

# Shared hearts and minds: Physiological synchrony during empathy

Does your physiology synchronize with your partner's during an empathy-inducing situation?

## Physiological Synchrony

The correlation of two or more individuals' physiologies at the same time.

## Empathy

Understanding or resonating with another person's thoughts and feelings.

## Method

One hundred and eleven couples were invited into our lab where they completed assessments of their typical thought-based empathy and empathetic feelings (affective empathy).



Then each partner was asked to share and discuss a significant life event that has caused them to suffer with their partner for 6 minutes during which we measured physiological activities relevant to their breathing, skin conductance reactivity (i.e., sweat), and heart-beat.

## Results

Our assessments showed that physiological synchrony was evident in their sweat. Physiological synchrony also showed in heartbeat, but only when it was the woman who was sharing.



Surprisingly, this physiological synchrony was not associated with the self-reported cognitive or affective measures of empathy, suggesting self-report and performance-based measures of empathy are independent of one another.

## In summary

These findings support the use of physiological synchrony in investigating empathy while highlighting (a) the importance of considering gender for differential experiences of empathy, and (b) the regard for empathy as a broad emotion that cannot be measured using a single generalized measure.

