

Is your dating partner happy? Research finds it hard to know at times

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Research tends to focus on the positives of self-monitoring -- a personality characteristic that accounts for how attuned individuals are to societal conventions as well as the degree to which “appropriateness” controls their behavior and moderates how they present themselves to others.

“High self-monitors are social chameleons,” says Northwestern University researcher Michael E. Roloff. “And, because they’re quick to pick up on social cues, are socially adept and unlikely to say things upsetting to others, they are generally well-liked and sought after.

“Research finds them to be excellent negotiators and far more likely to be promoted at work than their low self-monitoring peers.”

But there’s a downside for high self-monitors when it comes to their romantic relationships.

“High self-monitors may appear to be the kind of people we want to have relationships with, but they themselves are less committed to and less happy in their relationships than low self-monitors,” said the Northwestern professor of communication studies.

In “The Dark Side of Self-Monitoring: How High Self-Monitors View Their Romantic Relationships” in the journal *Communication Reports*, Roloff and co-authors Courtney N. Wright and Adrienne Holloway present their findings from a study of 97 single young adults.

“The desire to alter one’s personality to appropriately fit a given situation or social climate prevents high self-monitors from presenting their true selves during intimate interactions with their romantic partners,” says Roloff. “High self-monitors are very likeable and successful people. However, it appears they’re just not deep.”

Their propensity to self-censor prompts them to avoid face-threatening interactions that more honest self-disclosures potentially provide. The result: the partners of high self-monitors may be completely in the dark about the extent of their high self-monitoring partner’s degree of commitment and regard.

“It’s not that high self-monitors are intentionally deceptive or evil,” Roloff says. “They appear to have an outlook and way of achieving their goals that makes them attractive to us socially but that prevents them from being particularly happy or loyal in their romantic relationships.”

Conversely, the researchers found that low self-monitors -- people who are the least concerned with social appropriateness and are unlikely to mask their feelings or opinions to avoid confrontation or preserve their self-image -- are more committed to and more satisfied with their relationships.

Low self-monitors communicate in a more genuine, intimate way, but they also may say blunt and hurtful things to their partners. Their ‘disclosive’ communication and loyalty can extract a price from their partners.

Fortunately, says Roloff, self-monitoring is normally distributed, so the likelihood is that we wind up with partners who are neither excessively low nor excessively high self-monitors.

The Northwestern researchers surveyed study participants about the

levels of emotional commitment in their romantic relationships and used five measures to assess their degrees of self-monitoring, intimate communication, levels of emotional commitment, relational satisfaction and relational commitment.

They did not survey the partners of study participants. “That may be something we eventually should look at,” Roloff says.

Source: Northwestern University

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