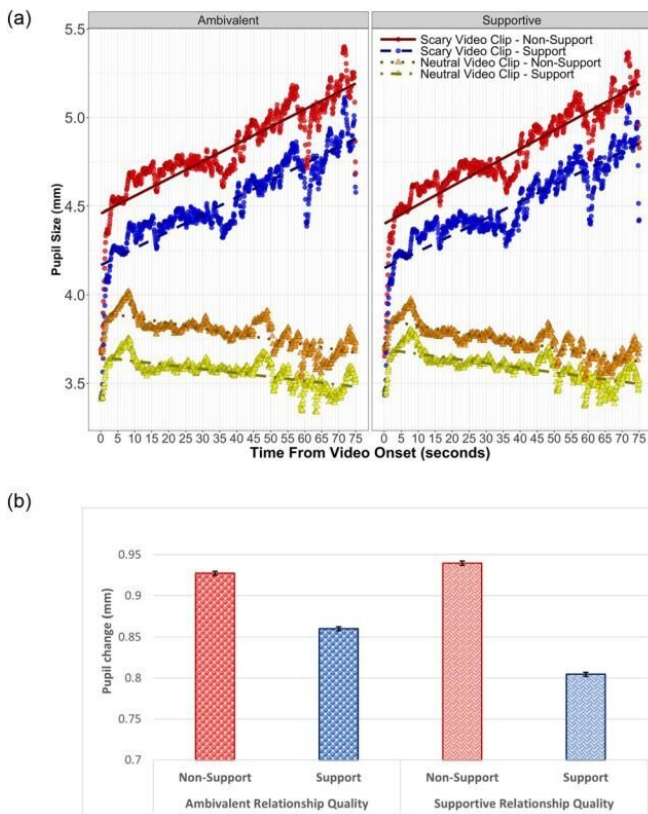


Supportive married couples found to experience less stress when watching horror movies

16 September 2021, by Bob Yirka



a: Tonic pupil size as a function of video condition, spouse condition, and relationship quality. Note. Graph shows pupil size in millimeters across all video clips from videos' onset to videos' end. The lines depict the average linear change for all participants and for all video clips as reported in Table 4. Circles and triangles represent the raw data in 100ms bins. b: Average tonic pupil change by condition: Three-way interaction. Note. This graph depicts the amount of increase in pupil size by condition when viewing the horror videos compared to pupil size during neutral videos. Having a supportive marital relationship while concurrently having one's spouse hold their hand resulted in less pupil dilation during horror videos. Graph depicts the same data as Fig 2a but modeled as change scores to represent more clearly this statistically significant three-way interaction. Credit: Graff et al, 2021, PLOS ONE (CC-BY 4.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

A team of researchers from Brigham Young University and Arizona University, has found that married couples who support each other when watching horror movies experience less stress than couples who are not as supportive. The team has written a paper describing their experiments and what they learned from them and have uploaded it to the open-access site *PLOS ONE*.

Prior research has suggested that people experience [less stress](#) during stressful times if they have support from another person. However, as the researchers with this new effort note, such experiences are difficult to measure. In this new effort, they set up a simple experiment that they believed could be used as a way to measure such events.

For their study, the researchers asked 83 [couples](#) who had been married for at least 10 years to watch short video clips captured from the stressful parts of horror movies. In the experiments, the researchers asked one of the volunteers in a couple to sit and watch a stressful video clip while their spouse sat next to them listening to unrelated music. Afterward, the couple would switch places. Also, in some scenarios, the couples were asked to hold hands and to behave in a supportive manner, while in other scenarios they were asked to sit slightly apart. As the experiments were unfolding, the researchers measured stress responses in the volunteers using blood pressure cuffs and pupil eye dilation measuring software. Each volunteer was also asked afterward how they felt regarding their spouse as they watched the video clip.

The researchers found that approximately two-thirds of the couples who held hands during the [video](#) clips had a lower stress response. Most of them also reported feeling more supported as they watched the videos.

The researchers suggest their findings hint at the impact that spousal support can have on people in a relationship, particularly during times of [stress](#). They acknowledge that their results are difficult to apply under different circumstances, but they still recommend that couples actively look for ways to be supportive of one another as a way to not only make their relationship better but to improve their physical health as well.

More information: Tyler C. Graff et al, Spousal emotional support and relationship quality buffers pupillary response to horror movies, *PLOS ONE* (2021). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0256823](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0256823)

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