

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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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.

People Need People: Why Close Relationships Predict Health

by David G. Myers

[Slatcher, R. B., & Selcuk, E. \(2017\). A social psychological perspective on the links between close relationships and health. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 26, 16-21.](#)

It's no secret: We are social animals. We need to belong. We flourish when connected, affirmed, and supported in enduring close relationships.

Massive epidemiological studies — some following thousands of people across years — have consistently found that close relationships predict better health. One analysis summarized data from 148 studies of 300,000 people. The conclusion: Those with ample social connections had 50% greater survival rates during the study period than those with meager social connections (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). The predictive power of mere connections rivaled that of smoking and alcohol-use disorder and was double that of not exercising or of obesity.

Friends, family, coworkers, faith communities, and support groups all provide meaningful connections. But for most people, the closest and most potent relationship, note Richard B. Slatcher and Emre Selcuk (in press), is marriage or another long-term romantic partnership. In a recent meta-analysis, Theodore F. Robles, Slatcher, Joseph M. Trombello, and Meghan M. McGinn (2014) reported that the associations among marriage quality, health, and mortality, though not huge, were similar to the benefits of health interventions such as increasing healthy eating and exercise.

So, supportive close relationships, including marriage, pay health dividends. But why? And what processes explain the link between marital quality and health?

Before offering answers such as those proposed by Slatcher and Selcuk, instructors might pause to invite students — perhaps in small groups — to brainstorm possible explanations for the marriage–health link. Not only will such discussion engage students in thinking psychologically, it also will drive home the big lessons: 1) the mind matters — our emotional experiences influence our bodies, and 2) relationships matter — The flourishing life prioritizes not just *me* but also *we*.

Slatcher also suggests asking, “Are there any kinds of marriages that might NOT be good for your health? Can you think of when it might be healthier to be single?” In addition, he invites his students to complete the four-item Couples Satisfaction Index, made freely available for use by Ronald D. Rogge (Funk & Rogge, 2007; Rogge, Fincham, Crasti, & Maniaci, 2016). To experience how relationship quality can be assessed, students can describe a current or past romantic relationship or can imagine what a future such relationship might look like.

1) Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship: extremely unhappy (0), fairly unhappy (1), a little unhappy (2), happy (3), very happy (4), extremely happy (5), perfect (6).

2) I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner: not at all true (0), a little true (1), somewhat true (2), mostly true (3), almost completely true (4), completely true (5).

3) How rewarding is your relationship with your partner: not at all (0), a little (1), somewhat (2), mostly (3), almost completely (4), completely (5).

4) In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship: not at all (0), a little (1), somewhat (2), mostly (3), almost completely (4), completely (5).

Summed scores can range from 0 to 21. Rogge (www.courses.rochester.edu/surveys/funk/CSI-4.docx) reports that scores below 13.5 “suggest notable relationship dissatisfaction.”

Slatcher and Selcuk classify the possible psychological explanations of marital influence as

Marital strengths: Intimacy and social support buffer the negative effects of work and life stress. Responsive partners care for, understand, and validate their partners. By so doing, they engender a health-promoting attachment security.

Marital strains: Conflict intensifies the toxicity of stresses. Inconsistent partners breed attachment anxiety. Unresponsive partners breed attachment avoidance.

This psychology of marital strengths and strains impacts physical health in several ways:

Stress responses: A strong relationship calms us — reducing stress hormones such as cortisol and lowering blood pressure — while a strained relationship does the opposite. In one study, partner responsiveness predicted lower daytime cortisol a decade later (Slatcher, Selcuk, & Ong, 2015).

Immune functioning: Attachment anxiety predicts a weaker immune system, including lower T-cell counts and exacerbated inflammatory responding. And it’s a cold fact — those with strong social ties are less vulnerable to an administered cold virus (Cohen, Doyle, Turner, Alper, & Skoner, 2003).

Health behaviors: Marriage has been linked with healthier living, including a lower smoking rate (Nielsen, Faergeman, Larsen, & Foldspang, 2006). Moreover, marital responsiveness predicts better sleep and less anxious arousal (Selcuk, Stanton, Slatcher, & Ong, 2016).

Pain management: Having a responsive partner predicted greater endogenous opioids and less pain 3 months after knee surgery (Khan et al., 2009). Even viewing a partner’s picture can reduce pain (Master et al., 2009).

Such mechanisms, discerned mostly in research with midlife and older adults, extend what attachment researchers have gleaned from the study of unresponsive caregiving of young children — which similarly “affects developing stress neurobiology and health,” report Slatcher and Selcuk. Moreover, early caregiving affects later romantic attachment; ergo, partner responsiveness is a process that extends across the lifespan.

The marriage–health studies were nearly all conducted during an era of exclusively heterosexual marriage, which raises a final question for student discussion:

What do you think: Does the need to belong, and the health benefits of close relationships and marriage, pertain only to straight people? Or do all humans, regardless of sexual orientation, tend to

flourish when connected, affirmed, and supported in enduring close relationships, such as marriage?

The articles in this issue will be available in the February 2017 issue of Current Directions in Psychological Science.

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