

# InSights

## A Reason to Reach Out

*Having intimate conversations with strangers may be far more enjoyable than we expect.*

**E**NGAGING IN MEANINGFUL conversations with others strengthens social bonds and boosts well-being far more than does small talk. Yet many people dread or even actively avoid intimate conversations, especially with those they don't know well. Why are we so reluctant to engage in an activity that could benefit us so acutely? According to new research, it may be due to miscalibrated expectations, and changing them could foster deeper connection.

In a series of studies published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, participants either engaged in “shallow” conversations (speaking, for example, about their sleep schedule or how often they get haircuts) or “deep” discussions (covering embarrassing moments, what they're grateful for, or when they last cried). Before chatting, they predicted how awkward and uncomfortable the conversation would be, how close they would feel to their conversation partner afterward, and how much they would enjoy the interaction.

Participants consistently overestimated the awkwardness of the conversations; this miscalculation was especially significant for the “deep” discussions. They also greatly underestimated how much they'd enjoy the more intimate conversations, as well as how close they'd feel to their partner. Participants who had both shallow and deep discussions enjoyed the latter more and felt more connected afterward.

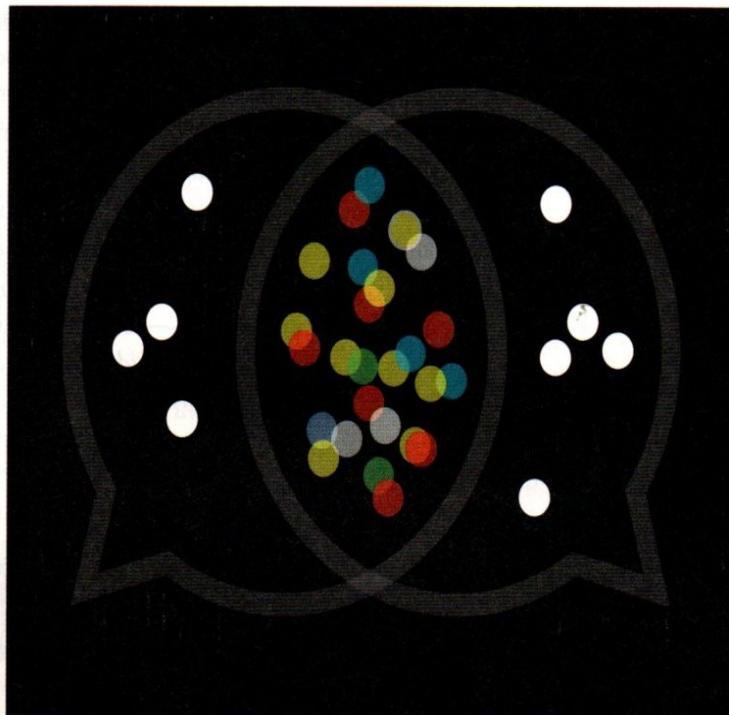
The disparity between participants' expectations and their actual experience seemed rooted in the assumption that conversation partners wouldn't care about the details of their lives. “We underestimate, essentially, how social others are,” explains study author Nicholas Epley, a psychologist at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. “As a result, we underestimate how positive it will be when we reach out and try to connect.”

Such an assumption could be a barrier to forming deeper connections with others, Epley speculates. Yet participants appeared able to course-correct. When they were told ahead of time that it's common to underestimate how much strangers care about each other, they voluntarily steered the talks into deeper directions, potentially reaping the benefits of doing so.

A single reminder likely isn't enough to permanently change

miscalibrated assumptions, Epley warns. But making the effort to engage in just a few positive interactions could help someone mentally reset. “After having a meaningful conversation, people usually want to have another one,” he says—in other words, they learn the benefits that intimacy can bring. “But you can learn only from experiences that you have,” he adds. “If you think it will be unpleasant to talk to someone and therefore never try, you'll never find out that you were wrong.”

—Devon Frye





## WHAT'S IN A KISS?

**How often couples kiss could speak volumes about their sexual and romantic satisfaction.**

**WHEN MEASURING THE** success of their relationship, most couples might give little thought to how their kissing habits could play a role. But how often couples kiss may be a strong indicator of how satisfied they are overall, new research suggests.

