

Aug. 22, 2000

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## **Fire and Ice Both Detrimental in Marital Communication**

Turning a cold shoulder can be just as corrosive to marriage as open hostility, according to research examining the consequences of different types of withdrawal, as well as overt aggression in couples' communication patterns.

The research, published in the August edition of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, suggests that one type of withdrawal--retreating from a partner's disclosure of personal, heartfelt feelings -- may be a particularly potent signal of marital distress. The new findings, from researcher Linda Roberts of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, also point to differences between husbands and wives that defy long-standing cultural stereotypes about the communication styles and emotional needs of men and women in marriage.

The longitudinal study of 97 couples followed into their third year of marriage investigated the relationship between partners' perceptions of both hostile and distancing behavioral responses and their impact on marital satisfaction. As expected, the "fires" of scathing sarcasm and caustic criticism were strong indicators of marital distress, but this inquiry into more subtle forms of marital behavior also highlights the importance of partner responsiveness in the complex landscape of marriage.

Behaviors that communicate withdrawal from interaction with a spouse, particularly withdrawal from situations requiring emotional closeness, warmth and caring, may be detrimental to marital happiness. The bottom line, says Roberts, is that ice, not just fire, matters in marriage.

Roberts' study distinguishes between spouses' perceptions of their partners' expressions of hostility and expressions of various types of withdrawal, including withdrawal from intimate interaction. This approach casts a wider net than previous studies that have focused exclusively on marital conflict.

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Whether a marriage is blissful or painful depends not only on how spouses handle the inevitable conflicts that arise, but also on how they respond to opportunities for emotional

intimacy, explains Roberts. She identified and assessed three distinct types of withdrawal behavior:

- Angry withdrawal, occurring in response to perceived negative behavior of a partner and expressed through actions such as stomping out of the room, pouting or giving the silent treatment.
- Conflict avoidance, occurring in response to conflict or a potential conflict with a partner and expressed through actions such as changing the subject, making a joke, placating, failing to bring up a disagreement, or demonstrating a lack of interest in a discussion.
- Intimacy avoidance, occurring in response to a partner's self-revealing disclosures of feelings and vulnerabilities, and expressed through behaviors such as ignoring, showing a lack of attention or interest, or not listening.

When Roberts examined both hostile and withdrawing behaviors together as predictors of future marital distress, a different pattern of results emerged for husbands and wives. A husband's hostile negativity was particularly important in the prediction of wives' marital distress while a wife's withdrawal was particularly important in the prediction of husbands' marital distress. Husbands who saw their wives as withdrawing were the most unhappy, even more discontent than husbands who saw their wives as hostile and critical. Similarly, wives who saw their husbands as negative and critical were the most unhappy, more so than wives who saw their husbands as withdrawing.

These results run counter to conventional conceptions of unhappy marriages as consisting of "critical, hostile wives" and "uninvolved, withdrawn husbands" and suggest caution in making an all-too-easy inferential leap from gender-based behavioral stereotypes to assumptions about marital functioning.

"We need to be careful not to rely on gender stereotypes to explain the roots of marital discord," says Roberts. "Female withdrawal and male negativity may play important roles in the development of marital dysfunction."

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Among other major findings and implications of the study:

- Understanding the role of distancing behaviors outside of conflict interactions is essential to developing an accurate and complete portrait of the processes contributing to the deterioration of a marriage.
- Conflict avoidance may be positive for some couples and negative for others. The study found that wives react positively to a husband's conflict-avoiding behaviors if the

alternative is hostile responsiveness. On the other hand, wives who do not perceive their husbands as likely to blow up and be hostile in response to conflict, react negatively to their husband's conflict-avoiding behavior.

- It may be particularly important to wives that negative feelings are aired and conflicts resolved in a context that feels safe and constructive.
- It may be particularly important to husbands that their wives are engaged, involved and responsive to their communications.

“Overall, the results send a strong message about the importance of staying involved with your spouse, listening to his or her concerns, and responding in a non-hostile and caring way,” says Roberts, “Spouses shouldn't fight fire with fire—or with ice.”

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*The Journal of Marriage and the Family* is the quarterly publication of the National Council on Family Relations, 3989 Central Ave. NE, Suite 550, Minneapolis, MN 55421, [www.ncfr.org](http://www.ncfr.org); telephone: (763) 781-9331. Editorial offices are located at 30 Merrill Hall, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469-5749. Telephone (207) 581-3103.

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