

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

C. Nathan DeWall and David G. Myers

Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

How Close Relationships Foster Health and Heartache

by David G. Myers

[Rook, K. \(2015\). Social networks in later life: Weighing positive and negative effects on health and well-being. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 24, 45–51.](#)

As social animals — as people who need people — our connections feed our highs and lows, our times of greatest happiness and deepest hopelessness. APS Fellow Karen Rook, a long-time explorer of social influences on adult psychological and physical health, highlights these social helps and harms.

To prime students' thinking about relational joys and woes — and their health aftereffects — instructors might first ask them to consider the following:

1. Over the past week, what prompted your time of greatest joy or contentment?
2. What prompted your greatest moment of stress or despair?

Without invading students' privacy, one could then ask for a show of hands: How many of those happy moments involved a social situation — some experience or event that included another person (rather than being a solo happening)? And ditto for the upsetting moment.

Some years ago, Peter Warr and Roy Payne (1982) asked similar questions of British adults. The most frequently reported strain? “Family.” And the most frequently reported source of pleasure? “Family.” Hell may be “other people,” as Sartre (1944) wrote, but so is heaven.

Rook catalogs the sorts of experiences that students may recall. Our social networks offer us

- *Support*: aid and care in times of need or stress.
- *Companionship*: shared enjoyments and respite and diversion from daily hassles.
- *Self-regulation*: influences that deter us from health-damaging behaviors and support healthy behaviors.

But they also burden us with

- *Support failures*: social network disruptions and unmet needs for assistance.
- *Rejection/neglect*: thwarting our need to belong, and exclusion from enjoyments.
- *Harmful influences*: social pressures that undermine sound health practices.

As teachers of psychology know well, close relationships predict both health and well-being. Epidemiological studies have tracked thousands of lives across decades. Their conclusion: People with ample social connections enjoy survival rates about 50% greater than those with fewer connections (across an average 7.5-year study period in one analysis of 148 studies; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Losing close relationships to death or divorce predicts increased health risk (Kaprio, Koskenvuo, & Rita, 1987; Sbarra, Law, & Portley, 2011). Friends have benefits. As Susan Pinker (2014, p. 43) says, longevity is a “team sport.”

The state of our social networks also can entail negative health effects. Peer influences predict smoking (Rose, Chassin, Presson, & Sherman, 1999). Marital conflict slows physical-wound healing (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005). Loneliness can be depressing (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009). Like other forms of real pain, ostracism and social rejection can foster aggression (Riva, Wirth, & Williams, 2011).

But Rook goes further. She connects the social network components to health and well-being. In some studies, for example, health in later life is better predicted by close companionship than by supportive care. And she notes that positive interactions occur far more often than negative interactions — but the latter are experienced more acutely and have more physiological effects. Thus, marriage predicts health and longevity, but what matters most is marital *quality* (Robles, 2014). In successful marriages, positive interactions (e.g., smiling, touching, complimenting, laughing) generally outnumber negative interactions (e.g., sarcasm, disapproval, insults) by at least a 5:1 ratio, reports John Gottman (1998).

To demonstrate the greater potency of negative interactions, Rook suggests distributing written statements asking students to imagine a wedding reception at which a groom overhears a whispered comment made by one guest to another. Half of the students learn that the overheard comment was “The groom is a nice person.” The other half learn that the comment was “The groom is not a nice person.”

Then ask all students to rate, on a “feeling ruler,” how they imagine the comment might have made the groom feel, from -10 (*extremely upset*) to 0 (*neutral*) to +10 (*extremely happy*). Students’ ratings should reveal the negativity effect — more extreme ratings for the negative than the positive comment. In one analysis, everyday negative emotional experiences exceeded the intensity of positive emotional experiences by a factor of 3:1 (Larsen, 2009).

Alternatively, the negativity effect could be explored by asking students to imagine being invited, or not invited, to a friend’s party.

“In everyday social life,” note APS William James Fellow Roy Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer, and APS Fellow Kathleen Vohs (2001), “bad events have stronger and more lasting consequences than comparable good events” (p. 355). Bad reviews of our research or teaching make us feel worse than good reviews make us feel good. Cruel words linger after kind words have been forgotten. Bad health diminishes happiness more than good health increases it. Pain produces more misery than comfort produces joy.

Negative information carries more weight because, being less usual, it grabs more of our attention (Yzerbyt & Leyens, 1991). And our sensitivity to negative interactions disposes us to respond to threats. For survival, temporarily feeling bad can be good. But so, in the long run, can supportive friendships, enjoyable companions, and connections that foster health and well-being.

References

Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, *5*, 323–370.

Bouchard, T. J., Jr. (2004). Genetic influence on human psychological traits: A survey. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *13*, 148–151.

Cacioppo, J. T., & Patrick, W. (2007). *Loneliness: Human nature and the need for social connection*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co.

Gottman, J. M., Coan, J., Carrere, S., & Swanson, C. (1998). Predicting marital happiness and stability from newlywed interactions. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *60*, 5–22.

Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. *PLoS Medicine*, *7*: e1000316

Kaprio, J., Koskenvuo, M., & Rita, H. (1987). Mortality after bereavement: A prospective study of 95,647 widowed persons. *American Journal of Public Health*, *77*, 283–287.

Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K., Loving, T. J., Stowell, J. R., Malarkey, W. B., Lemeshow, S., Dickinson, S. L., & Glaser, R. (2005). Hostile marital interactions, proinflammatory cytokine production, and wound healing. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, *62*, 1377–1384.

Larsen, R. (2009). The contributions of positive and negative affect to emotional well-being. *Psychological Topics*, *18*, 247–266.

Pinker, S. (2014). *The village effect: How face-to-face contact can make us healthier, happier, and smarter*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau.

Riva, P., Wirth, J. H., & Williams, K. D. (2011). The consequences of pain: The social and physical overlap on psychological responses. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *41*, 681–687.

Robles, T. F. (2014). Marital quality and health: Implications for marriage in the 21st century. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *23*, 427–432.

Rose, J. S., Chassin, L., Presson, C. C., & Sherman, S. J. (1999). Peer influences on adolescent cigarette smoking: A prospective sibling analysis. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, *45*, 62–84.

Sartre, J.-P. (1944/1955). *No exit and three other plays*. New York, NY: Random House.

Sbarra, D. A., Law, R. W., & Portley, R. M. (2011). Divorce and death: A meta-analysis and research agenda for clinical, social, and health psychology. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *6*, 454–474.

Van Lange, P. A. M., Vinkhuyzen, A. A. E., & Posthuma, D. (2014). Genetic influences are virtually absent for trust. *PLOS ONE*, *9*: e93880.

Warr, P., & Payne, R. (1982). Experiences of strain and pleasure among British adults. *Social Science and Medicine*, *16*, 1691–1697.

Yzerbyt, V. Y., & Leyens, J.-P. (1991). Requesting information to form an impression: The influence of valence and confirmatory status. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *27*, 337–356.

March 31, 2015