Researchers recruited nearly 900 participants who had been in a relationship for at least two years. They reported how frequently they kissed their partner, both during sex and in daily life. Participants also indicated how regularly they had sex, how often they orgasmed during it, and their overall sexual and relationship satisfaction.

Couples who kissed more during sex also had more sex overall; women who kissed more during sex had more consistent orgasms than those who kissed less. And the more satisfied people were in their relationship, the more frequently they kissed outside the bedroom, too.

Kissing may signal emotional closeness, a key driver of arousal for many women. Yet the power of kissing extends beyond just sex. Indeed, it appears that partners in happy relationships simply kiss more than those who are less satisfied, the authors note—suggesting that a sudden decrease in kissing might even serve as an early signal of growing dissatisfaction. —Nicole McNichols, Ph.D.

## How to Excel At Online Dating

*An optimistic mindset could make it easier to meet a mate online.*

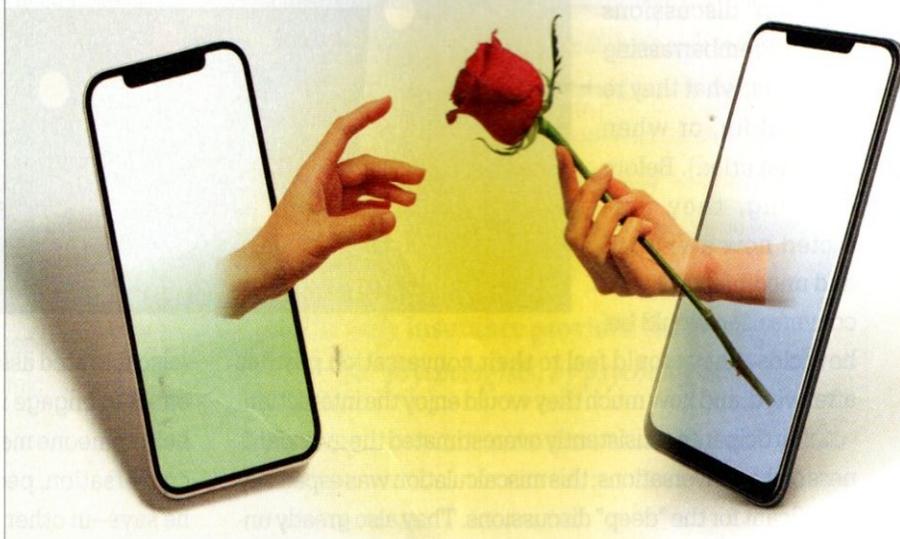
**M**ORE RELATIONSHIPS BEGIN online now than ever before. Yet countless users find online dating to be frustrating, tedious, or even altogether pointless. What sets those who succeed apart from those who give up, new research finds, may be the mindset with which they start the process.

Writing in the journal *Personal Relationships*, researchers surveyed more than 1,300 online daters to determine whether their approach to relationships was *promotion-focused*—that is, thinking about what they might gain—or *prevention-focused*, preoccupied with what they stood to lose by picking the wrong partner. Users also browsed profiles, reporting how engaged they were and how easy or difficult the process felt, and rated their perceived success in online dating so far.

The researchers found that the more promotion-focused people were, the easier and more engaging they found the online dating process. Those with a prevention focus found it only slightly less engaging, but substantially more difficult. People with a promotion focus also felt more successful in their online endeavors overall.

Because daters were asked only about *perceived* success, it's not clear if their mindset was related to actual success in finding a relationship. But it's certainly possible. The ease with which promotion-focused users experienced the browsing process, the authors write, may have allowed them to spend more time swiping—and their focus on the positive could make them more open to initiating a real-world date once someone caught their eye.

Because online dating requires some degree of investment and effort, one's mindset could play an especially important role in the outcome, the authors note. Ultimately, it may be that trying to see each profile as a potential partner—rather than digging for dealbreakers—could be the difference between giving up on love and finding it. —Gwendolyn Seidman, Ph.D.



