

Why 'playing hard to get' may actually work

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We tend to like people who like us—a basic human trait that psychologists have termed "reciprocity of attraction." This principle generally works well to start relationships because it reduces the likelihood of rejection. Yet, making the chase harder also has its advantages. So which one is the better strategy?

A pair of researchers from the University of Rochester and the Israeli-based Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya have spent the last few years studying the dynamics of human sexual attraction. In a [2019 study](#), they found that when people feel greater certainty that a prospective romantic partner reciprocates their interest, they will put more effort into seeing that person again. Furthermore, they will even rate the possible date as more sexually attractive than they would if they were less certain about the prospective date's romantic intentions.

In that study, whether participants felt certain or uncertain about a prospective mate's interest hinged on whether or not they received a follow-up message from their designated chat partner (who, in reality, was a study insider).

But in a new study published this spring in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, the team now examined the effects playing hard to get, a mating [strategy](#) that is likely to instill a certain [degree of uncertainty](#).

The researchers discovered that making the chase harder increased a potential mate's desirability.

"Playing hard to get makes it seem as if you are more in demand—we call that having higher mate value," says Harry Reis, a professor of psychology and Dean's Professor in Arts, Sciences & Engineering at Rochester.

"People who are too easy to attract may be perceived as more desperate," says coauthor Gurit Birnbaum, a social psychologist and associate professor of psychology at the IDC Herzliya. "That makes them seem less valuable and appealing—than those who do not make their romantic interest apparent right away."

Birnbaum and Reis have collaborated for decades, ever since Birnbaum was a postdoctoral fellow in psychology at Rochester in 1998–99. While playing hard to get is a common strategy used to attract mates, Birnbaum and Reis found that past research has been unclear about whether, and if so, why this strategy works—questions they sought to address in the latest study.

The duo tested the hard-to-get tactic across three interrelated studies. Participants interacted with what they believed to be another research participant of the opposite sex, but who was in reality an insider—a member of the research team. In each instance, participants rated the extent to which they felt the insider was hard to get, their perceptions of the insider's mate value (e.g., "I perceive the other participant as a valued mate"), and their desire to engage in various sexual activities with the insider.

Key findings

Birnbaum and Reis found that:

- Participants who interacted with the more selective online dating profile (thus making the insider harder to attract) perceived the insider as more valued and more desirable as a partner, compared to participants who interacted with less selective insider profiles (pretending to be easier to attract).
- Participants induced to expend efforts in the pursuit of the insider perceived the potential partner as more valuable and sexually desirable than did the participants who were not induced to invest such efforts.
- Participants expended greater efforts to see the hard-to-get insiders in the future.

Says Reis, "We all want to date people with higher mate value. We're

trying to make the best deal we can."

Of course, some are reluctant to employ this scarcity strategy, worrying that it'll backfire and drive prospective partners away out of fear of being rejected.

Reis acknowledges the strategy doesn't work for everyone, all the time. "If playing hard to get makes you seem disinterested or arrogant," he says, "it will backfire."

So, how then do you reconcile these two approaches—playing hard to get on one hand and removing uncertainty on the other?

Birnbaum advises to show initial interest in potential partners so as not to alienate them. At the same time, don't reveal too much about yourself. People are "less likely to desire what they already have," she explains. Instead, build a connection with a potential partner gradually, thereby creating "a sense of anticipation and a desire to learn more about the other person."

Playing hard to get may work as long as potential partners feel that their efforts are likely to be successful—eventually.

More information: Gurit E. Birnbaum et al, No pain, no gain: Perceived partner mate value mediates the desire-inducing effect of being hard to get during online and face-to-face encounters, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0265407520927469](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407520927469)

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