

# This kind of flirting works best

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Some people are experts at flirting. Others of us never flirt or fail spectacularly. But what kind of flirting works best?

One particular flirting technique almost always works for everyone and in every situation. More on that later, because not everything works

every time.

"What's most effective depends on your gender and whether the purpose of the flirtation is a long-term or short-term relationship," says Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair, a professor at NTNU's Department of Psychology.

Kennair belongs to a research group that has studied flirting in Norway and the U.S. and what people believe are effective tactics—and for whom and in what context. The research group came from NTNU and from Bucknell University in Pennsylvania and State University of New York at Oswego. Their study is published in *Evolutionary Psychology*.

## **We flirt... well, because of this**

But first: What exactly is flirting?

"Flirting involves different signals that people send to each other. It's done to attract [potential partners](#). Men and women both flirt to get the attention of a desired [partner](#), and perhaps to achieve a sexual or romantic result from it," says Professor Kennair.

"Flirting can be done verbally as well as non-verbally says T. Joel Wade, a Presidential Professor of Psychology at Bucknell University in the U.S.," a co-author of the study.

We basically flirt to attract a potential partner, regardless of whether we stop before it gets that far or not.

So what works? Let's look first at what works sometimes, but not always and not for everyone.

## **Gender and purpose at play**

"People consider signals that you're sexually available to be the most effective for women who are looking for a short-term relationship," says Kennair.

Friendly contact like hugging or a kiss on the cheek doesn't work in that context. Women who just want a short-lived fling from flirting need to signalize this clearly to the potential partner.

A completely different tactic works in another mating context.

The study shows that "signs of generosity and a willingness to commit works best for men who are looking for a long-term relationship," says professor and colleague Mons Bendixen.

Men who want to keep a partner for a longer period of time, perhaps for life, should not come across as stingy/ungenerous or as someone who prefers to change partners frequently.

### **Strongest flirting weapon for anyone**

But the most powerful weapon in the flirtation arsenal might come as a surprise to people who don't have it. This weapon almost always works to some degree for everyone: Humor.

"People think that humor, or being able to make another person laugh, is most effective for men who are looking for a long-term relationship. It's least effective for women who are looking for a one-night stand. But laughing or giggling at the other person's jokes is an effective flirtation tactic for both sexes," says Kennair.

"It is not only effective to be funny, but for women it is very important

that you show your potential partner that you think they are funny," Rebecca Burch, a co-author from SUNY Oswego, U.S., added.

If you need to flirt, but feel unsure about how to proceed, then humor is something you should add to your toolkit. But maybe you shouldn't start with that.

"Smiling and eye contact are important. Then you can build your flirting skills from that base, using more advanced tactics," Kennair says.

## **Supports previous findings**

The researchers applied sexual strategies theory as a framework to their work. Variants of this theory have also been used in other contexts that deal with how men and women proceed to find partners. This is the first time the theory is being used to examine flirting effectiveness.

"The findings fit perfectly with what we know from the literature on self-promotion. It also seems that flirting is largely the same in the U.S. and Norway," Kennair says.

Mostly these are the same flirting techniques that people believe are effective in both Norway and the U.S.. Flirting is only culturally dependent to a lesser extent, such as in people's body language, the initial contact and in the degree of generosity.

This indicates that effective flirting is largely universal, which is not surprising since the motivations for finding a mate are partly biological, Wade says.

However, this also shows that people fine tune their flirting techniques depending on what is emphasized in their culture, which is a smart, flexible strategy, Burch adds.

## Approach

The researchers surveyed close to 1000 students in Norway and the U.S. The participants rated how effective 40 different types of flirting were for a long-term or a short-term relationship, and whether the flirter was male or female. Participants were randomly assigned to the four versions of the questionnaire.

The researchers took into account the participants' extroversion, age, religiosity, how willing the person was to have a relationship and "mate value," that is, how attractive you are in the dating market.

"Individual differences in age, religiosity, extroversion, personal attractiveness and preferences for short-term sexual relationships had little or no effect on how effective respondents considered the various flirting tactics to be," says Bendixen.

Our personality may therefore be less relevant in how we judge flirting behavior in others.

"However, we do believe that [personal characteristics](#) affect the type of flirting people employ themselves," says Bendixen.

**More information:** Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair et al, Perceived Effectiveness of Flirtation Tactics: The Effects of sex, Mating Context and Individual Differences in US and Norwegian Samples, *Evolutionary Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/14747049221088011](https://doi.org/10.1177/14747049221088011)

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