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Relationship satisfaction at its lowest point after 10 years

For most people, satisfaction in a relationship changes over time. Researchers at the Institute of Psychology, University of Bern have, for the first time, managed to identify typical developmental trajectories, both over a person's life span and over the duration of a relationship. The study shows that average satisfaction in a relationship is at its lowest at the age of 40 and after 10 years of being in a relationship.

Satisfaction in marriage or a relationship can change temporarily, e.g., after an argument, or more persistently. Until now, it was unclear whether there is a typical developmental trajectory for satisfaction in relationships over a person's lifespan and over the duration of a relationship. This is the question Janina Larissa Bühler, Samantha Krauss, and Ulrich Orth from the Institute of Psychology at the University of Bern investigated using a systematic review and a comprehensive meta-analysis. The research has been published in the renowned journal "Psychological Bulletin".

For the investigation, the researchers compiled and systematically evaluated data from more than 165,000 people aged 20 to 76 in relationships spanning from 3 months to 46 years in length. The data come from 165 independent samples in which participants were repeatedly surveyed about their satisfaction with their relationship. The studies come from 16 countries, chiefly in North America and Europe.

Low point in relationship satisfaction at the age of 40

The meta-analysis paints a precise picture of how the trajectory develops depending on age: In young adulthood, relationship satisfaction decreases and reaches a low point at the age of 40. Janina Larissa Bühler, lead author of the research, notes: "the results of the meta-analysis show for the first time that the midlife crisis is reflected in relationship satisfaction." The meta-analysis also shows that it goes back uphill after this crisis: relationship satisfaction increases up to the age of 65, after which it stabilizes at a relatively high level. According to the researchers, this confirms the well-supported finding that older people value and enjoy harmonious social relationships more strongly than younger people.

The first 10 years of a relationship are the most critical

The meta-analysis also provides important knowledge about the duration of a relationship with regard to the developmental trajectory of relationship satisfaction. According to the "honeymoon is over" theory, it was often assumed in previous research that satisfaction in a marriage or a relationship decreased significantly after the first few months and years. The meta-analysis

supports this theory: satisfaction reaches its nadir after the first 10 years of a relationship. “However, the results also show that this low point is only temporary,” says Janina Larissa Bühler. Relationship satisfaction typically increases again up to 20 years of a relationship before it decreases again slightly.

Generally high relationship satisfaction

Although the researchers identified low points depending on age and length of relationship, the general satisfaction of the participants was relatively high. Satisfaction never fell below 77 percent of the maximum possible value.

The researchers also determined that participants with children tended to be somewhat less satisfied in their relationships than those without children. Other sample characteristics, such as gender, had no effect on the typical developmental trajectory.

Stimulation for prevention and intervention programs

“The results from the research are of great relevance, as a relationship is an important source of support, happiness and meaning in the lives of many,” says Janina Larissa Bühler. These results could encourage future research, into developing prevention and intervention programs in order to be able to better support couples at every stage of development and throughout a person’s entire life span. In the future, it will also be important to study the relationships of people in middle and late adulthood that are still short in duration. These relationships have been less well researched because most of the older participants in the studies analyzed had been in relationships already for long periods.

Information about the publication

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