

Research affirms the power of 'we'

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A healthy relationship starts with the word "we."

Past research by UC Riverside psychologist Megan Robbins has emphasized the power of first-person personal pronouns such as "we" and "us" in relationships. "We-talk" is an indicator of interdependence,

meaning partners affect one another's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This is a shift from self-oriented to relationship-oriented.

New research by her lab has greatly magnified the body of evidence asserting that the pronouns we use foretell good relationship outcomes. Robbins and her team reviewed and analyzed 30 studies of nearly 5,300 participants to assert that couples who often say "we" and "us" have more successful relationships and are healthier and happier.

"By examining all these studies together, they let us see the bigger picture. We-talk is an indicator of interdependence and general positivity in romantic relationships," said Alexander Karan, a graduate student in Robbins' lab and lead author of a related paper recently published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

Interdependence is tied to relationship-healthy behaviors, such as being supportive in stressful times. "Interdependence Theory," first introduced in the 1950s, holds that interdependent romantic partners are more inclusive in how they both think, feel, behave, and rely on each other for support over time.

For the study participants—about half of whom were married—Robbins' team looked at five measures: relationship outcomes (satisfaction, length of union); relationship behaviors (positive vs. negative interactions observed); mental health; physical health; and health behaviors (how well participants take care of themselves).

The benefit was evident in all five categories, and virtually equal for both men and women.

"The benefit of analyzing many different couples in a lot of different contexts is that it establishes we-talk isn't just positively related in one context, but that it indicates positive functioning overall," Karan said.

That is to say, we-talk is good for [young couples](#), and it's good for older couples. It's good when resolving a conflict; it's even good when the [partner](#) is not physically present. Most importantly, though we-talk is good when one uses it, it's even better when one's romantic partner uses it.

Karan said the primary takeaway is that interdependence may bring about supportive and relationship-centered behaviors and positive perceptions of the partner—especially important in times of stress and conflict.

A chicken-or-the-egg question that remains unanswered, and is the subject of upcoming research for Robbins' team: Does we-talk make for happy couples, or do happy couples make for we-talk?

"It is likely both," Robbins said. "Hearing yourself or a partner say these words could shift individuals' ways of thinking to be more interdependent, which could lead to a healthier relationship."

However: "It could also be the case that because the [relationship](#) is healthy and interdependent, the partners are being supportive and use we-talk."

The paper, "Meta-Analytic Evidence that We-Talk Predicts Relationship and Personal Functioning in Romantic Couples," was recently published online in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. Authors includes Robbins, Karan, and UCR Distinguished Professor Robert Rosenthal.

More information: Alexander Karan et al, Meta-analytic evidence that we-talk predicts relationship and personal functioning in romantic couples, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0265407518795336](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407518795336)

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