STAT

**2/3**

Proportion of people in a recent study who were friends with their partner before their romantic relationship began

TOP: PRETO PEROLA/ISTOCK BOTTOM: ISTOCK (4), PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY ED LEVINE



## WHEN IT'S BETTER TO GO IT ALONE

**Some leisure activities may be more enjoyable when done solo.**

**W**HEN PEOPLE DO fun things in public—see a movie, perhaps, or visit a museum—they usually want to do so in the company of close others. But for certain kinds of activity, new research finds, they may actually have a more enjoyable time if they go it alone.

In several studies, participants engaged in various activities—such as browsing a digital gallery of *National Geographic* photos—either alone or with a partner. Solo “travelers” could move at their own pace; partnered people navigated the task jointly but were allowed to socialize throughout. Participants rated their interest in the activity beforehand; some were informed how interested their companion was, while others weren't. In some studies, they also rated their focus and how well they were able to recall the activity afterward.

Solo and partnered participants enjoyed the activities equally—but *only* if the partnered people knew their companion's interest level ahead of time. When they were unsure if their partner was enjoying the

activity, they found the experience significantly less pleasurable than did people who were on their own. Solo participants also tended to remember more from the activities, and were better able to focus, than partners who lacked insight into their counterpart's interest level.

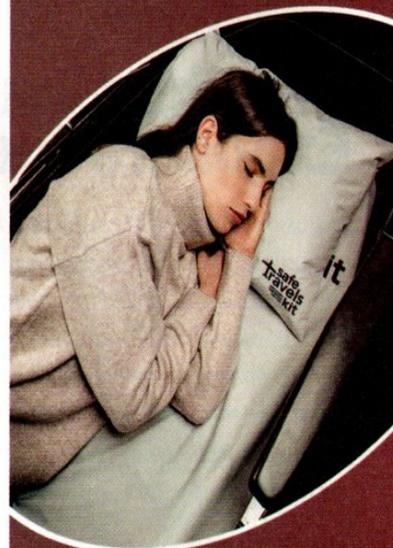
Feeling unsure whether a companion is having fun or what she wants to do next can be distracting, suggest the authors, led by Yuechen Wu, a postdoctoral researcher at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School. Thus, someone who isn't sure if a friend is interested in a particular activity—especially one that requires navigation and self-direction, like touring an exhibit—might simply have a better time if he struck out on his own.

That doesn't mean that group outings are off the table, Wu and her colleagues stress. But in cases where going alone isn't possible or desirable, it may be beneficial to briefly check in about each other's interest level before setting out. Having clarity at the outset could boost everyone's focus and make a fun occasion that much more enjoyable. —Bella DePaulo, Ph.D.

STAT

**44%** Share of people in a recent study who felt that social isolation during COVID-19 allowed them to learn skills and build competence

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## 3 Myths About Exposure Therapy

*Exposure therapy is the gold-standard treatment for many forms of anxiety. Yet some clinicians remain hesitant to try it. Their reluctance may be fueled by unfamiliarity and misinformation; indeed, research has found that negative attitudes toward exposure therapy inversely correlate with knowledge about it. The good news? The more information therapists receive about exposure, the more comfortable they feel implementing it. Shattering these myths is a good place to start.* —Courtney Beard, Ph.D., and Sara Brown



**Myth #1: Exposure therapy is unethical and harmful.** When people seek treatment for anxiety, they're already feeling anxious, despite efforts not to. Most intuitively understand that the only way to get over a fear is to ultimately face it—and leading them to do so in a safe therapeutic environment is both helpful and ethical. Some misunderstand exposure as punishing because of the incorrect idea that it forces people into distressing or dangerous situations. In reality, therapists *never* force patients to do anything. Exposure is helpful only when the person chooses to do it.

