

'Relationship glasses' shape how we see the good, the bad and the ugly in romantic partners

February 10 2021, by Jesse Lee Wilde and David J. A. Dozois



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

For some, the COVID-19 pandemic has offered an opportunity to spend more time and reconnect with romantic partners. For others, love on lockdown has magnified relationship difficulties that couples were experiencing before the pandemic, leading to increased relationship

stress and dissatisfaction.

Break-ups, divorces and even domestic violence have [been on the rise](#) since the pandemic began.

Given that stable and satisfying relationships are critical for both mental and [physical health](#), it is necessary to understand what contributes to relationship distress, and how to fix it. That's one of the goals of the "[Breaking Sad](#)" lab at Western University. Our lab focuses on how [negative thinking](#) contributes to depression and how these beliefs impact relationships.

Recent research from our lab suggests that the beliefs we hold about our romantic partners may be especially important in understanding dysfunctional relationship patterns.

The importance of beliefs about partners

In a [recent study](#), we found that individuals in relationships create sophisticated mental representations of their [romantic partners](#). What's more, these [mental representations](#) are stored in our memory, and are thought to [influence the way that we understand, interpret and respond to](#) the things our partners say and do. In a sense, they act like a pair of tinted glasses that color our experience of our partner.

If you hold a generally positive representation of your partner in your mind (for example, "he is a caring, thoughtful and well-intentioned person"), it is akin to wearing a pair of rose-tinted glasses. You might be more inclined to interpret some things your partner does in a more positive or benign light, such as, "he didn't reply to my text because he was busy in a meeting, I know he isn't just ignoring me and will answer as soon as he has the chance."

On the flip side, if you hold a generally negative representation of your partner in your mind ("she is selfish and does not care about my needs"), you may tend to see your partner's actions through a pair of glasses that are far less rosy. You may think: "She did not reply to my text because she is ignoring me and does not care about what I have to say."

The more we continue to see a partner's actions in a less forgiving light, the more consolidated our negative representations of them become—and the darker our "tinted glasses" come to be.

In this way, negative beliefs about our partners may lead us to feel angry or depressed and cause us to respond to them in a less helpful way, such as becoming critical or withdrawing from them. This ultimately results in both partners feeling less satisfied and supported in the relationship.

Unfortunately for many, positive beliefs about a partner that are prominent in the early stages of a relationship [tend to become more negative over time](#). What once drew us to our partner often becomes the thing that irks us the most. Exciting spontaneity becomes poor planning and unreliability.

Changing unhelpful thinking about a partner

So what can you do if you have an overly negative representation of your romantic partner? How can you see through your "[relationship](#) glasses" a little more clearly?

For one, you can make an active effort to be more evidence-based in your thinking about your partner.

Research shows that [evidence-based thinking](#) is an important contributor to psychological well-being. In order to be more evidence-based in your thinking about a partner, remember to check the facts rather than rely on

the negative explanations that may automatically come to mind.

Instead of jumping to conclusions and thinking that your partner is selfish and doesn't care about you because they didn't bring home the milk you asked for, take a pause and ask yourself: What evidence do I have to support the idea that my partner is selfish and doesn't care about me? What evidence do I have that does not support this idea?

Not only can this help you to feel better in the moment, it will allow you to see things a little more clearly and respond to your partner in a healthier way.

In addition to changing the way you think about your partner, [it is important to change the interactions you have with your partner.](#)

Believe it or not, changing the way you respond to your partner, such as opting for a hug instead of offering criticism when they arrive home without your milk, can actually change the way you feel and think about them. Putting in the extra effort to create positive interactions with your partner can help to change negative partner representations over time or prevent them from developing in the first place.

Now more than ever, with stresses running high and romantic relationships under pressure during the pandemic, it is important to do what is needed to nurture our closest connections.

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