

Study examines how couples' collaborative dialogue may assist in memory

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(Medical Xpress) -- Effective memory is a key ability for independent living in later life, and a new Iowa State University study is among the first to report that social partners can help extend memory. The study also found that the collaboration that helps middle-aged couples with memory tasks doesn't seem to be as effective for couples older than 70.

Jennifer Margrett, an assistant professor in human development and family studies, led the study, titled "Examining Collaborative Dialogue Among Couples: A Window Into [Prospective Memory Processes](#)." Psychological researchers Celinda Reese-Melancon from Oklahoma State University and Peter Rendell from Australian Catholic University collaborated with Margrett on the study, which was posted online by the *Journal of Psychology* and will be published in a special issue on prospective memory. They also presented two posters on their results earlier this month at the [American Psychological Association](#) conference in Boston, Mass.

The researchers found that spouses do rely on each other as [external memory](#) aids. However, the extent to which this strategy is effective depends on how reliable the partner's memory is, and that reliability changes with age for most people.

"In my lab we found that overall, collaboration is usually very helpful on a variety of [cognitive tasks](#), but it's sort of a mixed bag in this recent study, which focuses on memory tasks," Margrett said. "When you think about memory, if I ask you to remember something, you'll get on a roll, think of one thing, and then another thing should come. But if you have a partner who's interrupting you, interjecting, and perhaps leading you down a 'garden path,' that can definitely interfere in memory. So you may have done better on the memory path working alone than you did with a partner.

"For our middle-aged couples in this [pilot study](#), they definitely seemed to fill in the [memory] gaps more effectively than our older couples did," she continued. "So we found that two heads weren't necessarily better than one among the older couples."

Studying central Iowa married couples

The research was conducted on 14 married couples from central Iowa -- three being younger (average age of 35), five being middle-aged (average age of 52) and the other six being older couples (average age of 73).

All participants were asked to complete a variety of prospective memory tasks by playing the board game "Virtual Week," which encourages verbal interaction among players about completing real life tasks. For each virtual "day" in the game, participants were asked to perform 10 different prospective memory tasks -- four that regularly occur (i.e.: taking medication with breakfast), four that were different each day (i.e.: purchasing gasoline for the car), and two being time-check tasks that were not based on the activities of the board game (i.e.: check lung capacity at two specified times).

The researchers video-recorded the spouses playing the game in order to determine whether partners tried to assist each other in completing the task, and the impact that collaboration had on their partner's memory. They found that partners attempted to collaborate on prospective memory tasks, reporting evidence of tutoring, monitoring, encoding and sociability among the couples -- four of the most frequent types of collaborative behaviors.

"We did look at critical statements and demand statements among the couples, and in this sample, they were very low," Margrett said. "If people expressed any sort of socio-emotional type of

statements, it was more encouraging of a partner. But from our better to worst comparison of the dyads, the couples who performed at a higher level were more sociable and encouraging."

Extending the memory dialogue implications

While this study specifically examined married couples, Margrett says the research may be extended to others who collaborate in prospective memory tasks each day.

"This study had to do with [couples](#), but you interact with co-workers, adult children and others throughout middle and late life. If someone is living in a long-term care facility, they're interacting with caregivers," she said. "And so the idea is to extrapolate our findings to other dyads to see how can we support people within the context of both normal cognitive aging, as well as non-normative cognitive aging -- which includes some [memory](#) impairment, and potentially dementia."

Provided by Iowa State University

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