

UK is a nation of supportive partners

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Partners provide a vital source of positive emotional support for the vast majority of people in the UK. Nine out of ten people who were married or cohabiting talk to their partner about their worries, according to data from Understanding Society, the world's largest longitudinal household study of 40,000 UK households. Ninety four per cent of those surveyed rely on their partner for support when a problem crops up.

As part of the Understanding Society study of 40,000 UK households, researchers asked people how much personal and emotional support they felt they received from not only their spouse/partner, but also other [family members](#) and friends. [Respondents](#) were also asked to rate negative support from their partner, other family members and friends including how much they felt criticised and let down by those people.

"Spouses or partners were largely described as providing positive support," explains Professor Heather Laurie, Director of the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex. "Some 88 per cent of respondents said their partner understood the way they feel, with only ten per cent admitting that they had felt let down by their partner when they were counting on them."

In the UK, family members and friends can also provide important sources of positive support, but it seems that men are more inclined to rely primarily on their partner (if they have one) while women are happier to turn also to family and friends. In relation to family members, women were significantly more likely to report having positive support than men. More than three quarters of women said they could talk to

family members about their [worries](#) compared with only two thirds of men.

Understanding where people receive [emotional support](#) from is important, researchers argue, because existing evidence suggests a 'buffering effect' of having positive [social support](#) in the face of shocks such as [divorce](#), ill-health, [bereavement](#), or losing your job. Having positive and strong social support also appears linked with better psychological and physical health.

Having a confidant or person to share private feelings with is a significant component of social support. The Understanding Society study suggests that men were far more likely to share their feelings with a woman than a man. Less than a quarter of men said they shared their feelings with a man compared with 46 per cent of women. Just four per cent of men and two per cent of women had no-one at all in whom they could confide.

"Gender differences in perceptions of social support from partner, family and friends appear quite marked," Professor Laurie points out. "Men who have a spouse or partner rely heavily on that person for positive social support while women tend to look more widely to other family members and friends. This suggests that men and women differ in their approach to their relationships with family and friends and it will be interesting as more data comes on stream to assess how these gender differences relate to measures of well-being and the ability to withstand unforeseen [shocks](#)."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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