

Reducing the temptation to cheat in relationships

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The beneficial effects of putting yourself in someone else's shoes are well known. But can doing so in romantic relationships reduce the temptation to cheat? A team of psychologists from Reichman University

in Israel and the University of Rochester put that question to the test in a series of three double-blind, randomized experiments.

The answer appears to be "yes."

Perspective-taking—or putting yourself in our partner's shoes—not only reduces the temptation to cheat but inoculates against other partnership-destroying behaviors, according to the study, published in the *Journal of Sex Research*.

Why do people cheat in relationships?

People cheat for a variety of reasons, according to the study's lead author, Gurit Birnbaum, a professor of psychology at Reichman's Ivcher School of Psychology. Birnbaum notes that while people may be satisfied with their relationships, they may still betray their partners. For example, so-called "avoidant types" who feel uncomfortable with intimacy may try to maintain distance and control in their [relationship](#) by cheating.

Context is key.

"People often cheat not because they planned to do so," Birnbaum says. "Rather, the opportunity presented itself and they were too depleted—too tired, too drunk, too distracted—to fight the temptation."

Coauthor Harry Reis, the Dean's Professor in Arts, Sciences & Engineering at Rochester, agrees that there are multiple reasons for cheating. One of the more interesting ones, says Reis, author of *Relationships, Well-Being and Behavior*, is that men are more likely to cheat because they feel that their sexual needs are not being met. The evidence has shown that women, on the other hand, are more likely to cheat because they feel that their emotional needs aren't met.

How practicing empathy can reduce the temptation to cheat

One way to practice empathy is to try to adopt another person's perspective. Across three studies, the 408 total participants (213 Israeli women and 195 Israeli men, ranging in age from 20 to 47) were randomly assigned to either adopt the perspective of their partner or not. The participants were uniformly in monogamous, mixed-sex relationships of at least four months.

As part of the experiments, the participants evaluated, encountered, or thought about attractive strangers while the psychologists recorded their expressions of interest in these strangers, as well as their commitment to and desire for their current partners.

The researchers found that adopting a partner's perspective increased commitment and desire for the partner, while simultaneously decreasing sexual and romantic interest in alternative mates. The findings suggest that perspective taking discourages people from engaging in behaviors that may hurt their partners and damage their relationship.

"Perspective taking doesn't prevent you from cheating, but it lessens the desire to do so," says Reis. Ultimately, he says, cheating means "prioritizing one's own goals over the good of the partner and the relationship, so seeing things from the other person's perspective gives one a more balanced view of these situations."

According to Birnbaum, the findings can help people understand how to resist short-term temptations: "Active consideration of how romantic partners may be affected by these situations serves as a strategy that encourages people to control their responses to attractive alternative partners and derogate their attractiveness."

The team did not test if the benefits of perspective taking extended to the participants' romantic partners who were not part of the experiment. But the researchers have a hunch, because perspective taking generally promotes empathy, understanding, closeness, and caring.

"Both partners may feel more satisfied with their relationship," says Birnbaum, "and therefore might be less likely to cheat on each other, even if only one of them adopts this strategy."

Besides reducing the likelihood of infidelity, perspective taking motivates people to have compassion for their partners' emotions and to seek to strengthen the bond with that partner, thereby boosting the existing relationship.

"People invariably feel better understood, and that makes it easier to resolve disagreements, to be appropriately but not intrusively helpful, and to share joys and accomplishments," Reis says. "It's one of those skills that can help people see the 'us'—rather than the 'me and you'—in a relationship."

Reichman University's Tammy Bachar, Gal Levy, and Kobi Zholtack were also part of the team.

More information: Gurit E. Birnbaum et al, Put Me in Your Shoes: Does Perspective-Taking Inoculate Against the Appeal of Alternative Partners?, *The Journal of Sex Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/00224499.2022.2150998](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2022.2150998)

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