

# Silver linings come from partner support, research says

February 21 2019, by J.d. Warren

---

We're often told we are responsible for our own happiness. But in challenging situations, a UC Riverside study not only demonstrates the benefits of positive reframing—finding a "silver lining—but also suggests our partners can be more adept at finding that silver lining than we are.

A UCR psychology researcher says the findings, based on a study of couples coping with breast [cancer](#), may provide a roadmap for a more contented spouse.

Previous studies have demonstrated that women with breast cancer who engage in positive reframing not only have less distress, but may even find some benefit in the experience. But the question has remained: what's to credit for the ability to find a silver lining?

Psychology researchers know that a great source of support is a "socially similar" other who has faced the same stress, but has found a way to cope more calmly. The researchers in the current study theorized that socially similar other—when facing a challenge such as breast cancer—is likely a [romantic partner](#).

For the current study, 52 couples coping with [breast cancer](#) wore an "Electronically Activated Recorder," or EAR, over one weekend to record 50 seconds every nine minutes during their waking days. After the couples' weekend with the EAR device, researchers looked at the degree to which word use indicated positive reframing and successful

coping, or the reduction of stress.

Of the thousands of sound files collected, researchers found participants were speaking about 46 percent of the time. About 4 percent of "talking" sound files were about cancer. Research assistants were asked to examine these files and look for instances in which someone appeared to be changing a negative view into a positive one.

The couples were asked to self-report their positive reframing (e.g., when experiencing a stressful event, "I look for something good in what is happening"), and their stress levels.

The findings affirmed that spouses can help with coping by positively reframing the cancer experience and other negative experiences. In general, [positive reframing](#)—finding the silver lining—was associated with less stress. It bears out the original theory, the value of the "socially similar" other's support.

"Word use can be a window into people's thoughts and feelings without having to directly ask them. Positive emotion words, like 'happy' or 'calm,' can indicate what someone is feeling, and cognitive processing words, like 'think' or 'because,' reveal that someone is processing a thought," said Megan Robbins, a [psychology professor](#) at UCR and author of the study, which was published recently in the *Journal of Psychosocial Oncology*.

"It's possible that spouses' positive emotion and cognitive processing words indicated that they were helping patients see a new, more positive perspective on cancer." Robbins said it's likely that spouses who can help reframe a topic as "heavy" as cancer in a more positive light may be able to do the same for everyday stressors.

For those whose partners have cancer, and for those whose partners do

not, however, Robbins issues a caution: "To push your partner into positivity when they're not ready is not advisable."

Why are partners better at finding silver linings? Robbins said it may be because the partner who doesn't have cancer has more resources, like energy. It could even be due to a gender effect, i.e., men are more likely to positively reframe cancer than women —though more research is needed to affirm that.

"Interventions should focus on patients and spouses, as coping can be a social activity," Robbins said. "These interventions should stress the importance of active and appropriate coping strategies to both the patient and their potentially less distressed [partner](#)."

**More information:** Megan L. Robbins et al, Interpersonal positive reframing in the daily lives of couples coping with breast cancer, *Journal of Psychosocial Oncology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/07347332.2018.1555198](#)

Provided by University of California - Riverside

Citation: Silver linings come from partner support, research says (2019, February 21) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-02-silver-linings-partner.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--