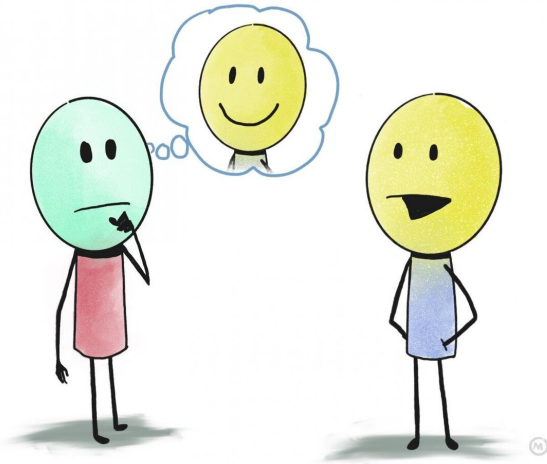


Reading your partner's emotions—when it helps, and when it hurts

21 May 2020



Are you good at reading your partner's emotions? Your perceptiveness may very well strengthen your relationship. Yet when anger or contempt enter the fray, little is to be gained and the quality of your relationship tanks, researchers find. Credit: University of Rochester illustration/Michael Osadciw

Are you good at reading your partner's emotions? Your perceptiveness may very well strengthen your relationship. Yet when anger or contempt enter the fray, little is to be gained and the quality of your relationship tanks, researchers find.

A new study by a team of psychologists from the University of Rochester and the University of Toronto tried to figure out under what circumstances the ability to read another person's emotions—what psychologists call "[empathic accuracy](#)"—is beneficial for a relationship and when it could be harmful. The study examined whether the accurate perception of a [romantic partner's](#) emotions has any bearing on the quality of a relationship and a person's motivation to change when a romantic partner asks for a change in behavior or attitude.

While prior research on empathic accuracy had yielded mixed findings, the new study shows that couples who accurately perceive appeasement emotions, such as embarrassment, have better relationships than those accurately perceiving dominance emotions, such as anger or contempt. The perception may be on the part of the person requesting the change, or the person receiving the request.

Lead author Bonnie Le, an assistant professor in the University of Rochester's Department of Psychology, says the team zeroed in on how accurately deciphering different types of emotions affects relationship quality.

"If you accurately perceive threatening displays from your partner, it can shake your confidence in a relationship," says Le, who conducted the research while a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

Why is the ability to change important for a partnership?

Even in the best relationships, partners invariably experience conflict. One way to tackle conflict, researchers argue, is to ask a partner to change by, for example, spending less money, losing weight, making changes to a couple's sex life, or resetting life goals. Yet, requesting such personal (and sometimes threatening) change can elicit [negative emotions](#) and put a strain on a relationship. That's why figuring out how best to navigate emotionally charged situations is crucial to maintaining a healthy relationship.

"If you are appeasing with your partner—or feel embarrassed or bashful—and your partner accurately picks up on this, it can signal to your partner that you care about their feelings and recognize a change request might be hurtful," Le says. "Or if your partner is angry or contemptuous—what we call dominance

emotions—that signals very different, negative information that may hurt a partner if they accurately perceive it."

The team—besides Rochester's Le—is made up of Stéphane Côté of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management; and Jennifer Stellar and Emily Impett, both from the University of Toronto Mississauga. They discovered that the type of negative emotion detected matters: if you read in your partner's expression softer emotions—such as sadness, shame, or embarrassment—you generally enjoy a strong relationship. One possible reason is that these so-called "appeasement emotions" are read as signals of concern for the partner's feelings.

In contrast, and contrary to the researchers' original hypothesis, simply feeling anger or contempt—emotions that signal blame and defensiveness—rather than accurately reading those emotions in your partner, may be socially destructive for a relationship. The team found that if even just one partner felt angry, or displayed contempt, the quality of the relationship tanked, regardless of whether the other partner's ability to read emotions was spot on, or completely missed the mark.

Coauthor Côté says the team doesn't exactly know why anger functions in this way. "We think reading emotions allows partners to coordinate what they do and say to each other, and perhaps that is helpful when appeasement emotions are read, but not when anger emotions are read. Anger seems to overpower any effect of reading emotions, which is consistent with lots of research findings on how anger harms relationships."

Yet, regardless of how well a person was able to decipher a partner's emotions, accuracy did not increase motivation to heed the partner's request for change.

Direct communication is key

For the study, the researchers asked 111 couples who had been dating for an average of three years to discuss in a lab setting an aspect that they wanted their partner to change, such as particular behaviors, personal characteristics, or how they

controlled their temper. The research team then switched the roles of those making the request and those who were asked to change. Afterward, the participants rated their own emotions and perceptions of their partner's emotions, their relationship quality, and their motivation to heed those change requests.

"Expressing and perceiving emotions is, of course, important for making connections and deriving satisfaction in a relationship," says Le. "But in order to really propel your partner to change, you may need to use more direct communication about exactly what kind of change you are hoping for."

Research has shown that direct communication, whether positive or negative, is more likely to lead to change in the long run. That said, the [emotional tone](#) you take when you ask your partner for a change is important, notes Le:

"It's not bad to feel a little bashful or embarrassed when raising these issues because it signals to the partner that you care and it's valuable for your partner to see that. You acknowledge that what you raise may hurt their feelings. It shows that you are invested, that you are committed to having this conversation, and committed to not hurting them. And the extent to which this is noted by your partner may foster a more positive [relationship](#)."

More information: Bonnie M. Le et al, The Distinct Effects of Empathic Accuracy for a Romantic Partner's Appeasement and Dominance Emotions, *Psychological Science* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797620904975](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620904975)

Provided by University of Rochester

APA citation: Reading your partner's emotions—when it helps, and when it hurts (2020, May 21) retrieved 20 August 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-partner-emotionswhen.html>

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