

## WHAT COMPONENTS SHOULD BE STRENGTHENED BY WORKING WITH A COUPLE TO INCREASE THEIR RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION AND THEIR WELL-BEING?

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### Abstract

There are many schools of couple therapy, but none has emerged yet that would clearly dominate the rest. Therefore, it is extremely important to constantly search for new therapeutic practices and verify them in empirical research. The purpose of this study was to check the link between women's self-esteem and their satisfaction in a relationship and well-being. Attempts have also been made to verify if there is a correlation between relationship satisfaction and well-being, and with the components of love: intimacy, passion and commitment (IPC). There were 116 women, aged 19 to 45, in a heterosexual, romantic relationship who participated in the study. A self-developed questionnaire was used to identify the phases of the relationship, as well as Polish adaptations of tools measuring self-esteem, life and relationship satisfaction. The results indicate a positive correlation between the level of women's self-esteem and their well-being (strong) and relationship satisfaction (moderate). Results confirming a positive correlation between women's relationship and life satisfaction and strong positive correlations between love components and relationship satisfaction were also obtained. Moderate correlations between self-esteem and its subscales were also established: self-liking and a self-competence with intimacy. There was also a positive correlation of self-acceptance with the sum of the components of love as well as of passion and intimacy with well-being. Additionally, a positive relationship was found between self-esteem and self-acceptance subscale and life satisfaction. The data from regression analysis showed that the predictors of life satisfaction are self-esteem, relationship satisfaction and the sum of the love components. The results of this study contribute to research on close relationships, as well as to the therapeutic practice of couples. They can also have a practical dimension for individual psychological or therapeutic help. There is a chance that by developing self-esteem, as well as intimacy and passion in a client's relationship, the therapist will not only enable her to increase satisfaction with the relationship, but also with life.

**Keywords:** *Self-Esteem, relationship, intimacy, well-being, couple therapy.*

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### 1. Introduction

The conducted research was aimed at searching for new predictors of women's life and relationship satisfaction, in order to show additional possibilities of working with clients in a therapeutic setting. For this purpose, the correlations between women's self-esteem, their well-being and relationship satisfaction were analysed, and between women's relationship satisfaction, their well-being and the components of love, i.e. intimacy, passion and commitment (Sternberg, 1986). In the development proposed by Wojciszke (2014), he distinguished five phases of a romantic relationship in which there is a different saturation of the components of love. The first phase of a relationship is *falling in love* with passion. As intimacy increases, the relationship passes into the phase of *romantic beginnings*, and when complemented with commitment, it enters the third phase - a *complete relationship*. All three elements of love are present in this phase. With the disappearance of passion, the relationship passes into the fourth phase - a *friendly relationship*, and when the level of intimacy decreases over time, the partners enter an *empty relationship* – the fifth phase of the relationship, in which only commitment remains.

#### 1.1. Relationship satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction is a fundamental factor in describing the quality of the relationship. This quality may be influenced by, i.e., a subjective sense of satisfaction of the spouses (Plopa, 2008), compliance of the attitudes they adopt towards their priority values (Wojciszke, 2014), mutual perceived

physical attractiveness (Weeden, Sabini, 2005) or increased interaction with those who are attractive to us (Luo, Zhang, 2009). Rozwadowska (2015) showed a positive relationship between the level of intimacy and the sense of satisfaction with the relationship in the case of women. In the case of men, high level of intimacy and passion contributed to high relationship satisfaction. One factor positively related to relationship satisfaction is sexual satisfaction, especially in men (Sprecher, 2002).

## 1.2. Well-being

Subjective well-being is related to close relationships (Diener, & Oishi, 2000). It refers to the assessment of the degree of one's own satisfaction with life by an individual. This assessment is based on the presence of positive affect and the absence of negative affect in various areas of life and time contexts (Diener et al., 1999). Positive emotions seem to be important in this context, because, according to Barbara Fredrickson (2011), they broaden people's thought-action repertoires, build psychological resilience and trigger upward spirals toward enhanced emotional well-being.

## 1.3. Self-esteem and close relationships

The level of self-esteem is of great importance in interpersonal contacts and romantic relationships. Murray et al. (2001) indicated that people with low self-esteem evaluate their partners worse, as well as show lower levels of satisfaction and optimism regarding the future of their relationship. In addition, people with low self-esteem are sensitive to rejection, which causes a tendency to distance themselves from their partner (Murray et al., 2015). Moreover, the level of self-esteem is related to the subjective satisfaction with life (Diener & Diener, 1995), and in romantic relationships, also to general, emotional and sexual satisfaction (Shackelford, 2001).

