

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY NEWS

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MICHELANGELOS MAKE SMART LOVERS

New study shows that partners sculpt each other to achieve their ideal selves

EVANSTON, Ill. --- Is that really Bob? You've seen him hundreds of mornings for the last 10 years at local coffee shops. Since he started dating Sara, he looks you in the eye -- and smiles. Sara takes every opportunity to let coffee shop cronies know that Bob is her guy and to gush about how funny he is. And he is. Who knew?

Think of Sara like Michelangelo chipping away at a block of marble to release the ideal figure slumbering within.

A new international review of seven papers on "the Michelangelo phenomenon" shows that when close partners affirm and support each other's ideal selves, they and the relationship benefit greatly.

"To the degree that the sculpting process has gone well, that you have helped mold me toward my ideal self, the relationship functions better and both partners are happier. And over the long term, I more or less come to reflect what my partner sees and elicits from me," said Eli Finkel, associate professor of psychology in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University.

Finkel co-authored the review with Caryl E. Rusbult, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and Madoka Kumashiro, Goldsmiths, University of London. "The Michelangelo Phenomenon" appears in the December issue of *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

The Michelangelo effect is not simply about supporting your partner, nor is it about promoting what you think your partner's ideal self should be. "Even if partners treat us in perfectly loving, supportive ways, if the treatment is not consistent with the person we dream of becoming, we have to pay attention to those red flags," Finkel warned. "Is that the person you want to be married to 10 years down the road?"

The Michelangelo studies show that close partners sculpt one another's traits and skills and promote, versus inhibit, one another's goal achievement. "It's not just that you treat me positively," Finkel said. "You treat me in particular ways that dovetail with my ideal self."

That's how Sara, an outgoing person with a great social network, brought Bob's best out in him. Sara made Bob more comfortable being the person he wanted to be. With Sara celebrating his ideal self, he became much funnier.

Just as the sculptor chisels, carves and polishes away flaws in the stone to reveal the ideal form, so do skillful partners support their loved ones' dreams, aspirations and the traits they hope to develop, such as completing medical school or becoming more fluent in a second language or more sociable.

Supporting a partner's image of his ideal self, whether it is a vague yearning or a clearly articulated mental representation, helps the loved one reduce the discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self.

Sara consciously may interpret the disparities between Bob's actual self and ideal self in a benevolent way. She may help Bob become more sociable at a dinner party, for example, by subtly directing him to tell one of his most charming stories.

Conversely, a relationship can run into trouble when an individual emphasizes attributes that are peripheral to the core elements of what a partner ideally wishes to become. Take Mary, a leading researcher and a beauty. If she prizes her scholarly accomplishments above her physical virtues, she will feel disaffirmed when her partner affectionately refers to her as his "Colorado cutie." What that term of endearment represents could ultimately doom the relationship.

Some people such as Sara, who is so warm and empathic, are better sculptors than others and are particularly adept at bringing out others' ideal selves. Some individuals may be on the verge of achieving great personal growth and be open to any number of people who could help them. And others, the studies show, may have a much more difficult time bringing out someone's ideal self or be much more resistant to the Michelangelo effect.

The studies reviewed in the journal article used longitudinal procedures to examine how people grow toward their ideal self over time as a result of how their partner treats them. At the beginning of the studies, individuals reported on their actual and their ideal selves, and their partner reported on how they view the individuals. To gain an external perspective, some studies incorporated the perspective of the individuals' friends. Across studies, individuals were especially likely to grow toward their ideal self when their partner viewed them in line with this ideal. The process ultimately promoted both relational and personal well-being for both partners.

“When deciding on a life partner, we consider many factors,” Finkel observed. “But we frequently neglect to think about whether the person I hope to be in 10 years is consistent with the person you want me to be in 10 years. When our partners can chisel and polish us in a way that helps us to achieve our ideal self, that’s a wonderful thing.”

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