

Impact of bad behavior greater than positive gestures, Baylor study shows

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WACO—Refraining from bad behavior toward a significant other during stressful life events is more important than showing positive behavior, a Baylor University study revealed.

Compared with positive gestures, negative ones tend to trigger more intense and immediate responses, according to the study. And how a couple works together during stressful times is associated with individual well-being, as well as satisfaction with the relationship.

“When people face stressful life events, they are especially sensitive to negative behavior in their relationships, such as when a partner seems to be argumentative, overly emotional, withdrawn or fails to do something that was expected,” said researcher Keith Sanford, professor of psychology and neuroscience at Baylor. “In contrast, they’re less sensitive to positive behavior—such as giving each other comfort.”

Low doses matter

The study also found low doses of a behavior are most important, and over time, more extreme levels have less impact.

“Because people are especially sensitive to negative relationship behavior, a moderate dose may be sufficient to produce a nearly maximum effect on increasing life stress,” Sanford said. “After negative behavior reaches a certain saturation point, it appears that stress is only minimally affected by

further increases in the dose of relationship problems.”

The study—“Negative Relationship Behavior Is More Important Than Positive: Correlates of Outcomes During Stressful Life Events”—is published in *Journal of Family Psychology*. Sanford and co-researcher Alannah Shelby Rivers, doctoral candidate in psychology and neuroscience, surveyed couples experiencing stressful life events to measure their behavior, relationship satisfaction, personal well-being and quality of life.

Two studies

The research consisted of two studies done using data from Internet samples.

In the first study, 325 couples who were married or living with a partner all reported experiences of at least one of six possible stressful events within the past month, including: losing a job, becoming a primary caregiver of an older relative, experiencing a parent’s death, experiencing a child’s death, not having enough resources to afford basic necessities, and experiencing bankruptcy, foreclosure or repossession of a house or car.

The second study included 154 people who were either married or living with a partner and experiencing a serious medical issue meeting one or more of these criteria: a condition requiring hospitalization or a trip to the emergency room, a serious chronic condition and a life-threatening condition. All participants reported that they had visited a medical practitioner within the past year for treatment of their conditions.

Researchers used a scale that included 18 items—nine for negative and nine for positive behavior. Participants were asked to remember the past month, then write a few words describing different memories of interactions occurring in their relationships and indicate how often specific types of interactions occurred in their relationships.

All participants also were asked questions about how rewarding their relationships were, their general well-being (such as being active and vigorous) and their quality of life (such as health). Those in the first study also were asked about stress, their coping strategies in general and their coping style in the relationship.

The second study, examining couple's behavior during stressful medical events, showed lower levels of negative behavior than the first study dealing with other types of stressful issues.

"It is possible that couples facing stressful medical situations are less likely to blame each other," researchers wrote.

"When people face stressful life events, it's common to experience both positive and negative behavior in their relationships," Sanford said. "When the goal is to increase feelings of well-being and lessen stress, it may be more important to decrease negative behavior than to increase positive actions."