

The truth about online dating and the link between depression and relational uncertainty

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There's no doubt that meeting partners on the Internet is a growing trend. But can we trust the information that people provide about themselves via online dating services? And why is depression so dissatisfying in relationships? These two questions are explored in articles appearing in the latest issue of the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, published by SAGE. The authors also discuss their findings in a new podcast series: Relationship Matters.

Jeffrey Hall of the University of Kansas is lead author of the paper on internet dating, which shows that people looking for romance online actually behave very much as they do in face to face dating and relationships. "Our findings dispel the myth that people using online dating are that different than any one else who might find a [relationship](#) through friends, school or work," Hall explains.

His team investigated over 5000 individuals dating online in search of long-term partners, from all walks of life and over a wide age range (18 to over 60). The survey included questions on [personality traits](#) such as openness, extroversion, education and income. "We also asked a series of questions on an important trait that we call self monitoring," Hall says. "Self monitoring is about how we try to present ourselves in a favourable light to others, to make people like us." Someone who scores as 'low' on self monitoring is extremely authentic when describing themselves in all circumstances, and those who score 'high' are more

prone to so-called white lies.

Self-monitoring scores turned out to be a major factor in the likelihood of people changing their presentation to others across all dating indicators (topics such as previous relationships, likes, dislikes, appearance, etc).

Whether a person is likely to lie about themselves online also depends on what kind of person they are: Someone who is very open to new experiences (e.g. foreign travel) is highly unlikely to misrepresent themselves about their experiences - because they are naturally interesting people. On the other hand extroverts are more likely to misrepresent themselves when describing past relationships. Extroverts tend to have many past relationships because they meet new people easily, but may play this down when looking for a new relationship.

The good news, according to Hall, is that the likelihood of people misrepresenting themselves overall is actually very low. The research also showed that not all men are from Mars and Women from Venus - the differences between individuals was far greater than any difference between the sexes. However women were somewhat more likely to fib about their weight, whereas men were more prone to tell white lies on other subjects, such as how many previous partners they had had, or how serious they were about finding a long-term relationship. "Men and women aren't as different from one another as we might believe," Hall says. Next up - Hall and his team are developing an inventory of flirting styles, which they aim to publish later this year.

Meanwhile twin sisters Leanne Knobloch of the University of Illinois, US and Lynne Knobloch-Fedders from The Family Institute at Northwestern University, US put their heads together to look at a longstanding question about what explains the association between [depressive symptoms](#) and relationship quality.

Over three decades of research have shown that people with depression are less satisfied in their romantic relationships. But questions remain about exactly why these go together. Now the sisters' research shows that relational uncertainty could be one explanation.

Relational uncertainty is how sure individuals are about their perceptions of involvement in a relationship. It has three sources. Self uncertainty is the questions people have about their own relationship involvement, such as, "how certain am I about my view of this relationship?" Partner uncertainty involves questions about a partner's relationship involvement, such as, "how certain am I about where my partner wants this to go?" Finally relationship uncertainty involves questions about the relationship status, such as "How certain am I about the future of this relationship?"

There were three main findings from the study of couples experiencing depressive symptoms or relationship problems: Those with more severe depressive symptoms reported more relationship distress; people experiencing more relational uncertainty were less satisfied with their relationship; and finally, women's depressive symptoms predicted all three sources of their relational uncertainty, which in turn predicted both men's and women's relationship quality. For men, only the self source of relational uncertainty acted as a mediator.

This finding could suggest treatment options. For example, working through relational uncertainty issues in psychotherapy may help alleviate depressive symptoms. Alternatively treating depression might help individuals achieve more relational certainty, leading to more satisfying relationships.

"People suffering from depressive symptoms may wrestle with more questions about their romantic relationship, which may be dissatisfying," says Knobloch. "If we find ways to help people address their uncertainty about their relationship, then their depressive symptoms might not be so

debilitating for their romantic relationships."

Provided by SAGE Publications

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