

For couples, negative speaks louder than positive

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After a long day, a couple cuddles together while watching a favorite show, taking comfort in each other's touch, scent and voices—until one partner makes an insensitive comment. Will the comment be quickly

forgotten, or might it signal trouble for the relationship?

New Cornell psychology research finds that the more we harbor implicit judgments about a partner that are negative, the more we're likely to perceive [negativity](#) in daily interactions, which in turn predicts a decline in [relationship satisfaction](#) over time. Positive implicit associations, on the other hand, don't similarly forecast more positive partner perceptions or relationship outcomes.

The findings suggest a negativity bias in the operation of so-called implicit partner evaluations (IPEs)—evaluations triggered spontaneously when thinking about one's partner—giving the negative ones more sway.

"Even in the most satisfying and secure relationships, feelings about our partners are complex: They bring us joy, laughter and comfort, but can also give rise to disappointment, conflict and disconnection," said Vivian Zayas '94, professor of psychology in the College of Arts and Sciences.

"We found that people who had stronger implicit negative evaluations were more likely to report instances where their partner behaved negatively, and the more people recalled that [negative behavior](#), the less satisfied they were with the relationship three months later."

Zayas is a co-author of "Negative Speaks Louder Than Positive: Negative Implicit Partner Evaluations Forecast Destructive Daily Interactions and Relationship Decline," [published](#) in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, with Ezgi Sakman, a former postdoctoral research fellow at Cornell, now a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Bilkent University in Turkey.

Researchers have found that, intentionally or not, people may misrepresent their judgments about a partner when asked. Implicit evaluations, which come to mind automatically, unintentionally and

unconsciously, are believed to be less sensitive to such distortions and at times even better predictors of relationship outcomes.

"These implicit mental representations might tell a different story, and you might not be consciously aware of that," Sakman said.

In prior work, Zayas showed that even when people consciously reported only very [positive feelings](#) toward a loved one, thinking about them simultaneously activated both positive and negative implicit evaluations, highlighting relationships' complexity. That complexity may not be fully captured by typical measures of implicit evaluations that assess net positivity—how much one holds positive feelings relative to negative.

The researchers sought to investigate if, rather than simply offsetting each other, positive and negative associations operate independently and forecast positive and negative behaviors, respectively.

In the study, more than 100 undergraduates in exclusive heterosexual relationships first completed surveys about their relationships and tests of implicit partner evaluations, measured through rapid reaction tasks on computers. Participants then kept daily diaries for two weeks, noting positive or negative behaviors by their partners and themselves. Three months after the study began, their explicit and implicit attitudes were reassessed.

The results showed that if study participants more easily associated negativity with their partner in the first assessment, they reported more negative behaviors from their partners in their diaries. Those conscious observations predicted lower relationship satisfaction by the second assessment.

"The path from initial negativity to subsequent satisfaction decline was picking up that negativity on a day-by-day basis," Sakman said.

The researchers think the lack of a similar correlation for positivity may be explained by a negativity bias: Even if we feel mostly positive about a partner, we remember and attend to negative experiences more, probably because potential threats may be more consequential.

"When reflecting on one's day, many dating couples are likely to be able to recall instances where their partners behaved positively, partly because it is common for dating couples to express affection," Zayas said. "But if one recalls negative behaviors, this independently forecasts decreases in relationship satisfaction.

"Think about the negative IPE as a cognitive 'storage bin' for when a partner does something negative. People who have larger storage bins, as assessed with our measure, appear to have actually stored more negative partner information, as reflected in their daily diary.

"Positive IPEs were not as predictive, but it's possible this could reflect that most participants were in happy relationships. We need to conduct follow-up studies to better understand whether and how positive IPEs affect relationship outcomes."

For the cuddling couple, the researchers said, the frequency of insensitive comments and their substance—did it concern a movie character, or one's core values?—could determine whether a partner was predisposed to perceive it more negatively, and if that could portend a breakup.

Near of Valentine's Day, they said the study results point to the significance of the small, day-to-day interactions reflected in diary entries, rather than grand gestures. More intense negativity—even if balanced by positive associations—seems to place a relationship at higher risk, compared to one with lower levels of both, though their net positivity could be similar.

"It might be helpful for all of us to be mindful of the negativity in our relationships," Sakman said. "If we're a little bit short with each other just because of daily hassles, we should take care to watch our attitudes and behaviors and make a conscious effort not to take it out on our partner."

More information: Ezgi Sakman et al, Negative speaks louder than positive: Negative implicit partner evaluations forecast destructive daily interactions and relationship decline, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/02654075231224803](https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075231224803)

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