

Write about love

Looking for a way to improve your relationship? Write about it, say researchers at the University of Texas.

In a study called "How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Words," psychologists found that people who write about their romantic relationships are more likely to stay in those relationships than people who don't.

Professor James W. Pennebaker and graduate student Richard B. Slatcher analysed the writing samples of 86 people in romantic relationships. Participants were asked to write minutes a day for three consecutive days. Volunteers in one group wrote about their daily activities while those in the second group wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings about the relationship. Their dating partners did not complete any writing task.

The researchers found that participants who wrote about their relationship were significantly more likely to still be dating their romantic partners 3 months later. The findings also revealed that those who wrote about their relationship used more words expressing positive emotions such as "happy" and "love" in Instant Message (IM) exchanges with their dating partner during the days following the writing.

"These results demonstrate that people who express more emotion, both in their writing and to their partner, may have the power to improve their relationship's longevity," says Pennebaker, a pioneer in the study of the effects of expressive writing. The writing not only changed the way the participants communicated with their partners in IM conversations; it also changed the way in which the partners communicated with the participants, which improved the relationship stability. Researchers call the phenomenon linguistic synchrony - when one person mirrors the language of another.

Observing the couples' IM conversations gave the researchers insight into the development of the relationships after the writing exercise and allowed them to study couples in their natural setting.

Other studies have also highlighted the social benefits of expressive writing. One study found when people write expressively about recent relationship breakups, they are somewhat more likely than control participants to get back together with their partners.

Another found that when married couples recovering from infidelity write emotionally expressive letters to each other, they experience less depression, anger, and marital distress.

The benefits of writing, the researchers say, are not only limited to people recovering from a relationship breakup or to those whose relationship is in distress. People in healthy and committed romantic relationships also might benefit from expressive writing. "Expressive writing as a tool for relationship enhancement can even be applied to non-romantic relationships, including those in families, circles of friends, and even work groups," researchers say.

What's your story?

If you want to enhance your relationship, write down your deepest thoughts and feelings about your relationship, following these tips from Pennebaker:

Find a time and place where you can write uninterrupted, at the end of your day

Write for at least 15 minutes a day, for at least 3 or 4 consecutive days

Write continuously, without worrying about spelling or grammar

If you run out of things to write, repeat what you have already written

You can write longhand, type or speak into a tape recorder if you are unable to write

You can write about the same topic every day or a series of different issues

Pennebaker suggests writing about major conflicts or problems with your partner, or very positive events that you have experienced or are experiencing with this person now.

Some people, Pennebaker warns, may feel sad or depressed after writing. This is completely normal, and just like feeling sad after seeing a sad movie, the feelings will subside in a couple of hours. If, however, you get extremely upset about a particular issue, stop writing or change topics.

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