

# Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

December 31, 2013

*Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bi-monthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications, and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to non-experts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.*

[Shopping for Relationships: Two Sides of the Same Coin?](#)

[Does Low Self-Esteem Feed Depression?](#)

## Shopping for Relationships: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

*by C. Nathan DeWall*

[Joel, S., MacDonald, G., & Plaks, J. \(2013\). Romantic relationships as a judgment and decision-making domain. \*Current Directions in Psychological Science\*, 22, 461–465.](#)

“Will you marry me?” Before Cameron got down on one knee and popped this question to his girlfriend, he had to make a decision. Should he commit or should he run?

He thought of the 6 years they had dated, 3 of which were long-distance. He thought of the numerous plane tickets he had purchased to visit her, the holidays he spent at her parents’ house, and her growing concern that he wasn’t interested in marriage. He loved her; he knew he did. But part of him also wondered whether he wanted to get married. Will she still love me when I lose my hair? What if I could find someone who seems more exciting? Would it hurt more to be alone than it would feel fun to meet someone else? When he considered his options, Cameron decided she was the best choice. What looked like romance was rational decision-making.

This sort of rational calculus dispels stereotypes about star-crossed lovers. But according to Samantha Joel, Geoff MacDonald, and Jason Plaks (2013), romantic relationships provide a useful context to apply principles of judgment and decision-making. As Cameron weighed the pros and cons of marrying or leaving his girlfriend, he faced what judgment and decision-making researchers call a multiattribute choice. He demonstrated extreme ambivalence, which is linked to a greater likelihood of divorce (Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012). He also showed loss aversion — he was more sensitive to the potential loss of his relationship than to the potential reward of a new one. By understanding his decision-making process, researchers will better understand why Cameron’s relationship may fail or flourish.

Students love talking about romantic relationships. Taking this cutting-edge research into the classroom should offer opportunities for discussion, sharing, and excitement.

The first activity encourages students to discuss why some relationships end and others do not. First, have students offer examples of celebrities whose relationships have ended and those whose relationships have lasted at least 10 years. Encourage them to use their smartphones, laptops, or other electronic devices. Next, ask the class to discuss why the unsuccessful relationships ended and why the successful relationships did not. Use a chalkboard or dry erase board to write down each response.

Instructors can then introduce three main concepts from the judgment and decision-making literature that Joel and colleagues identify as relevant to romantic relationships:

- *Multiattribute choice*: Weighing the pros and cons when there are two options
- *Heuristics*: Using mental shortcuts, such as selecting a partner if he or she conforms to memorable examples of desirable romantic partners
- *Anticipated emotions*: Expected emotional reactions to relationship events, such as overestimating how long a divorce or breakup might affect you emotionally

Divide the class into three groups. Each group will focus on applying one judgment and decision-making concept to understand why the celebrity relationships failed or succeeded. Allow 5 minutes for small group discussion and another 5–10 minutes for a full class discussion.

A second activity applies the decoy effect, also known as the asymmetric dominance effect (Huber, Payne, & Puto, 1982). The decoy effect occurs when two options are presented, each of which will appeal to some people. A third option is then introduced, which serves as the decoy. The decoy adjusts the basis of comparison for the first two options, which can have dramatic consequences for decision-making.

To introduce the activity, first provide students with a brief description of research showing that people often desire romantic partners who share similar characteristics (Byrne, 1961) and who live in close proximity (Bossard, 1932). Next, present students with the following scenario:

*Julia wants to find a romantic partner who shares her interests and values. She's willing to travel to visit him, but she would rather he live close by. Julia signs up for an online dating service and receives several matches. She asks you to help her decide whom to date. Next to each option appears the partner's similarity score and the distance he lives from Julia.*

Instructors can then divide the class into two groups. The first group will see the following option.

### **Group #1**

	Partner A	Partner B
Similarity (out of 100)	70	80
Distance(in miles)	30	45

Which person should Julia select?

## Group #2

	Partner A	Partner B	Partner C
Similarity (out of 100)	70	80	50
Distance (in miles)	30	45	35

Which person should Julia select?

Partner A will receive the most votes from Group #2 because it included a distractor, Partner C, who was worse than Partner A on both similarity and distance. Instructors can then educate students about the decoy effect and how it may inform how people select their romantic partners. Instructors may also discuss whether online dating services may profit from using the decoy effect to match people. For example, could an online dating service use the decoy effect to help its members get selected for dates? How might that call into question the ethics of online dating?