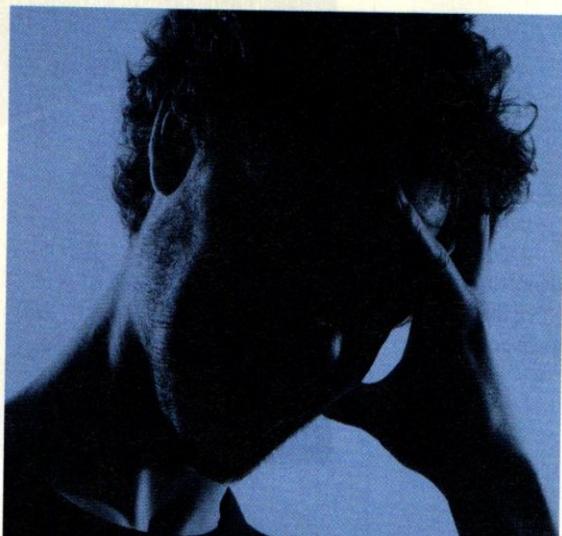
**Myth #2: Exposure only makes people more anxious.** In the moment, exposure therapy can indeed generate distress—people are confronting the very situations that make them anxious. But willingness to experience short-term anxiety reduces suffering in the long run. Studies show that when people experience anxiety in controlled environments, they learn to tolerate it. This means that each time they practice coping with anxiety, they reduce the amount they feel next time. More important, they gain confidence that they can handle stressful situations, whatever happens.

**Myth #3: People with severe anxiety can't handle exposure therapy.** This is false; a large body of research has found that exposure can benefit people with mild to severe symptoms with little risk of adverse effects. In fact, people with very severe symptoms may actually benefit from *more* intensive therapy. It is important to keep in mind, however, that exposure shouldn't always be the first-line treatment. People who struggle with substance use, self-injury, suicidal ideation, or dissociation may want to work on developing other coping skills prior to trying exposure therapy.

## When Pain Signals PTSD

**Recognizing the physical manifestations of PTSD could improve diagnosis.**

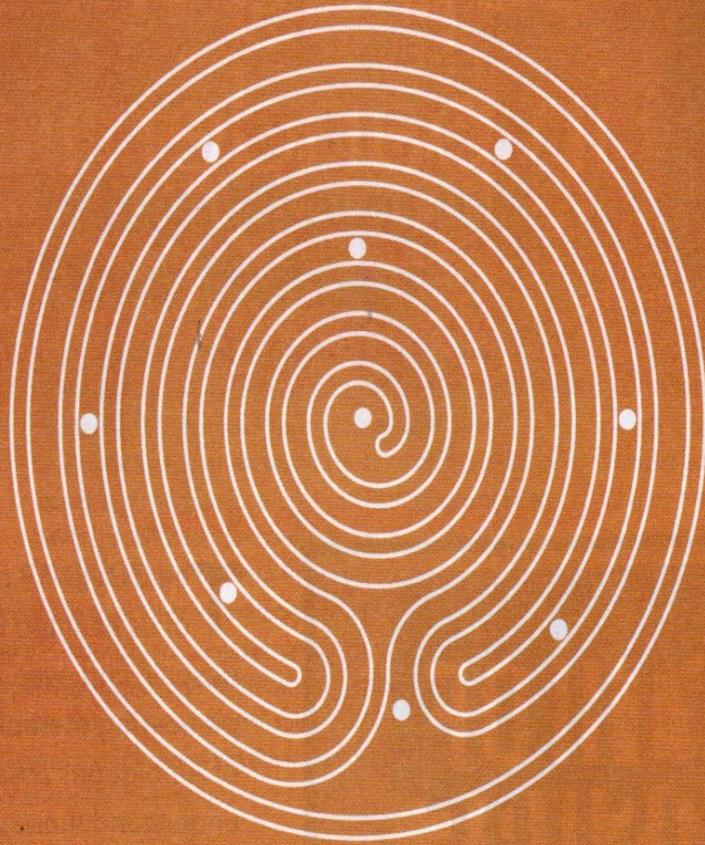
**T**HE MOST WELL-KNOWN symptoms of PTSD—and those that make up its official diagnostic criteria—tend to be psychological: intrusive memories, dissociation, anxiety. New research, however, argues that often-ignored physical symptoms are also of prime importance and should



play a larger role in diagnosis and treatment.

