

Compassion doesn't help all couples, finds study

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More compassion = a better relationship. This is an obvious rule of thumb for couples. But it doesn't apply to everyone, as a study shows. Some people prefer to do without it.

Whether irrevocably estranged or merely bored with the [daily routine](#): "Couples counseling can improve communication and the quality of the relationship. And it has a positive effect on [mental health](#)," says Andrew Gloster, professor of clinical psychology at the University of Lucerne.

Therapy methods are usually based on findings from [psychological research](#), which assumes that most people's psyches largely function according to the same principles.

But perhaps it's not such a good idea to lump everyone together, as a research project on couples counseling shows. [The results](#) are published in the *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*.

"If you look at couples individually, you may reach different results as opposed to taking the average of all of them." Psychological homogeneity—the assumption that all people think alike—has been called into question for some time. "But it's only recently that psychotherapeutic research has taken notice of it."

Compassion leaves some people cold

New methods in [data collection](#) and analysis have now made it possible to question a general principle of couples counseling: namely, that if one partner feels empathetic towards the other, the latter will find him/her more attractive. The same applies to [compassion](#) with oneself.

Quite in line with the popular adage: only those who love themselves can love others. Accordingly, compassion ensures greater satisfaction in the relationship. It is expressed, among other things, in tolerance, benevolence and caring when interacting with the other person or—in the case of self-compassion—with oneself. Fostering these characteristics is therefore often part of couples-counseling sessions.

Gloster's team analyzed data that had previously been part of another study: 84 [heterosexual couples](#) from Switzerland kept a type of real-time diary. Over the course of a week they noted their compassion for their partner, their self-compassion and the attractiveness of their partner several times a day.

"In this way we were able to analyze the couples individually from the perspective of each partner and find out how they deviated from the average," Gloster explains.

The analysis showed that the motto "Those who are empathetic towards their partner find him/her more attractive" applied to only around half of the couples. With the other half, the researchers found barely any connection between compassion for their partners and attraction.

One other result, which was only observed in the [male partners](#), was particularly unexpected: men who were self-compassionate (but who demonstrated little compassion towards their partners) even found their wives or girlfriends to be less attractive.

As a first step, clarify the dynamics in the relationship

This finding certainly has implications for couples counseling in practice: "For couples who see a link between compassion for their loved one and attraction, it can be helpful to strengthen the compassion and self-compassion," Gloster comments. "But for others, this strategy may be ineffective."

That might apply, for example, to the sub-group of couples for whom compassion does not play a role. In the special case of men who feel little compassion for their partner it is also to be expected that

strengthening their self-compassion will have little influence on how attractive they find their partner. The first step would be to develop compassion for the wife or girlfriend.

According to Gloster, who has worked with couples as a therapist, it would make sense to first clarify the dynamics of a relationship at the beginning of the therapy and to tailor the therapy strategy in line with the results. This applies not only to couples counseling but to other forms of psychotherapy too.

Over the next few years, Gloster intends to identify other sub-groups that do not react to interventions in line with the average. A customized therapy could increase their chances of achieving good mental health.

More information: Joseph Ciarrochi et al, The compassion connection: Experience sampling insights into romantic attraction, *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jcbs.2024.100749](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcbs.2024.100749)

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