

'Happy wife, happy life'? More like 'happy spouse, happy house,' new study shows

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New research challenges old adage 'happy life, happy wife,' showing that men and women's satisfaction matter equally. Credit: Andres Ayrton via Pexels

"Happy wife, happy life," the saying goes. But the expression is outdated and new research shows that the assumptions behind it are out of step

too.

UTM psychology professor Emily Impett and University of Alberta family sciences professor Matthew Johnson have found that men and women are equally strong predictors of future [relationship](#) satisfaction in mixed-gender relationships. "Happy spouse, happy house" isn't only a more inclusive maxim, it is a more accurate one too.

"People experience ups and downs in their [romantic relationships](#). Some days are better than others, and it is widely believed that women's relationship perceptions will carry more weight in predicting future relationship satisfaction," says Impett.

"This idea that women are the barometers of relationships is captured in expressions like 'happy wife, happy life.'"

But there are few studies that have examined this assumption, and those that did had small sample sizes. It had never been rigorously tested before.

"Happy wife, happy life" is also consistent with theoretical perspectives.

"Evolutionary perspectives might suggest that women have evolved psychological mechanisms that make them especially attuned to the quality of their relationships—to help them select an optimal mate," Impett explains.

"And there is also a social psychological perspective. The social performance of gender roles requires women to attend to the needs of their partners and take responsibility for maintaining relationships. So, their views about the relationship would be more likely to affect [couple](#) dynamics. But that is not what we found at all. We found that both men and women have equal power to shape the future of their relationship."

In research published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Impett, Johnson and their fellow researchers tested the old adage through analysis of data from nine studies from Canada, the United States and Germany. These studies included relationship satisfaction reports provided by 901 mixed-gender couples who kept a daily diary for up to 21 days, and yearly relationship satisfaction survey provided by 3,405 couples over a five-year period. In all, the research considered more than 50,000 relationship satisfaction reports.

"The relationship satisfaction of both men and [women](#) were equally strong predictors of their own future satisfaction and of their [partner](#)'s—whether it was day-to-day, or year-to-year," says Impett. "Men's satisfaction matters equally, in terms of how they feel, and how their partner feels about the relationship in the future.

"Just think about what happens in the daily lives of couples. When one partner is having a particularly bad day, that lingers in the relationship. On the flip side of that, when one partner is feeling particularly good about the relationship, both partners reap the benefits of that. We see the same pattern over longer periods of time too, from one year to the next. Relationship satisfaction forecasts future satisfaction."

The results underscore the importance of being aware of satisfaction in relationships and taking the necessary steps to cultivate it.

"Many couples wait too long to seek help for issues in their relationships, but people know when they are experiencing more negativity than positivity, and they have the potential to try to shift things," says Impett.

"We already know the things that couples can do to maintain relationship satisfaction. Be responsive to a partner's needs, support them when they are down, share in their good news, and cultivate gratitude. It is important for people to be aware of their own satisfaction and its

fluctuations. Knowing how you can impact your own relationship [satisfaction](#) matters for you, and it matters for your partner too."

More information: Matthew D. Johnson et al, Women and Men are the Barometers of Relationships: Testing the Predictive Power of Women's and Men's Relationship Satisfaction, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2209460119](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2209460119)

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