

Teaching: Are Romantic Relationships Actually Good for Mental Health?

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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](#).

[More teaching resources in this Observer: Applying a Growth Mindset to Mental Disorders](#)

[South, S. \(2023\). A romantic partner model of mental health. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 32\(3\), 258–263.](#)

When confronting the ongoing mental health crisis, which factors do many psychologists ignore? Psychological scientists have examined various novel risk factors for mental illness over the past decade, including excessive social media use, economic inequality, and gender identity. According to Susan South (2023), few psychologists realize that a potent risk factor for psychological disorders has been hiding in plain sight: people's dissatisfaction with their current romantic relationship.

In fact, South (2023, p. 3) boldly states that “a distressed and unsatisfying romantic relationship may be one of the most important social-environmental triggers for the expression of psychopathology.” If South is correct (and I think she is), then we should encourage students to ask three questions:

- (1) Why should we explore romantic relationships as they relate to psychological disorders?**
- (2) What percentage of romantic relationships could increase people’s risk for psychological disorders?**
- (3) How does having an unsatisfying romantic relationship compare with other known risk factors for psychological disorders?**

Instructors can complete one or more of the following brief activities, encouraging students to apply critical thinking to each question. Each activity demonstrates the benefits of approaching psychology as a science rather than relying on intuition.

Student Activities

Activity 1: Why study romantic relationships?

Widespread topics garner widespread attention. For example, at some point in their lives, 50 percent of people in the United States meet diagnostic criteria for a psychological disorder. Hence, many people study psychology because they have experienced or know someone with a psychological disorder.

Ask students to estimate the percentage of people in the United States who, at some point in their lives, will get married. Is it more or less than 50 percent? Tell them that South (2023) reports that the number is higher than students might expect: 90 percent!

Thus, almost everyone in the United States will experience marriage. Does the overall likelihood of marriage make it worthwhile to understand whether romantic relationships relate to having better mental health? Why or why not? Either way, relying on the evidence—rather than our intuition—about the likelihood of marriage can help us understand whether studying romantic relationships is worth our time.

Activity 2: How many people in serious romantic relationships are dissatisfied?

To know whether romantic relationships impact mental health, we need to know not just how many people are in serious romantic relationships (marriage or cohabiting) but also the percentage of romantic relationships that are flourishing or floundering. Students may have a false sense of the quality of

people's romantic relationships. Social media offers an unrealistic glimpse into people's lives, including their romantic relationships. Thankfully, psychological science can offer clear-cut evidence on the percentage of dissatisfied people in serious romantic relationships.

Ask students to estimate how many people in serious romantic relationships are dissatisfied. How did they come up with their number? Was it based on intuition or scientific data? Finally, instructors can tell them that there is good and bad news. According to South, the good news is that 80 percent of serious romantic relationships are satisfying. The bad news is that 20 percent of people consider their serious romantic relationship unsatisfying. Worse, unsatisfying romantic relationships heighten people's risk for various psychological disorders, including specific phobia, generalized anxiety, disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, and alcohol use disorder (South, 2021).

Ask students why they think unsatisfying romantic relationships increase people's risk for various psychological disorders. How might a psychological scientist determine the direction of the relationship between romantic relationship quality and people's risk for psychological disorders? Would a cross-sectional or longitudinal design offer a better approach? Why?

Activity 3: How does relationship distress compare with other risk factors for depression?

Psychology students often learn about risk factors for psychological disorders. Many of these risk factors seem intuitive, such as a family history of mental illness and childhood trauma. How does having an unsatisfying romantic relationship compare to other risk factors for major depressive disorder?

Ask students to rank order the following risk factors in terms of how much they increase people's risk of having major depressive disorder:

1. Biological sex
2. Race
3. Level of education
4. Childhood abuse
5. Family history of depression
6. Unsatisfying romantic relationship

How did your students rank the risk factors? What led to their decisions? Ask them how much they relied on their intuition and how much they relied on scientific evidence. Show students how these risk factors rank, from strongest to weakest, based on the scientific evidence (Peters, Shankman, Deckersbach, & West, 2015; Whisman, 2007):

1. Childhood abuse
2. Biological sex

3. Unsatisfying romantic relationship
4. Family history of depression
5. Race
6. Level of education

Did your students experience any surprises from the actual rank ordering?

Thankfully, psychological science has uncovered a risk factor for depression and other psychological disorders that people can work to improve. By improving your romantic relationship, you can decrease your risk for depression and other psychological disorders.

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References

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