

# 'Feeling obligated' can impact relationships during social distancing

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In a time where many are practicing "social distancing" from the outside world, people are relying on their immediate social circles more than usual. Does a sense of obligation—from checking on parents to running

an errand for an elderly neighbor—benefit or harm a relationship? A Michigan State University study found the sweet spot between keeping people together and dooming a relationship.

"We were looking to find whether obligation is all good or all bad," said William Chopik, assistant professor of psychology at MSU and co-author of the study. "When we started, we found that people were responding to types of obligations in different ways. People distinguished between requests that were massive obligations and requests that were simple. There's this point that obligation crosses over and starts to be harmful for relationships."

According to Jeewon Oh, MSU doctoral student and co-author of the study, obligation is sometimes the "glue that holds relationships together," but it often carries negative connotations.

"We found that some obligations were linked with greater depressive symptoms and slower increases in support from friends over time," Oh said. "However, other obligations were linked with both greater support and less strain from family and friends initially."

Chopik and Oh's findings suggest that there's a distinct point at which obligation pushes individuals to the brink of feeling burdened, which can start to harm their relationships.

"The line in our study is when it crosses over and starts to be either a massive financial burden or something that disrupts your day-to-day life," Chopik said. "While engaging in substantive obligation can benefit others and make someone feel helpful, it is still costly to a person's time, energy and money."

Until now, similar research showed inconsistencies in how obligation impacts relationships, which Chopik attributes to the spectrum of

obligation. This spectrum ranges from light obligation, like keeping in touch with a [friend](#), to substantive obligation, like lending that friend a considerable amount of money.

"In a way, major obligations violate the norms of friendships," Chopik said. "Interestingly, you don't see that violation as much in relationships with parents or spouses."

Chopik explained that friendships are viewed as low-investment, fun relationships that make people feel good.

"Our longest lasting friendships continue because we enjoy them. But if obligations pile up, it might compromise how close we feel to our friends," Chopik said. "Because [friendships](#) are a [relationship](#) of choice, people can distance themselves from friends more easily than other types of relationships when faced with burdensome obligations."

Additionally, substantive obligations may create strain in a friendship as we try to encourage our friends to do the same even when they might not be able to do so, Oh said.

"Although we may feel good when we do things for our friends, and our friends are grateful to us, we may start to feel like we are investing too much in that relationship," Oh said.

On the other end of the spectrum, light obligation creates what Chopik calls a "norm of reciprocity."

"Those light obligations make us feel better, make us happier and make our relationships stronger," Chopik said. "There's a sense that 'we're both in this together and that we've both invested something in the relationship.'"

That's why, among the best relationships, low-level acts of [obligation](#) don't feel like obligations at all. Small acts of kindness, which strengthen the bonds of our relationships, are done without any fuss or burden.

Still, some types of relationships can make even minor obligations seem daunting. If someone doesn't have a great relationship with a parent, a quick phone call to check in isn't enjoyable, it's an encumbrance.

"Even for things we would expect family members to do, some in the study did them begrudgingly," Chopik said.

Chopik and Oh's findings reveal a spectrum of obligations as diverse as the relationships one has in life.

"It's the little things you do that can really enhance a friendship, but asking too much of a friend can damage your relationship," Chopik said.

**More information:** Jeewon Oh et al, The effects of obligation on relationships and well-being over time in middle adulthood, *International Journal of Behavioral Development* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0165025420911089](#)

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