



July 22, 2010

A Young Man's Lament: Love Hurts!

By PAMELA PAUL

THE GIST: Contrary to popular belief, relationship woes bother men more than they bother women.

THE SOURCE: "Nonmarital Romantic Relationships and Mental Health in Early Adulthood: Does the Association Differ for Women and Men?" *The Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, June 2010.

ACCORDING to the pop-cultural standard, a woman may be a lioness in the workplace and an indomitable social force, but when it comes to love, she's a delicate flower, dependent on regular spritzings of romance. Social scientists' assumptions have long backed this up: Women need their love lives happy and healthy; men, stoical and stalwart, are the more resilient.

But in the last decade, scientists of love, taking into account differences in how men and women express emotional distress — women by becoming anxious or depressed, men by abusing alcohol or drugs — have shown that marital discord has an equally unkind effect on both sexes. A new study asks if the same might be true in relationships among unmarried young adults.

The answer turns out to be no. And, in an unexpected plot twist, the study, which surveyed 1,611 men and women age 18 to 23 in the Miami area, found that thorny relationships take a far greater toll on men.

According to the report by Robin W. Simon, a sociology professor at [Wake Forest University](#), and Anne E. Barrett, a sociologist at [Florida State University](#), "It appears that young men benefit more than women from support, and that they are more harmed than women by strain in ongoing romantic relationships."

For women, whether they're in a relationship at all — no matter how awful — is what counts.

"It's a little bit pathetic," Ms. Simon allowed. "Even though there's been so much social change in this area, women's self-worth is still so much tied up with having a boyfriend. It's unfortunate."

And pity the men, their anguish so long overlooked. One hypothesis of the authors suggests that while women have outlets for emotional engagement in the form of intimate friendships, men are

adrift without the ongoing care of a female soul mate.

But why then do older married men more closely approximate women's responses to relationship discord? It may be that gender differences are stronger in young adulthood and disappear with age. Or the data may capture broad social change in the making.

Biology could also be at work. Helen Fisher, author of "Anatomy of Love," said that male brains tend to be more compartmentalized, female brains more connected. "Men tend to focus more deeply on the here and now," Ms. Fisher said. "Women tend to think longer term."

She posited a Darwinian explanation: "Because women can only reproduce so many times, they have dramatic time constraints that men don't have. A breakup means the loss of very valuable reproductive time."

Ye olde biological clock ticks yet. But change is also at hand. Though it may be that men were always this sensitive, now, at least, their pain is acknowledged.