

Low Self-Control Promotes Selfless Behavior in Close Relationships

June 27, 2013

When faced with the choice of sacrificing time and energy for a loved one or taking the self-centered route, people's first impulse is to think of others, according to new research published in [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

“For decades psychologists have assumed that the first impulse is selfish and that it takes self-control to behave in a pro-social manner,” says lead researcher Francesca Righetti of VU University Amsterdam in the Netherlands. “We did not believe that this was true in every context, and especially not in close relationships.”

Righetti and colleagues sought to examine whether impulsivity, in close relationships, might actually benefit others.

They found that participants whose self-control was taxed (and were thus more impulsive) were more willing to sacrifice time and energy for their romantic partner or best friend than participants whose self-control wasn't taxed.

In one study, to find out whether they would sacrifice in actual practice, the researchers told couples they would have to talk to 12 strangers and ask them embarrassing questions. The participants didn't know that they wouldn't actually have to follow through with the task.

Participants with high self-control opted to split the burden right down the middle — assigning six strangers to themselves and six strangers to their partner. But participants with low self-control opted to take on more of the burden, sacrificing their own comfort to spare their partners.

A final experiment revealed that married individuals low in trait self-control sacrificed more for their partners, yet were also less forgiving of their transgressions — presumably because self-control is required to override the focus on the wrongdoing and think instead about the relationship as a whole.

While sacrificing for a partner may help to build the relationship on a day-to-day basis, Righetti and colleagues note that it could backfire over the long-term, compromising individuals' ability to maintain a balance between personal and relationship-related concerns.

This balance is a perennial issue for anyone in a close relationship:

“Whether it's about which activities to engage in during free time, whose friends to go out with, or which city to live in, relationship partners often face a divergence of interests — what is most preferred by one partner is not preferred by the other,” notes Righetti.

The field of research is relatively new, so the jury is still out on what effects sacrifice has on relationship well-being, but Righetti is hopeful that research over the next few years will shed more light on the link.

Co-authors on this research include Catrin Finkenauer, also of VU University Amsterdam in the Netherlands, and Eli Finkel of Northwestern University.

This research was supported by grants from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research.