UC SANTA BARBARA
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‘Thinking and Feeling’

So you had a terrible day at work. Or the bills are piling up and cash is in short supply. Impending visit from the in-laws, perhaps?

When stress sets in, many of us turn to a partner to help us manage by being a sounding board or shoulder to cry on. Your odds of actually feeling better are much improved if they’re both those things.

New research by psychologists at UC 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 the journal Psychological Science, provide the first evidence that cognitive and affective forms of empathy work together to facilitate responsive behavior.

“When people were empathically accurate — when they had an accurate understanding of their partner’s thoughts and feelings — they were more responsive only when they also felt more empathic concern, more compassion and motivation to attend to their partner’s needs,” explained lead author Lauren Winczewski, a graduate student in UCSB’s Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences. “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. 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, argued that responsiveness requires not only accurate understanding but also compassionate motivation. Specifically, they 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.

And as it turned out, they were right. 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.

According to Winczewski, the findings suggest that empathic accuracy facilitates responsive behavior only when one is motivated to use that insight for benevolent goals.

“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. “People use these kinds of interactions as diagnostic of their partner’s motivation and ability to respond to their needs,” she continued. “‘If that’s how you’re responding to me now, is that how you’ll respond to me again in the future?’ Over time, you may build trust in your partner’s responsiveness or you

may start to wonder if your partner is even willing, let alone able, to respond to your needs.”

Said 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.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.