

Study finds young men more vulnerable to relationship ups and downs than women

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Contrary to popular belief, the ups and downs of romantic relationships have a greater effect on the mental health of young men than women, according to a new study by a Wake Forest University sociology professor.

In the study of more than 1,000 unmarried young adults between the ages of 18 and 23, Wake Forest Professor of Sociology Robin Simon challenges the long-held assumption that women are more vulnerable to the emotional rollercoaster of relationships. Even though men sometimes try to present a tough face, unhappy romances take a greater emotional toll on men than women, Simon says. They just express their distress differently than women.

Simon's research is published in the June issue of the [Journal of Health and Social Behavior](#). Anne Barrett, associate professor of sociology at Florida State University, co-authored the article.

"Our paper sheds light on the association between non-marital [romantic relationships](#) and emotional well-being among men and women on the threshold of adulthood," Simon says. "Surprisingly, we found young men are more reactive to the quality of ongoing relationships."

That means the harmful stress of a rocky relationship is more closely associated with men's than women's mental health. The researchers also found that men get greater emotional benefits from the positive aspects of an ongoing romantic relationship. This contradicts the stereotypic

image of stoic men who are unaffected by what happens in their romantic relationships.

Simon suggests a possible explanation for the findings: For young men, their [romantic partners](#) are often their primary source of intimacy—in contrast to young women who are more likely to have close relationships with family and friends. Strain in a current romantic relationship may also be associated with poor emotional well-being because it threatens young men's identity and feelings of self-worth, she says.

She also explains how men and women express [emotional distress](#) in different ways. "Women express emotional distress with depression while men express emotional distress with substance problems," Simon says.

While young men are more affected emotionally by the quality of their current relationships, young women are more emotionally affected by whether they are in a relationship or not, Simon says. So, young women are more likely to experience depression when the relationship ends or benefit more by simply being in a relationship.

For the study, Simon and Barrett analyzed data from a large sample of young adult men and women in south Florida. The survey data was originally gathered for a long-term study of [mental health](#) and the transition to adulthood.

Simon says there is much still to learn about these relationships between men and [women](#) in early adulthood, so she advocates for more research on this prolonged and varied period in the life course that is characterized by identity exploration, a focus on the self, and forging new relationships.

Provided by Wake Forest University

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