

# Stress Affects How Men and Women Provide Support to Partners

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Men and women both provide strong support to their partners, but women tend to do a better job of being supportive under stressful situations, according to new [research](#) published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

“Men seem to be different when it comes to managing stress,” said psychological scientist Thomas Bradbury, the paper’s senior author and co-director of the [Relationship Institute at UCLA](#). “When men are stressed, they are more likely to be critical in responding to a stressed partner and less likely to be positive, nurturing and comforting. And that’s especially the case when their partner expresses her feelings in more emotional terms.”

Bradbury and colleagues studied 189 heterosexual couples who were highly satisfied with their relationships and had been together for an average of slightly more than four years. The participants were, on average, in their mid- to late-20s.

The couples were divided into three experimental groups: one in which only the man was subjected to stress; one in which only the woman was subjected to stress; and a third in which both partners experienced stress.

Each couple was placed together in a room and videotaped by the researchers for 8 minutes. The

researchers induced stress by conducting mock job interviews with each participant and then asking them to count down from 2,043 in increments of 17, as fast as possible — telling them to start over each time they made a mistake.

To measure stress levels, the researchers took saliva samples and tested the participants' levels of cortisol — a hormone released during stressful events. The results showed that the test was very stressful for men and for women.

While analyzing the videotapes, the psychologists recorded how the participants under stress expressed themselves, either matter-of-factly (saying, for example, “They had me give a speech” or “I had to do math problems, and they corrected me every time I got them wrong”) or emotionally (“I’m a wreck!” or “They must think I’m a complete idiot!”).

They also analyzed whether the partner offered positive support (for example, “You did the best you could under difficult circumstances; no one can ask for more” or “It amazes me how well you deal with stress; you’re so much better at it than I am”) or negative (“You’re overreacting” or “Sounds rough, but do you have any plans for dinner tonight?”).

The researchers also assessed whether the couples' non-verbal behavior was positive, such as holding hands or hugging, or negative, such as playing with objects and avoiding eye contact.

Among the findings, the results showed that:

- Both unstressed men and unstressed women provided positive support to their partners.
- When stressed, women tended to show more support than men did when responding to a partner's emotional expressions of anxiety and stress.
- When stressed, men tended to make a greater number of negative comments that women did in response to their partners' emotional expressions of anxiety and stress.

The researchers argue that both men and women can benefit from acknowledging the role stress plays in these scenarios, regardless of their sexual orientation by recognizing that they really cannot know how stressed their partner is without asking directly, and by understanding that stress can interfere with their ability to stay connected.

“The outside stress that partners bring into their relationship can be a real challenge,” Bradbury said. “That’s because stress can increase both partners’ needs for support while also making it less likely that either partner will receive it. Couples who appreciate the subtle effects of stress can rise to the challenge, and even grow closer because of how they respond.”

Study co-authors include Guy Bodenmann, Nathalie Meuwly, and Janine Germann of the University of Zurich; Fridtjof Nussbeck of Bielefeld University; and Markus Heinrichs of the University of Freiburg.

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