

# We are more forgiving when people close to us misbehave

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When people behave badly or unethically, their loved ones may judge

them less harshly than they would judge a stranger who committed the same transgressions, but that leniency may come at the cost of the judger's own sense of self-worth, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"How do we react when our [romantic partners](#), friends or family members behave unethically? Past research tells us a lot about how we respond to a stranger's unethical behavior, but very little about how we respond when the perpetrator is someone we care deeply about," said lead author Rachel Forbes, MA, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto. "When someone close to us behaves unethically, we face a conflict between upholding our [moral values](#) and maintaining our relationship. We conducted this research to better understand this conflict." The study was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Researchers conducted a series of four experiments involving more than 1,100 participants. In one experiment, participants read about a hypothetical situation in which a romantic partner, a close friend or a stranger committed an unethical or immoral act, such as stealing money from a charity collection jar. In another experiment, participants were asked to recall a moment when they had witnessed a romantic partner, close friend or stranger commit an unethical or immoral act. In a third experiment, participants kept a log of moral transgressions they witnessed each day for 15 days. In each experiment participants answered a series of questions about the person who committed the act, the severity of the act and how harshly the transgressor should be punished. Participants also answered questions about how they felt about themselves, including any negative emotions they experienced and their own sense of morality.

In all three experiments, researchers found participants felt less anger, contempt and disgust toward family and close friends who behaved

badly. They rated them as more moral and wanted to punish or criticize them less than strangers. However, participants also felt more shame, guilt and embarrassment and reported somewhat more negative evaluations of their own morality when someone close to them committed a moral or ethical violation.

In the fourth experiment, participants were physically paired with a romantic partner, a close friend or a relative stranger. They were then taken to separate rooms and asked to respond in writing to a series of questions about themselves. The pairs then swapped answers (via a research assistant) and were told to transcribe them into a book. In the first round, the partners received genuine answers, but in the second round, participants were given fake responses indicating their partner had behaved unethically, by lying, plagiarizing or acting selfishly. As in previous experiments, participants then answered a series of questions about their partner, the transgression, how harsh the punishment should be and their feelings about themselves. The results were similar to the first three experiments, but the effect was not as strong.

Forbes believes the less consistent effects observed in the fourth experiment may be because the unethical information presented to participants in this study was unknown to the participants prior to the experiment and was first shared with them in a very brazen way by a stranger. "It's possible that participants were upset with their close others because they did not tell the participant about the unethical acts beforehand and instead chose to tell the researcher. Hearing about an unethical behavior by someone you care about from a stranger is likely to be a bit more jarring than hearing about it directly from your friend or loved one," she said.

"Across a diverse range of methods with both student and online samples, our findings suggest that having a close relationship with the transgressor heavily affects responses to their bad behavior, supporting

the call for social-relational factors to be more strongly incorporated into models of moral judgment," said Forbes.

The findings are important because, in everyday life, unethical behaviors are often entwined with social ties, according to co-author Jennifer Stellar, Ph.D., also from the University of Toronto.

"Identifying that observers are more lenient toward close others who transgress raises deeper concerns about how moral norms are policed by individuals in these situations," she said. "This may allow people to either overlook and/or fail to call out transgressions committed by close others, which poses a danger for maintaining the moral norms in society."

The researchers focused on close relationships, but Stellar believes that the same processes may apply to other relationships, such as shared group membership, and that should be incorporated in future research.

"One important limitation in our work is that we did not examine responses to extremely severe immoral actions," said Forbes. "Highly immoral acts would certainly place a greater strain on the relationship and therefore could show different effects."

One relevant example she often uses when talking about this work is a quote by 'TODAY' host Savannah Guthrie in response to the accusations of sexual misconduct against Guthrie's colleague and friend Matt Lauer. Guthrie responded to news of the accusations on air, saying, "We are grappling with a dilemma that so many people have faced these past few weeks: How do you reconcile your love for someone with the revelation that they have behaved badly?"

"In the case of very severe unethical actions, the conflict with one's moral values is likely more apparent. We don't yet know how close

others may respond because this is very difficult to study," said Forbes.

Another limitation was that the participants in the first three experiments were approximately 80% white.

"Our paper provides an initial step in understanding responses to the unethical behavior of close others, but future research should try to more adequately represent not only a more racially diverse sample, but also diversity in sexual orientation, which is particularly relevant to the study of romantic relationships," she said.

**More information:** Rachel C. Forbes et al, When the Ones We Love Misbehave: Exploring Moral Processes within Intimate Bonds, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/pspa0000272](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000272)

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