

Dr Sarah Stanton

Researching Relationships

This is Forward Thinking, I'm Isabella Melking.

How do our close relationships affect our health and wellbeing? What makes a good relationship?

Here to explain is Dr Sarah Stanton, a Psychology lecturer and relationship lab director at the University of Edinburgh.

Her research at HARP lab explores the cognitive – so relating to the mental process of developing knowledge and understanding – and the affective aspects – so relating to moods, feelings and attitudes – of close relationships.

She is particularly interested in how promoting positive relationship experiences benefit close others immediately and over time.

Isabella:

Hi Sarah, welcome to the Forward Thinking podcast!

Sarah:

Hi, thank you so much for having me!

Isabella:

Thank you for joining me.

So how did you end up as a relationship researcher?

Sarah:

It's a bit of a convoluted story. So I originally went to my undergrad for theatre, but I went in knowing that I would want to double major in something. I've got plenty of psychologists in my family: my dad is a university professor at the University of Delaware, my mom had a psychology degree before she went into law and now she saves the environment for a living.

Anyway, so I knew I wanted to double major, and I figured I would want to do psychology because I find people fascinating and I like understanding how they work and how they don't... [chuckles]

So, I went in for theatre originally, realised *very* quickly that I didn't want to pursue a career in theatre and so then I focused a little bit more on the psychology aspect of my life and it was a research methods course of all things that got me *really* excited about figuring people out. As I started to get really into psychology, I thought for a while that I wanted to be a therapist, like I wanted to pursue clinical psychology, because I was the type of person, and maybe you are as well, where friends will come to you for advice on life's stuff. And so, for some reason, people always came to me to ask for advice, so I thought to myself, "oh, I'd be a really great therapist!" And then I took a couple of clinical psychology classes and realised I

would make a terrible therapist but maybe I can do research that might help them eventually or inform what they do.

So, I was then looking for some research experience, and I essentially just went down the list of faculty at Northwestern University, which is where I did my undergrad, and Eli Finkel, studies love and relationships and I remember thinking, "How do you even... how can you even study and quantify love and relationships?" So I joined his lab as a research assistant, ended up doing my honours dissertation there.

I kind of just fell in love with relationships research, pun intended... [chuckles] and then the rest is kind of history.

Isabella:

Nice!

Sarah:

Yeah.

Isabella:

Yeah!

Sarah:

[Laughs]

Isabella:

And do you get to tie in your research with your teaching at all?

Sarah:

Yeah, definitely.

So I teach a fourth year course on intimate relationships although I think next [academic] year [2018/2019] it's becoming a third year and fourth year course.

So I teach an upper year course on intimate relationships, which is a lot fun.

For any of you thinking of taking it, there's an entire lecture devoted to sex: you're welcome in advance... [chuckles]

Isabella:

[Laughs]

Sarah:

So, I teach it at upper level for undergraduates. I will eventually teach it at the master's level as well, probably starting next year. And, basically when I teach any kind of social psychological thing, the easiest examples for me to draw on are always from relationship science and I also find that those are the most interesting for students. So, I tie it into everything: it's kind of impossible for me to separate myself from it. Yeah... but definitely, I tie it in whenever I can, even if it's completely shoehorned.

Isabella:

From your research, could you tell us a bit about the characteristics of a good relationship, kind of in contrast with a bad relationship?

Sarah:

Oh sure. So, one of the most important predictors of relationship success, and this is going to probably sound very obvious to people, but it's also the kind of thing I don't think we really think about enough, unless you study it and then you think about it all the time.

One of the best predictors of a strong healthy relationship is something called positive illusions, which is kind of your tendency to view your partner as slightly more awesome than they actually are. You still have to be accurate. So, it's like if you think your partner is Channing Tatum, that's a little much, because they probably aren't, unless your partner is Channing Tatum, in which case, please do my relationship studies, I will be very curious to see how that's going [laughs].

If your partner is actually like a seven but you see them as an eight or a nine, that's actually *the* strongest predictor of whether you guys are going to make it. And it has to go both ways, right. But if you think that your partner is less awesome than they are that's a very, very quick way to get to break-up town.

So, another thing that is super important for having a good relationship is how you manage conflict, because conflict is unavoidable. You and your partner will not always have perfectly compatible goals. And so, conflict itself is not bad. There is a conception in society that, like, a perfect couple never fights. That's completely unrealistic and also just a dysfunctional relationship belief. You will fight, it's ok. It's *how* you fight that matters. So, in a bad relationship when partners fight, they're very hostile towards each other; they disconnect from each other – it's called stonewalling where they essentially just shut down – they criticise each other. But conflict is really an opportunity for you and your partner to get on the same page about what you need, and to problem-solve as a team, which will actually strengthen your relationship. So if you approach conflict by calmly and positively articulating what your concerns are, and your partner responds in kind, then you actually end up much stronger because the change will happen and you'll be happier and also you will have made it through together. So, manage conflict positively.

Isabella:

That's great advice.

Sarah:

There's a paper on my website that you can read if you want.

Isabella:

Ah, great.

Sarah:

Other stuff that's really important: commitment. You have to be committed to the relationship if you want it to last, the exception being that you don't want to commit yourself to a bad relationship. So, if there are other aspects of the relationship that aren't fulfilling, or make you feel bad about yourself. If you're highly committed you're more likely to stay in it but that's not going to be good for you. So commitment is really big.

And then another aspect that's really big, that's very relevant to me – because it's one of the primary things that I study – is called partner responsiveness, which is basically the extent to which we believe that our romantic partner cares about us, understands who we are as a person, and validates and appreciates our thoughts and feelings. Basically, that our partner loves us, warts and all [chuckles]. And that is an *extremely* important predictor of all kinds of other relationships processes like social support involves responsiveness, commitment involves responsiveness, and positive illusions involve responsiveness: it's huge.

