

Shrink Rap: The Power of Sympathetic Joy

By Steven Hendlin, Ph.D.

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Not surprisingly, a recent study has confirmed the importance of strengthening love relationships by partners responding sympathetically to each other's triumphs. The way you respond to your partner's good fortune – with excitement or passive approval, shared pride or indifference – was found to be the most crucial factor in tightening or undermining your relationship bond.

Psychologists have long advocated the common-sense practice of mutual support of each partner's projects in healthy love relationships. Yet, much of the content of marriage and couples counseling focuses on problem solving, improving communication skills, and correcting hurtful and distancing responses between partners. In other words, correcting the negatives and soothing your partner's disappointments. The reason, of course, is that these are typically the issues presented by couples in distress.

Undoing the negative and soothing your partner's disappointments – while necessary – are insufficient in creating and maintaining a satisfying relationship. You also need to be actively supporting your partner's projects and especially their achievements. These achievements are great opportunities to strengthen trust, intimacy, and deepen love. And that's what this research on a relatively small sample of couples confirms.

The study asked 79 heterosexual couples who had dated at least six months to fill out questionnaires characterizing how their partners typically reacted to positive news. Individuals responded differently depending on the context of the news. For example, a boyfriend who withdrew when his partner was upset or overwhelmed might glow with shared excitement if she was promoted. The researchers filmed the couples interacting in the lab, as they discussed positive events that happened to one or the other, to check their self-reports. The researchers also had members of the pairs rate how satisfied they were in the relationship, based on a battery of questions at the start of the study and again two months later.

In their analysis of response styles, the researchers found that it was the partners' reactions to their loved ones' victories that most strongly predicted the strength of the relationships. Four of the couples had broken up after two months, and the women in these pairs rated their partners' usual response to good news as particularly uninspiring.

Celebrating your partner's achievements provides an emotional boost through what I call "sympathetic joy," which helps bind you closer together. Sympathetic joy means celebrating these triumphs as if they were your own. Since there is some evidence that, overall, positive events outnumber negative ones by four to one, amplifying your partner's triumphs is a powerful way of building intimacy. You get "more bang for your bonding buck" than from either good listening or soothing the bruises of negative events.

One stumbling block to feeling sympathetic joy is a high level of mutual competition. The more you believe your partner's triumphs diminish your own self-esteem in comparison, the tougher it will be to identify with them and feel sympathetic joy. You must be reasonably secure about your own abilities and accomplishments in order to truly honor those of your partner.

For example, it may be challenging for you to feel sympathetic joy for your wife's promotion if it widens the gap between her higher earnings compared to your own. Or if you feel intellectually inferior to your husband, you may defend yourself by dismissing or discounting his promotion, rather than welcoming it.

Finally, this study was done with people in relatively short-term relationships. If the power of sympathetic joy was felt in this group, consider its importance in marriages, where response styles to your partner may easily become habituated. If your partner's achievements are met with criticism, sarcasm, or just passive acceptance, it means lots of lost opportunities to feel greater intimacy. On the other hand, if you can develop a positive response pattern to each other's successes, imagine how many great opportunities you're going to have to be each other's primary cheerleader.