

ESSAY

Why Sisterly Chats Make People Happier

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“Having a Sister Makes You Happier”: that was the headline on a recent article about a study finding that adolescents who have a sister are less likely to report such feelings as “I am unhappy, sad or depressed” and “I feel like no one loves me.”

These findings are no fluke; other studies have come to similar conclusions. But why would having a sister make you happier?

The usual answer — that girls and women are more likely than boys and men to talk about emotions — is somehow unsatisfying, especially to a researcher like me. Much of my work over the years has developed the premise that women’s styles of friendship and conversation aren’t inherently better than men’s, simply different.

A man once told me that he had spent a day with a friend who was going through a divorce. When he returned home, his wife asked how his friend was coping. He replied: “I don’t know. We didn’t talk about it.”

His wife chastised him. Obviously, she said, the friend needed to talk about what he was going through.

This made the man feel bad. So he was relieved to read in my book “You Just Don’t Understand” (Ballantine, 1990) that doing things together can be a comfort in itself, another way to show caring. Asking about the divorce might have made his friend feel worse by reminding him of it, and expressing concern could have come across as condescending. The man who told me this was himself comforted to be reassured that his instincts hadn’t been wrong and he hadn’t let his friend down.

But if talking about problems isn’t necessary for comfort, then having sisters shouldn’t make men happier than having brothers. Yet [the recent study](#) — by Laura Padilla-Walker and her colleagues at [Brigham Young University](#) — is supported by others.

Last year, for example, the British [psychologists Liz Wright and Tony Cassidy](#) found that young people who had grown up with at least one sister tended to be happier and more optimistic, especially if their parents had divorced. Another British researcher, Judy Dunn, [found a similar pattern](#) among older adults.

So what is going on?

My own recent research about sisters suggests a more subtle dynamic. I interviewed more than 100 women about their sisters, but if they also had brothers, I asked them to compare. Most said they talked to their sisters more often, at greater length and, yes, about more personal topics. This often meant that they felt closer to their sisters, but not always. One woman, for example, says she talks for hours by phone to her two brothers as well as her two sisters. But the topics differ. She talks to her sisters about their personal lives; with

her brothers she discusses history, geography and books. And, she added, one brother calls her at 5 a.m. as a prank.

A prank? Is this communication? Well, yes — it reminds her that he's thinking of her. And talking for hours creates and reinforces connections with both brothers and sisters, regardless of what they talk about.

A student in my class recounted a situation that shows how this can work. When their family dog died, the siblings (a brother and three sisters) all called one another. The sisters told one another how much they missed the dog and how terrible they felt. The brother expressed concern for everyone in the family but said nothing about what he himself was feeling.

My student didn't doubt that her brother felt the same as his sisters; he just didn't say it directly. And I'll bet that having the phone conversations served exactly the same purpose for him as the sisters' calls did for them: providing comfort in the face of their shared loss. So the key to why having sisters makes people happier — men as well as women — may lie not in the kind of talk they exchange but in the fact of talk. If men, like women, talk more often to their sisters than to their brothers, that could explain why sisters make them happier. The interviews I conducted with women reinforced this insight. Many told me that they don't talk to their sisters about personal problems, either.

An example is Colleen, a widow in her 80s who told me that she'd been very close to her unmarried sister throughout their lives, though they never discussed their personal problems. An image of these sisters has remained indelible in my mind. Late in life, the sister came to live with Colleen and her husband. Colleen recalled that each morning after her husband got up to make coffee, her sister would stop by Colleen's bedroom to say good morning. Colleen would urge her sister to join her in bed. As they sat up in bed side by side, holding hands, Colleen and her sister would "just talk."

That's another kind of conversation that many women engage in which baffles many men: talk about details of their daily lives, like the sweater they found on sale — details, you might say, as insignificant as those about last night's ballgame which can baffle women when they overhear men talking. These seemingly pointless conversations are as comforting to some women as "troubles talk" conversations are to others.

So maybe it's true that talk is the reason having a sister makes you happier, but it needn't be talk about emotions. When women told me they talk to their sisters more often, at greater length and about more personal topics, I suspect it's that first element — more often — that is crucial rather than the last.

This makes sense to me as a linguist who truly believes that women's ways of talking are not inherently better than men's. It also feels right to me as a woman with two sisters — one who likes to have long conversations about feelings and one who doesn't, but who both make me happier.

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