In connection with the above, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Women's self-esteem is positively related to their well-being.

H2: Women's self-esteem is positively related to their relationship satisfaction.

H3: Women's self-esteem is positively related to all the components of love.

## 2. Method

The sample consisted of 116 women aged 19 to 45 ( $M = 29$ ,  $SD = 6.81$ ). The conditions to qualify for participation in the study were: at least one year of experience in the relationship and heterosexuality. Recruitment took place via social media and the survey was conducted online. The subjects completed a set of questionnaires, in the following order: screening - a self-developed questionnaire to test the relationship phase, Tafarodi and Swann's Self-Liking / Self-Competence Scale-Revised Version (SLCS-R) to measure self-esteem, STLS Acker and Davis to measure the components of love, Diener's Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) for measuring satisfaction with life, Comprehensive Marital Satisfaction Scale (CMSS) by Blum and Mehrabian for measuring relationship satisfaction.

## 3. Results

### Correlates of life satisfaction (well-being)

There was positive correlation between well-being and self-esteem ( $r = 0.54$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; 29% of common variance), and its components: self-liking ( $r = 0.54$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and self-competence ( $r = 0.44$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, well-being correlated with romantic beginnings ( $r = 0.30$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), complete love ( $r = 0.42$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and friendliness ( $r = 0.35$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and negatively with empty compound ( $r = -0.36$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and decay ( $r = -0.37$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

### Correlates of relationship satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction turned out to be positively correlated with self-esteem ( $r = 0.31$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ) and its subscales: self-liking ( $r = 0.32$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and self-competence ( $r = 0.23$ ;  $p = 0.011$ ). Relationship satisfaction also positively correlated with the sum of all three components of love ( $r = 0.67$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), as well as with each component individually, with the strongest relationship between intimacy and relationship satisfaction ( $r = 0.84$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). There was also a correlation between relationship satisfaction and well-being ( $r = 0.53$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Relationship satisfaction also correlated positively with romantic beginnings ( $r = 0.61$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), complete love ( $r = 0.69$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and friendliness ( $r = 0.69$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and negatively with empty compound ( $r = -0.78$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and decay ( $r = -0.77$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, the results showed that self-esteem is positively correlated with intimacy ( $r = 0.33$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Importantly, self-acceptance correlates both with self-esteem ( $r = 0.35$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and with the sum of all three components of love ( $r = 0.19$ ;  $p = 0.038$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

The results show a relationship between women's self-esteem and their well-being and relationship satisfaction. Especially the latter seems to be important, as previous studies were not clear on this issue. The research showed also a correlation between women's self-esteem and the components of love: passion, intimacy, and commitment (IPC). Both self-esteem and its subscales: self-liking and the self-competence correlated moderately positively with intimacy, the strongest being the relationship between intimacy and self-liking. A significant, though weak, correlation was observed between the self-liking subscale and IPC. The obtained results indicate that women's relationship satisfaction is positively related to their well-being. Markey, Markey and Gray (2007) showed that partner support can protect against the harmful effects of stress and lead to achievement of well-being. It has also been shown that there is a positive correlation between IPC and relationship satisfaction.

People undertake various activities to strengthen their self-esteem, including: compensating for the decrease in self-esteem in one area with another area, blaming other people and circumstances for their own mistakes, using comparisons with others to their advantage or using positive self-presentation (cf. Doliński, 2000). Knowledge in this area, as well as the results presented in this paper, may prove useful in the treatment of couples. Firstly, it is recommended to use a tool for measuring self-esteem when diagnosing problems in close relationships. It is also recommended to support both partners in developing their self-regulatory competences without compromising the quality of the relationship. They can be taught not to escape to other spheres of life, e.g. professional, to raise their self-esteem when the relationship is experiencing difficulties, or to work with them to regulate their self-esteem at the expense of the other person (through comparisons), which can happen in less conscious relationships. It is additionally recommended using a self-esteem measuring tool when diagnosing personal problems or reduced life satisfaction. Working on self-esteem of an individual can be a factor supporting the effective resolution of life difficulties.

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