

Relationship quality tied to good health for young adults

June 24 2016, by Bert Gambini



Credit: University at Buffalo

For young people entering adulthood, high-quality relationships are associated with better physical and mental health, according to the results of a study by a University at Buffalo-led research team.

"Health benefits begin to accrue relatively quickly with high-quality relationships and supportive contexts," says Ashley Barr, assistant professor in UB's Department of Sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences. "And then we see detrimental effects from low-quality relationships – particularly, those low-quality relationships that last a

long time."

Over the last few decades, the transition into [adulthood](#) has been extended, according to Barr. Younger people today are waiting longer to get married than those in previous generations, and they're waiting longer to finish school. During this period, they're moving in and out of relationships.

"Much of the research literature focuses on relationships and health in the context of marriage," says Barr. "The majority of our respondents were not married, but these relationships are still impactful to health, for better or for worse."

This is Barr's second study to look at how the quality of relationships during the transition into adulthood affects health. The findings were recently published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

She previously conducted research with an all-African-American sample that suggested patterns of instability in relationships mattered when it came to depressive symptoms, alcohol problems and how people reported their general health.

Given those findings, the researchers wanted to see if the same patterns held true in a very different sample.

And they did.

Using the Iowa Youth and Families Project, a sample of all-white youth coming from two-parent, married families in rural Iowa, Barr says about one-third of the sample experienced relatively large changes in their relationships over a two-year period.

"We took into account satisfaction, partner hostility, questions about

criticism, support, kindness, affection and commitment," says Barr. "We also asked about how partners behave outside of the relationship. Do they engage in deviant behaviors? Is there general anti-sociality?"

Barr says the longer people are in high-quality relationships, or the faster they get out of low-quality relationships, the better their health.

"It's not being in a relationship that matters; it's being in a long-term, high-quality relationship that's beneficial," she says. "Low-quality relationships are detrimental to health. The findings suggest that it's better for [health](#) to be single than to be in a low-quality relationship."

Barr says the attention to changes in these relationships is important, particularly in the context of the extended transition to adulthood.

"It's rare today for young adults to enter a romantic relationship and stay in that relationship without ever changing partners or relationship characteristics," she says. "We now have two studies that found similar patterns and similar implications for those changes."

Provided by University at Buffalo

Citation: Relationship quality tied to good health for young adults (2016, June 24) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-06-relationship-quality-tied-good-health.html>

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