It also is one of the relationship processes that has the most or the heaviest downstream effects on health and well-being over time. This paper isn't quite published yet – I'm revising it this weekend, cross your fingers for me – but I have analysed data that suggests that I can reliably predict whether you will be dead in 20 years based on how responsive your partner is right now.

Isabella:

Wow.

Sarah:

Yeah [chuckles]. It's because perceiving our partner to be more responsive and having that responsiveness increase over time is associated with us being able to handle stress better, and because we handle stress better we're less likely to die.

Isabella:

OK!

Sarah:

Good times, right?

Isabella:

Yeah, I look forward to seeing that publication.

Sarah:

Oh, me too!

Isabella:

We can link to it on the blog.

Sarah:

There's plenty of already published responsiveness and health stuff for anybody who's interested. But it basically affects everything. It affects mental health, physical health, sleep, and all the things.

Isabella:

So now we're living in an era of lots of technology, and sometimes when we're chatting with our friends or partners, phones, tablets, laptops, they can kind of be a bit of a distraction. How has this development impacted on our personal relationships?

Sarah:

Oh, gosh. In a tonne of different ways. I can talk about some of the good stuff and some of the bad stuff.

The good stuff is that now technology makes it easier for us to stay in contact with our partners: tell them that we're thinking about them throughout the day, [it] makes it easier to do long distance if you have to do long distance, and there are even some apps now that help you keep track of how your relationship is going.

So, if you're interested, there's an app called StayGo that was created by some relationship researchers and experts in the field. They just ask you questions everyday and you can kind of track the health of your relationship over time. And then every once in a while, they will give you a little diagnostic. It's like, "Seems like you're miserable. You should probably think about getting out." It won't tell you what to do but it will say, "Looks like you're kind of on the fritz, based on how your satisfaction has been plummeting." So that's kind of cool, that we can learn about our relationships; but also, it's a way that we can use technology to help maintain our relationships, which is really nice.

And then, of course, the advent of apps for dating or websites for dating make it easier to meet people for those of us who don't go to bars [laughs]. But at the same time, there's this idea that either has been coined or I think one of my colleagues is coining it, I'm not sure yet; she hasn't published this research, stay tuned on 'technoferece' is what she calls it. Which is basically how technology gets in the way of us enjoying our relationships and having meaningful interactions with people. So, I'm sure you all can relate or maybe you are one of these people that when you go to dinner with someone, your phone is on the table or their phone is on the table, and you just spend the entire dinner noticing that mid-sentence they always look at their phone; or they check their phone in between every sentence and you're just sitting there like: "I would enjoy having a legit conversation with you over our delicious meal. But I just guess we're going to be on our phones." So that's not good, right? I mean, there is research suggesting that people that are bit more disconnected now from their relationships than they used to be. And there are a lot of comics and memes

on the internet about how we're so glued to our phones that we ignore stuff happening around us. But there actually is a little bit of research that suggests that is happening. But stay tuned for my friend's stuff. She's trying to figure out how it operates in couples over time, whether it predicts like break-up and goal pursuit, and all kinds of stuff that's relevant for you living the happy life! So yeah, well see.

I think technology also makes certain relationship processes a little more callous [laughs]. It's easier, or it's not easier, but it is possible to dump someone over a text or an SMS message, or whatever, right? To me, there's a surprising number of people who do that. Like, upwards of 10 percent or more people say like: "I would do it. I would dump my partner over text message," which just seems so bizarre to me. Because if those same people answer questions about whether they would like it if someone did that to them, as you would expect it would be terrible and they would be miserable. But they still say that they would do it. I guess because like it's easier than dealing with emotions face to face for some people.

Yeah... Oh, there's [laughs] a really interesting paper on how smartphones and how technology helps us keep the backburner warm. So, being able to like, stay in contact with ex-partners or attractive alternatives, which [chuckles] in the relationship literature is sometimes referred to as an interloper, which I just think is hilarious. But we can kind of keep alternative relationships waiting in the wings with technology in a way that we couldn't really before.

Isabella:

So, approaching Valentine's Day. What's the best relationship advice you can give us, Sarah?

Sarah:

I don't know. [Laughs] Valentine's Day is an interesting one. I guess, if you're into it, then use it as an opportunity to do something really nice with your partner. If you're not into it, that's totally fine. There's perceived pressure that Valentine's Day should be about being together and that if you're single on Valentine's Day, you know, everything is on fire. Not really. It depends on the kind of person you are, right? But if you're single, and you're happy being single, have a romantic night for yourself. Sit in, binge-watch something on Netflix. I'm going through Brooklyn Nine-Nine right now, and it's hilarious. Binge-watch some Netflix, drink some wine, eat some chocolate, hang-out with your pets if you've got pets. That's great! But if you are the romantic type and you've got someone or you're thinking about pursuing someone, go for it. Direct is best. Don't play any games. People like it if you just go up to them and say: "Hey, I find you really attractive, can I buy you a drink?" Or: "Do you want to make out?" Yup! I never know how to answer that question. [Laughs]

Isabella:

[Laughs]

Thank you, Sarah, it's been a really interesting chat with you here today.

Sarah:

Oh, it was my pleasure. Thank you so much.

Isabella:

Thank you.

If you want to know more about relationship research follow the links on the Forward Thinking blog at [forwardthinking dot ppls dot ed dot ac dot uk](http://forwardthinking.ppls.ed.ac.uk).

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