Deciding whom to love relies on equal doses of fairy tale and expected utility. People have grandiose ideas about their ideal mate and conjure up stories about how their romantic partner fits that image. But people often use the same judgment and decision-making strategies to make relationship decisions as they use when buying a car, a computer, or a cup of coffee. Relationships add more to well-being than any material good. But the processes that feed our relationship decisions suggest that our romantic partners resemble the cups of coffee we buy more than we might think.

## Does Low Self-Esteem Feed Depression?

*by David G. Myers*

[Orth, U., & Robins, R. W. \(2013\). Understanding the link between low self-esteem and depression. \*Current Directions in Psychological Science\*, 22, 455–460.](#)

It will come as no surprise to students, much less teachers of psychology, that low self-esteem predicts greater depressive tendencies. But why? Ulrich Orth and APS Fellow Richard Robins's essay, which crisply identifies and assesses possible explanations, offers an opportunity for teaching critical thinking.

To show students how psychologists measure self-esteem and depressive tendencies, invite students to respond to accessible self-esteem and depression measures — such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ([tinyurl.com/RosenbergSE](http://tinyurl.com/RosenbergSE)) and the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale ([tinyurl.com/ZungDepr](http://tinyurl.com/ZungDepr)). Or perhaps in class, simply invite students to respond to a few sample items of each scale (explaining the reverse scoring of half the items).

First, Rosenberg's self-esteem scale: Do you strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), agree (A), or strongly agree (SA) that

I feel that I have a number of good qualities: \_\_\_SD \_\_\_D \_\_\_A \_\_\_SA

I feel I do not have much to be proud of: \_\_\_SD \_\_\_D \_\_\_A \_\_\_SA

I wish I could have more respect for myself: \_\_\_SD \_\_\_D \_\_\_A \_\_\_SA

I certainly feel useless at times: \_\_\_SD \_\_\_D \_\_\_A \_\_\_SA

Second, Zung's depression scale: How often have you felt these ways in the past several days? A little of the time (Little)? Some of the time (Some)? Good part of the time (Good part)? Most of the time (Most)?

I feel down-hearted and blue: \_\_\_Little \_\_\_Some \_\_\_Good part \_\_\_Most

My life is pretty full: \_\_\_Little \_\_\_Some \_\_\_Good part \_\_\_Most

I get tired for no reason: \_\_\_Little \_\_\_Some \_\_\_Good part \_\_\_Most

I feel hopeful about the future: \_\_\_Little \_\_\_Some \_\_\_Good part

It's one of psychology's most consistent findings: People who score low on such self-esteem scales tend to score high on depression scales. Self-esteem correlates negatively with depression.

Using this opportunity to illustrate that correlation does not imply causation, invite students to speculate *why* low self-esteem scores associate with depressive tendencies. See if their brainstorming can produce the alternatives Orth and Robins identify:

1. *Vulnerability*: Low self-esteem causes depression.
2. *Scarring*: Depression causes low self-esteem.
3. *Reciprocal vulnerability and scarring*: In a vicious circle, low self-esteem might be both a source and a result of depression.
4. *Underlying precursor*: Perhaps low self-esteem is a manifestation of depression, with both caused by underlying factors such as a broken relationship, failure, victimization, job loss, or neuroticism.
5. *Diathesis-stress*: Low self-esteem is a diathesis — a predisposing factor that causes depression only when combined with a significant life stress.

To sift these possibilities, Orth and Robins meta-analyzed 77 longitudinal studies that followed 35,000 lives through time. Cross-lagged regression analyses, which explore the sequence of low self-esteem and depression, reveal both vulnerability and scar effects. "But the vulnerability effect is twice as large." Vulnerability — the emotionally toxic effect of low self-esteem — appears across both genders, all age groups, and various cultures. Moreover, the vulnerability remains even when controlling for underlying third factors. And low self-esteem predicts depression risk with or without stressful life events.

To alleviate depression, it would help to know what mediates the relationship between low self-esteem and depression. The evidence indicates that negative rumination and social withdrawal bridge low self-

worth to negative affect.

We need more research on the development, stability, and mediation of the relationship between self-esteem and depression, note Orth and Robins. But, they say, we can now discount the argument “that self-esteem is an empty construct that has no long-term impact.” And we can hope that this research might lead to interventions that lighten the burden of depression.

## **References**

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