

New study finds compassion is at the heart of love

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Credit: University of Nottingham

Beneath those carefully crafted profiles on dating sites there are traits that evolution has crafted that drive what we look for in a partner, now new research has shed light on which traits are most important to people when looking for love and revealed it's compassion that sets hearts

racing.

The research by Psychologists at the University of Nottingham published in *Royal Society Open Science* showed that men choose to display their compassionate side, rather than their punitive side, when looking for love and [women](#) prefer men who are compassionate rather than punitive. This preference for compassion over punishment is stronger for those with a left-wing political ideology and who are empathic. This synergy not only brings romantic couples together but helps to sustain caring societies.

The preference for compassion as an attribute when looking for a mate also helps to explain why we are so helpful to each other. We can help people directly, indicating qualities of compassion or indirectly by deterring those who act unfairly by punishing them—indicating qualities of fairness. Both are desirable but it was compassion that men chose to show and women picked as the preferred attribute in a potential partner.

"Human society is characterized by high levels of co-operation which is hard to explain by natural selection. Sexual selection offers one explanation. If men, who are co-operative (help others or punish transgressors), are chosen by women then co-operation survives as a sexually selected trait, and our findings suggest that it is compassion rather than punishment that is favored by sexual selection. The preferences for compassion is also favored more strongly by those with a left-wing political ideology and high empathic concern," says Professor of Health Psychology Eamonn Ferguson.

In a series of studies the researchers asked men—in a romantic mind set or not, to spend money to either; help through giving [compensation](#) to a victim who had been treated unfairly, or punish the person who had treated them unfairly, or do nothing. When men were considering a [romantic relationship](#) they shifted from punishment to compensation.

When presented with the same situation women preferred men who compensated rather than punished. Compensation is linked to compassion and fairness making compensation the behavioral signature for [compassion](#) and is displayed by men when looking for a relationship and preferred by women.

More information: Eamonn Ferguson et al. To help or punish in the face of unfairness: men and women prefer mutually-beneficial strategies over punishment in a sexual selection context, *Royal Society Open Science* (2019). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.181441](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.181441)

Provided by University of Nottingham

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