Writing in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, researchers assessed over 14,000 veterans, measuring both PTSD symptoms and somatic symptoms such as headaches, joint pain, or digestive distress. Just 3 percent of the sample met criteria for probable PTSD. Yet of that group, nearly 60 percent also met criteria for “somatoform disorder,” experiencing persistent physical symptoms without clear medical cause. Less than 3 percent of the non-PTSD group reported significant somatic symptoms.

While follow-up research is needed, the study strongly suggests that somatic symptoms are a core part of PTSD for most patients—and paying more attention to unexplainable physical complaints could help tackle persistent underdiagnosis. PTSD sufferers—especially veterans—may ignore or downplay psychological symptoms, yet many are willing to seek help for physical ailments, the authors write. Recognizing somatic symptoms as part of PTSD could help individuals secure a diagnosis sooner—and with it, much-needed treatment. —Grant H. Brenner, M.D.



# RECOVERY IS ONGOING

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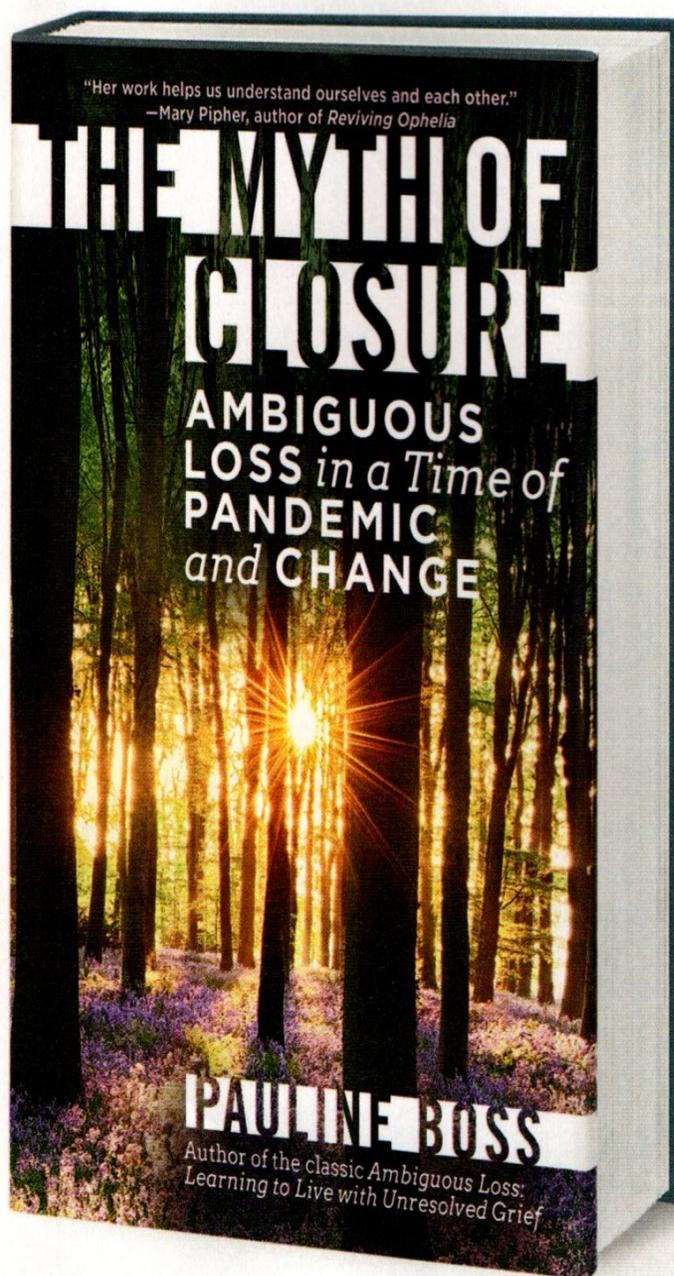
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# Coping with loss in pandemic times from Pauline Boss



**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has left many of us haunted by feelings of anxiety, despair, and even anger. In this book, pioneering therapist Pauline Boss, author of *Ambiguous Loss*, identifies and helps us understand these vague feelings of distress as caused by ambiguous loss, losses that remain unclear and hard to pin down, and thus have no closure. Collectively the world is grieving as the pandemic continues to change our everyday lives. This book provides many strategies for coping: encouraging us to increase our tolerance of ambiguity and acknowledging our resilience as we express a normal grief, and still look to the future with hope and possibility.

