

Couples Lab studies importance of relationships

February 14 2014, by Kåri Knutson

Valentine's Day is a day when we think about our romantic relationships—or lack thereof.

But at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Couples Lab, every day is spent thinking about the importance of relationships. What makes them work? How do couples communicate? In what ways do our parents' relationships affect us for a lifetime?

It's complicated, but for Lauren Papp, relationships are an endless source of fascination. Papp, an associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the School of Human Ecology, has been at UW-Madison since 2006 and started the UW Couples Lab in 2007.

"The idea is to get a better understanding about what our closest relationships mean in our day-to-day lives," Papp says. "We know that how relationships are going holds important consequences, especially for young adults. It influences friendships, academic success, financial stress, substance abuse and many other areas of our lives."

Right now, Papp and her students are recruiting for two studies: a dating study for people ages 18 to 25 and an empty nest study for couples whose adult children have recently left home. Both are ongoing studies that Papp plans to wrap up by the end of the summer.

She works with 10 [undergraduate students](#) and three graduate students in

the lab. Many are studying areas such as psychology, [social work](#), nursing and [human development](#).

"It's a wonderful way to get a better understanding of people," Papp. "Our relationships make a huge impact not only on our mental health but our physical health as well."

Amber Smits, a junior majoring in human development and family studies and psychology, has been a research assistant at the lab since fall. Last semester, she and other undergraduate students observed interviews with couples. This semester, they'll get to do more hands-on work, including helping conduct interviews.

"I've been very surprised how open the couples are," Smits says. "We're virtually strangers and yet they share all of these intimate details from their lives."

Smits plans to go to graduate school and study social work.

"I really learned you can't judge anyone's relationship," Smits says. "There are so many factors that go into it. We get one little snapshot."

Papp, along with her students, has learned a thing or two from the Couples Lab – namely how important a good relationship is. Papp is married and has two young daughters. She says demonstrating a healthy relationship by working through conflicts is one of the most important things parents can teach children.

"When a relationship is going well, it can be the most supportive, most facilitating part of life," Papp says. "Even when work is stressful and there's a lot to be done at home, you need to prioritize your relationship and give it the attention it needs."

Even good relationships can be better. Here are a few tips from Papp:

- Be an agreeable and engaged person most of the time; be kind, good-natured, and forgiving. These qualities go a long way in making you feel good, improving your partner's daily experience, and keeping the relationship a positive place for both people in it.
- Minimize your negativity. Try to stay healthy and happy for your own sake as well as for your relationship. When conflicts arise, handle them directly and constructively. No need to bring up every other annoyance or dwell on past mistakes. Know that some issues will require more time and attention to resolve, and handle those discussions in the right time and space (for example, not when you're hungry, or feeling rushed to meet a due date or deadline).
- Devote energy to keeping the emotional and physical affection in your relationship high. The time and effort you commit to developing and maintaining a satisfying romantic relationship can be a wonderful investment for ensuring your daily happiness and productivity as well as promoting health benefits for you and those around you for years to come.
- And for those not in a [relationship](#) but looking for a Valentine's date, Papp says you should prioritize what's important to you.

"The latest research suggests that people interested in starting a [romantic relationship](#) should keep their desired traits to a maximum of three," Papp says. "If you're looking for too many specific qualities in a potential partner, then your chance of finding that person becomes nearly impossible."

More information: More information can be found here:
mywebspaces.wisc.edu/groups/couples/web/index.htm

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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