Spousal Attitudes and Suicidal Thoughts

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Automatic spousal attitudes—quick emotional associations with one’s husband or wife—can predict suicidal thoughts in married couples. Automatic spousal attitudes are a more reliable predictor of suicidal thoughts than self-reported marital satisfaction or automatic attitudes toward oneself.

Researchers conducted three longitudinal studies with newly married heterosexual couples. In two of the studies, participants were shown a photo of their spouse and were then asked to categorize a series of positive and negative words. Participants who could more quickly classify positive words after viewing a photo of their spouse were identified as having positive automatic spousal attitudes. Participants also completed baseline surveys on overall marital satisfaction and suicidal thoughts. One year later, participants reported on their suicidal thoughts again. Participants who demonstrated more positive automatic spousal attitudes were less likely to report suicidal thoughts one year later.

In a third study, participants were randomly assigned to receive training to improve their automatic spousal attitudes. Participants who were trained to have a more positive automatic attitude toward their spouse were less likely to report suicidal thoughts two months later than those who did not receive training. This result remained after controlling for marital satisfaction and automatic attitudes toward oneself.

According to the interpersonal theory of suicide, thwarted belongingness is a core predictor of suicidality. Because marriage is an important aspect of social connection, spousal attitudes may also play a role in predicting suicidal behavior. The current research suggests that improving automatic interpersonal processes, like automatic spousal attitudes, may be a novel approach to suicide prevention.
