

# Stress shared by same-sex couples can have unique health impacts

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Studies of stress and its effects on health have typically focused on the worries of an individual: money, love, health, work. But what about stress shared by two people in a romantic relationship?

New research by Allen LeBlanc, Health Equity Institute Professor of Sociology at San Francisco State University, studies how minority stress—which results from being stigmatized and disadvantaged in society—affects same-sex [couples' stress levels](#) and overall health. LeBlanc asserts that the health effects of minority stress shared by a couple can be understood as distinct from individual stress, a new framework in the field.

"Stress research has traditionally focused more on the individual experience of stress, which is very important, but social contexts get overlooked," LeBlanc said. "We are developing new ways of measuring stress at the couple level."

A gay man, for example, might feel individual stress if he conceals his sexual orientation from others, fearing discrimination in his workplace or rejection by his family. This situation can lead to couple-level stress if he asks that his partner hide their relationship, leading to new challenges affecting both men—and the quality of their relationship.

In an article to be published in the February issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, LeBlanc suggests that future research must strive to better understand stressors that originate within the context of intimate relationships. According to LeBlanc, such studies will advance the entire field of stress research.

"Relationships aren't inherently seen as problematic or challenging," LeBlanc said. "A lot of important work has been focused on what is helpful or positive about being in a relationship. There is longstanding literature, for example, demonstrating that people who are married tend to

have better health than those who are not. But relationships are also a source of stress, and we can learn from that."

Using their new framework of understanding shared stress, LeBlanc and his team are currently undertaking the first study of couple-level minority stress. Hundreds of couples across the country will participate in a study designed to measure their individual and couple-level stress as distinct entities. A year later, the couples will complete a second survey, with the goal of learning how stress experiences and health change over time—and the effects they have on a relationship. The data from this survey will allow the researchers to test their new theory of stress and [health](#) and help identify the kinds of stress that are most challenging for same-sex couples.

While LeBlanc's work focuses on minority stress among same-sex couples, he said the insights can be applied to other couples that experience minority [stress](#), such as interracial couples, interfaith couples and couples in which one partner is significantly older than the other.

**More information:** LeBlanc, A. J., Frost, D. M. and Wight, R. G. (2015), "Minority Stress and Stress Proliferation Among Same-Sex and Other Marginalized Couples." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77: 40–59. doi: 10.1111/jomf.12160

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