

# What makes a happy couple, a happy family?

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"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," Leo Tolstoy wrote famously in 1878 in the opening lines of *Anna Karenina*. Turns out the Russian author was onto something.

Cohesive families, indeed, seem to share a few critical

traits—psychologists agree. Being emotionally flexible may be one of the most [important factors](#) when it comes to longevity and overall health of your romantic and familial relationships.

That's the finding of a new University of Rochester meta-analysis, published in the *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, which statistically combined the results of 174 separate studies that had looked at acceptance and commitment therapy, mindfulness, and emotion regulation.

The researchers' aim was to clarify how mindful flexibility—on one hand—and inattentive, mindless, and rigid inflexibility on the other—were linked to the dynamics within families and romantic relationships.

"Put simply," says coauthor Ronald Rogge, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, "this meta-analysis underscores that being mindful and emotionally flexible in tough and challenging situations not only improves the lives of individuals, it might also strengthen and enrich their close relationships."

## **Psychological flexibility versus inflexibility**

Psychological flexibility is defined as a set of skills that people use when they're presented with difficult or challenging thoughts, feelings, emotions, or experiences. Such skills encompass:

- Being open to experiences—both good and bad—and accepting them no matter how challenging or difficult they might be
- Having a mindful attentive awareness of the present moment throughout day-to-day life
- Experiencing thoughts and feelings without obsessively clinging to them

- Maintaining a broader perspective even in the midst of difficult thoughts and feelings
- Learning to actively maintain contact with our deeper values, no matter how stressful or chaotic each day is
- Continuing to take steps toward a goal, even in the face of difficult experiences and setbacks

The opposite—psychological inflexibility—describes six specific behaviors, including:

- Actively avoiding difficult thoughts, feelings, and experiences
- Going through daily life in a distracted and inattentive manner
- Getting stuck in difficult thoughts and feelings
- Seeing difficult thoughts and [feelings](#) as a personal reflection and feeling judged or shameful for having them
- Losing track of deeper priorities within the stress and chaos of day-to-day life
- Getting derailed easily by setbacks or difficult experiences, resulting in being unable to take steps toward deeper goals.

Psychologists consider the rigid and inflexible responses to difficult or challenging experiences dysfunctional, ultimately contributing to and exacerbating a person's psychopathology.

## **How flexibility shapes interactions**

Through their analysis, coauthor Jennifer Daks, a Ph.D. candidate in the Rochester Department of Psychology, and Rogge discovered that within families, higher levels of various forms of parental psychological flexibility were linked to:

- Greater use of adaptive parenting strategies
- Fewer incidents of lax, harsh, and negative parenting strategies

- Lower perceived parenting stress or burden
- Greater family cohesion

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