

Q&A: How does self-esteem affects relationships?

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In February, as some people's thoughts turn toward romance, they might wonder: What does it take to keep a relationship strong? Dr. Joanne Wood, distinguished professor emerita in Psychology, explains how

one's self-esteem plays a role.

How does low self-esteem impact relationships?

Self-esteem can lead to a series of processes that affect relationships. People with high self-esteem assume that others like them and value them as much as they like themselves, whereas people with low self-esteem have doubts. People then carry these assumptions into their relationships.

For example, people with low self-esteem may be quick to assume that their partner has neglected or slighted them. They may feel hurt and withdraw or become angry and hostile. It's hard for their partner to not be hostile or angry in return, and a vicious cycle of conflict can begin.

In contrast, a person with high self-esteem is less likely to jump to the conclusion that their partner has devalued them, so this cycle does not start.

What are some of the other factors that impact relationships?

Researchers have found more than two dozen predictors of [relationship](#) quality, including age, education, poverty, and divorce laws. Self-esteem is not the only important personality trait. A person's characteristic level of [negative emotions](#) —[sadness](#), anxiety, anger—influences the partner's happiness.

How can people improve their relationships?

It's very difficult for people to try to improve their self-esteem directly. For example, repeating positive self-statements can backfire, making

people with low self-esteem feel worse. Instead, I'd advise people to become aware of how [low self-esteem](#) can lead them to see [rejection](#) where it does not exist, as well as how their behaviors can affect their partners when they feel hurt.

Dr. Wood and collaborators' most recent publication, "Self-esteem and romantic relationship quality," was [published](#) in *Nature Reviews Psychology*.

More information: Joanne V. Wood et al, Self-esteem and romantic relationship quality, *Nature Reviews Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s44159-023-00247-z](#)

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