

# Responsive Partners Show Two Kinds of Empathy

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When stress sets in, many of us turn to a partner to help us manage, relying on the partner to provide a sounding board or shoulder to cry on. A new [study](#) on close relationships suggests that your odds of actually feeling better are much improved if your partner provides both of those things.

The [research](#), conducted by psychologists at the University of California, Santa Barbara reveals that simply understanding your partner's suffering isn't sufficient to be helpful in a stressful situation; you've got to actually care that they're suffering in the first place.

The findings, published in *Psychological Science*, show that cognitive and affective forms of empathy work together to facilitate responsive behavior.

“People might assume that accurate understanding is all it takes to be responsive, but understanding a partner's thoughts and feelings was helpful only when listeners were also feeling more compassionate and sympathetic toward their partner,” explained lead author Lauren Winczewski, a UCSB graduate student. “When listeners had accurate knowledge but did not feel compassionate, they tended to be less supportive and responsive.”

Responsiveness has become an important line of study in social and health psychology because research evidence increasingly suggests that feeling understood, validated and cared for by other people is crucial to relationships and personal well-being. But exactly what enables one to be responsive to others?

In the study, Winczewski and fellow graduate researcher Jeff Bowen, working with UCSB psychology professor Nancy Collins, hypothesized that understanding another person's thoughts and feelings — a cognitive skill known as empathic accuracy — would foster responsive behavior only when paired with benevolent motivation, or empathic concern.

They tested their theory by asking couples to discuss a previously identified personal or relationship stressor — jealousy, say, or, as in one case, one partner's extreme fear of flying. By videotaping the conversations, the researchers were able to gauge empathic accuracy and empathic concern, as well as responsiveness, both in real time and after the interaction had concluded.

When a listener's concern for their partner was high, their accuracy bolstered responsiveness; but when compassion was scant, understanding did little to aid responsiveness.

“You can know very well what your partner is thinking and feeling — maybe you've heard this story 17 times, the fight with the boss and so on — but if you don't care?” said Winczewski. “Having accurate knowledge in the absence of compassionate feelings may even undermine responsiveness.”

The researchers speculate that everyday support conversations, like the ones they observed in their lab, inform people's more enduring perceptions of their partners' responsiveness over time.

According to Collins, who leads UCSB's Close Relationships Lab: “Having an accurate understanding of our partner's inner world, combined with compassionate feelings, enables us to provide the kind of support that is wanted and needed by our loved ones. But in the absence of compassionate feelings, cognitive empathy alone is not enough.”

“In this way,” Collins added, “our study shows that ‘thinking and feeling’ work together to help us be as supportive as possible to those we love.”

## **Reference**

Winczewski, L.A., Bowen, J.D., & Collins, N.L. (2016). Is empathic accuracy enough to facilitate responsive behavior in dyadic interaction? Distinguishing ability from motivation. *Psychological Science*. doi: 10.1177/0956797615624491