

ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT: Disagreements are virtually inevitable in a romantic relationship. More than 90 percent of couples argue, according to a survey by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, with nearly half quarreling at least once a month. Common topics of marital disagreement are money, sex and time spent together. None of this will surprise anyone who has been in a long-term relationship. But a new study indicates that a cognitive ability may help to explain why some couples are more successful in resolving their differences. University of North Carolina Greensboro psychologist Levi Baker and his colleagues report that spouses who were high in working memory capacity had better memory for each other's statements in discussions about problems. In turn, these couples showed greater progress in resolving their problems over time. The study suggests that it's not just dogged commitment that gets couples through rough spots, but a cognitive factor that directly affects the quality of partners' communication with each other.

The sample included 101 couples (93 heterosexual, 7 lesbian and 1 gay) that had been married for less than three months. Working individually, the newlyweds first completed tests of working memory capacity, which is the ability to hold information in the focus of attention over a short period, as when following what someone is saying to you in a conversation. In one of the tests used by Baker and his colleagues, called "operation span," the test-taker sees an arithmetic problem on the screen and attempts to solve it, after which a letter appears. After some number of these trials, the person is prompted to recall the letters in the order in which they were presented.



Next, the couples participated jointly in problem-solving discussions. Each spouse identified a problem that could be resolved through changes in their partner's behavior. The couples were then left alone to discuss the problems, spending eight minutes on each and rating the severity of the problem before and after discussing it. After each discussion, the spouses went to separate rooms and were recorded attempting to recall each other's statements. Finally, after four and eight months, the couples were emailed questionnaires that asked them to again rate the severity of the problems.

Couples high in working memory capacity showed the greatest decline in problem severity at the follow-ups. Furthermore, spouses high in working memory capacity were the most accurate in recalling each other's statements from the discussions. Linking these two findings, when the researchers statistically controlled for spouses' memory for each other's statements, the relation between working-memory capacity and decline in problem severity dropped significantly.

Baker and his colleagues tested for the influence of other factors on their results, including self-control, tolerance for distress and emotional regulation. None of these factors explained the relation between working memory capacity and decline in problem severity. While noting that other cognitive factors such as reasoning ability could also play a role in marital dispute resolution, the researchers suggested that a high level of working memory capacity contributed to decline in problem severity by facilitating encoding of the problem discussions into long-term memory.

These findings suggest that one way that romantic partners might better resolve their disputes is simply to pay better attention to each other when discussing problems. You have probably had the experience of being introduced to a person and not being able to remember their name seconds later. You didn't forget the person's name—you never committed it to memory. That is, you didn't pay enough attention to it to transfer it into your long-term memory. In the same way, if you don't attend to what your partner is saying when discussing a problem, you will remember it poorly, if at all. Making matters worse, in the absence of an



accurate memory for the conversation, you may remember what you *think* your partner said rather than what they actually said, leading to a false memory. So listen carefully to your lover, and save discussions about relationship problems for times when the two of you are most attentive: when you are rested, sober and undistracted.

Conflict will always be a part of romantic relationships. Insights gained from this new research on the cognitive underpinnings of dispute resolution, however, may help partners resolve their differences more effectively and spend more time on the things that make a relationship worth having in the first place.

Conceptual reasoning, also known as conceptual thinking, refers to a specific type of thought that involves abstraction and reflection, as well as creative thinking and problem solving. It is a term that encompasses many types of thought, which all relate to thinking in abstract and intuitive ways. Conceptual reasoning has many applications and is referred to in many different fields. Scientists, academics and psychologists are a few of the professionals who deal routinely with different kinds of conceptual reasoning.

REFERENCE

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