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**"[Boss] writes beautifully and with great emotion as she tackles one of our most difficult challenges—how to grow through pain and suffering. Boss is a cultural therapist whose work helps us understand ourselves and each other."**

—Mary Pipher, psychologist and author of *Women Rowing North* and *Reviving Ophelia*



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**HARA ESTROFF MARANO**  
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## When Managing Time Matters

I am 17 years old and a senior in high school, now preparing my college applications. I am a pretty good student and pride myself on my writing skills. I have known for a while what I wanted to do for my personal essay, and I have spent a lot of time writing it in my head. My first application (Early Application) was due yesterday, and I sent it in several hours before the deadline (I didn't want to get caught in a website crash). I expected to be finished earlier, and I had to cancel plans for the weekend in order to get it done. On top of that, everyone in my family is mad at me. Both my parents are angry at me for "waiting until the last minute." My father is also angry at my mother for "allowing this to happen," but she blames him. And my little sister feels that I get all the attention. I like the way my essay turned out. Still, everyone is upset, and I'm not sure what I did wrong.

IN ABOUT 20 years or so, you will understand that you really did nothing wrong, that the college application process has become massively distorted by societal problems way beyond your or your family's control but which play out anyway in every household when a still-growing person is aiming at admission to a competitive college. Admittedly, that's a long time to wait for understanding or for peace in your family.

In the meantime, there are a few things to know that can help you and everyone around you. They fall under the general category of self-management, which essentially takes a lifetime to get good at, although some people never do. What's more, it enormously benefits from the motivation that often comes from being responsible for yourself, which few American teens today are.

First up under the category of self-management is self-knowledge. You know you're good at writing and enjoy doing it. That's an important bit of information. Especially because writing is a facet of your growing identity, your self-esteem to some degree hinges on carrying out writing tasks well. That takes preparation, and you seem to have done some by considering what you

**Parents must always negotiate a fine line between nurturing and controlling; they rarely recognize crossing it.**

wanted to say and rehearsing it in your head. I would be willing to guarantee, however, that it took longer than you imagined to transfer what was in your head into a finished piece. That gets us to time management, more specifically: time management, writing division.

Finding the words that convey with precision and clarity what you think and feel is challenging—even for experienced writers. It often takes far more time than you think. The thoughts in your head are shaded by feelings that don't necessarily need words to be understood by you. Exporting them for others to grasp—impaling a thought upon a word—is hard mental work. Every disciplined writer has poems or ar-

ticles or books in a drawer somewhere, waiting to be finished, because they have not yet found a way to articulate those thoughts with the desired deftness.

In order to actualize the wish to do well, you need to put it together with an acknowledgment of how important writing is to you and the discipline of time management. That's a pretty tall order for a teen under the best of circumstances. But college application time is not the best of circumstances, for the reasons alluded to above. And because your parents are nervous for you and for themselves.

They know that college matters to your future (and thus to theirs, too), and they know that admission to the college of your (or their) dreams is guaranteed to no one these days. If they are themselves mature, they will do their best to keep their anxieties to themselves. But a final pre-filing weekend of cancelled plans and intensified effort is high drama that affects everyone in a household. Parents must always negotiate a fine line between nurturing and controlling, often not recognizing when they've crossed

it. What you're hearing from yours is more or less a debate between them on how they did on that score.

And yes, by most reckonings, hitting "send" a few hours before the filing deadline is waiting until the last minute. While that rattles parental nerves, mostly it just short-changes you. The tightening margin of time keeps you from enjoying the process of expression. But more significantly, it prevents you from being able to put your essay away for a necessary day and then look at it with fresh eyes. When you plan enough time for that, then you can give your work those polishing touches that feed your sense of self-mastery and represent you at your best. ■