

Long-term, intimate partnerships can promote unhealthy habits

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For better or for worse, in sickness and in health – there's a long line of research that associates marriage with reducing unhealthy habits such as smoking, and promoting better health habits such as regular checkups. However, new research is emerging that suggests married straight couples and cohabiting gay and lesbian couples in long-term intimate relationships may pick up each other's unhealthy habits as well. University of Cincinnati research into how those behaviors evolve will be presented Aug. 23 at the 106th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Las Vegas.

Corinne Reczek, a UC assistant professor of sociology, reports three distinct findings into how [unhealthy habits](#) were promoted through these long-term, intimate relationships: through the direct bad influence of one partner, through health habit synchronicity and through the notion of personal responsibility.

Reczek reports that gay, lesbian and straight couples all described the "bad influence" theme, while in straight partnerships, men were nearly always viewed as the "bad influence."

"The finding that one partner is a 'direct bad influence' suggests that individuals converge in health habits across the course of their relationship, because one individual's unhealthy habits directly promotes the other's unhealthy habits," reports Reczek. An example would be how both partners eat the unhealthy foods that one partner purchases.

"Gay and lesbian couples nearly exclusively described how the habits of both partners were simultaneously promoted due to unhealthy habit synchronicity. For these individuals, one partner may not engage in what they consider an unhealthy habit on their own, but when their desire for such a habit is matched by their partners, they partake in unhealthy habits," writes Reczek.

"Third, respondents utilized a discourse of personal responsibility to describe how even when they observe their partner partaking in an unhealthy habit, they do not attempt to change the habit, indicating that they were complicit in sustaining their partner's unhealthy habits. The final theme was described primarily by straight men and women," says Reczek.

Reczek adds that the study is among the first of its kind to examine how gay and lesbian couples promote each other's unhealthy habits.

Study Method

Reczek and two team researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 122 people involved in long-term straight or married relationships (31 couples), gay partnerships (15 couples) and lesbian relationships (15 couples), who had been together between eight and 52 years.

Participants were individually asked a series of open-ended questions about smoking, drinking, food consumption, sleep patterns, exercise habits and other health habits. "Particular attention was paid to how partners shaped each of these habits," writes Reczek.

Demographic Description

In the survey sample, 83 percent of the straight respondents were white,

nine percent were African-American, one person was Asian American, two were Latina and one respondent identified as multiracial. For the gay and lesbian couples 63 percent were white, four percent identified as Hispanic, Latino or Latina, one respondent identified as African-American, one Native American/Hispanic and one South American.

The average age for the straight couples was 53 years – 49 years for gay couples and 43 years for lesbian couples.

The average relationship duration for straight couples was 25 years. For gay couples, it was 21 years and for lesbian couples it was 14 years.

Household income of the participants ranged from \$40,000 to \$120,000.

"While previous research focuses nearly exclusively on how intimate relationships – particularly marriage – are health-promoting, these findings extend this research to argue that intimate partners are cognizant of the ways in which they promote the unhealthy habits of one another," states Reczek.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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