, MA, of the University of California, Los Angeles, and lead author of the study. "For a wealthier couple in the same situation, the wife may perceive that the husband is unwilling to make a sacrifice for his family and that can cause friction in the [relationship](#)."

The study was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Ross and her colleagues noted that previous studies on demand-withdraw behavior have focused almost exclusively on white, middle-class [couples](#). Results of those studies showed that this common behavior could be helpful for some couples and harmful for others. Ross and the team wanted to understand what mitigating factors could lead to those different effects. The researchers decided to include a more racially and ethnically diverse sample, as well as examine the role of socioeconomic status in relationship satisfaction, according to Ross.

As in previous studies, this one focused on the wife being the [partner](#) to give the demand and the husband being the partner to withdraw. Examples of the demand-withdraw behavior included the wives being hostile, dominating, threatening or blaming, while their [husbands](#) avoided the confrontation.

The researchers conducted two experiments with [heterosexual couples](#)

over the course of 18 months. The first experiment included 515 couples (the vast majority were married; all had at least one child or were expecting a child) and 40 percent were at or below the federal poverty line. The couples were visited in their homes by the research team and asked to engage in a series of discussions about something each partner wanted to change about themselves as well as a topic of disagreement in the relationship.

In cases where the researchers observed demand-withdraw behavior, relationship satisfaction remained stable for the couples with fewer financial resources during those 18 months, according to Ross. For more affluent couples who engaged in demand-withdraw, relationship satisfaction declined during that time period.

Interestingly, [relationship satisfaction](#) declined for lower-income couples when the husbands did not exhibit strong withdrawal behaviors, Ross said.

The second experiment involved 414 newlywed couples who were visited in their homes four times over 27 months. The couples were asked to engage in the same series of discussions as the couples in experiment one.

The researchers again found that the disadvantaged couples experienced more dissatisfaction over those 27 months when the husbands displayed lower withdrawal in the face of the wives' demands.

The results of the second experiment were not as robust as experiment one, which could be due to the fact that the second group of couples were newlyweds whereas the first group had been married for an average of five years, according to Ross.

"Even though it is easier for wealthier couples to access resources to

address their relationship problems, it can also create higher expectations that partners will make accommodations for one another's demands and needs that underlie their problems," said Thomas N. Bradbury, Ph.D., of the University of California, Los Angeles, a co-author of the study. "But if those expectations are not met, rifts can occur in the relationship and exacerbate the existing problems."

This study highlights the importance of using diverse samples in research on couples because results can vary based on differing life circumstances, Ross said. The results may be beneficial for clinicians who work with couples in therapy and policymakers focused on marriage and family, she noted.

"Life circumstances may matter for relationships far more than we think—so much so that these circumstances appear to moderate the effects of communication on how happy we are in our partnerships," said Ross. "Creating safe and secure environments helps to allow partners to relate well to each other and to their children, giving more people the kinds of relationships and families that will keep them healthy and happy."

Future research could focus on same-sex or [older couples](#) to examine how this dynamic plays out across various types of relationships, she added.

More information: "Communication that is Maladaptive for Middle-Class Couples is Adaptive for Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Couples," by Jaclyn M. Ross, MA, Benjamin R. Karney, PhD, Teresa P. Nguyen, MA, and Thomas N. Bradbury, PhD, University of California, Los Angeles. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published October 15, 2018.

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