

Romantic Relationships as a Protective Factor for College Students' Mental Health

Romantic Relationships as a Protective Factor for College Students' Mental Health: Sociability,  
Neuroticism, and Friendship Importance Across Gender and Relationship Status

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### **Abstract**

Research on the well-being of college students, an area of psychology that is understudied, is important because college students are highly susceptible to depression and substance abuse. This study focuses on whether or not romantic relationships positively affect the well-being of college students and if sociability, neuroticism, and friendship importance significantly predict life satisfaction. The sample mostly consists of young adult females in the age range of 20-29 years, who plan to obtain at least a Bachelor's degree. The results indicate that romantic relationships do not act as a buffer for mental health, but that the three variables sociability, neuroticism, and friendship importance significantly predict life satisfaction for the majority of the sample. These findings suggest that college campuses would benefit from investing in the promotion of sociability, extraversion, and high-quality friendships, rather than the promotion of romantic relationships.

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The variables that predict life satisfaction differ between males and females, and between single and taken or married individuals. Females, whether single or married, are more satisfied with their lives, on average, than are males (Mookherjee, 1997, p. 102). Despite this disparity, marriage improves the life satisfaction of both males and females (Mookherjee, 1997, p. 102). For college-age young adults, committed relationships serve as a protective factor against depression and alcohol and drug abuse just as marriage does for older adults (Whitton, Weitbrecht, Kuryluk, & Bruner, 2013, p. 176).

Three variables that predict life satisfaction are sociability, neuroticism, and friendship importance. Sociability is one significant predictor of happiness, and individuals who are more social tend to have greater satisfaction with their lives (Neto, 2011, p. 821). According to Diener and Seligman, the happiest people spend the least amount of time alone and the most time socializing (2002, p. 82). The second predictor of life satisfaction, neuroticism, is inversely correlated with life satisfaction (Schimmack, Oishi, Furr, & Funder, 2004, p. 1065). Neuroticism more commonly affects females, so it would be expected that females have lower scores on life satisfaction than males. However, females also tend to have more positive emotions. In general, the positive emotions seem to counteract neuroticism in females, and this balance that is created means that neuroticism does not negatively affect life satisfaction differentially by gender (Schimmack, Oishi, Furr, & Funder, 2004, p. 1073). The third predictor of life satisfaction, friendship importance, is shown to be central to people's self-concepts and directly related to life satisfaction (Demir & Orthel, 2011, p. 174). Females tend to have higher quality friendships with less conflict and more intimacy than males. It could be predicted then that females may have higher life satisfaction scores due to this finding. However, it could also be argued that

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males do not desire more intimate and less confrontational friendships because they prefer to seek intimacy through romantic relationships instead (Demir & Orthel, 2011, p. 185). It is possible that males do not value their friendships as much as females, but this does not affect their life satisfaction scores.

The prediction of this study is that sociability, neuroticism, and friendship importance are all significantly correlated with life satisfaction for both males and females regardless of relationship status. Neuroticism may negatively affect females' life satisfaction scores more than males', and friendship importance may have more of an effect on females' life satisfaction scores. Another prediction is that friendship will be more important to single males than to males involved in a romantic relationship. The final hypothesis is that life satisfaction will vary across gender and relationship status, and those in romantic relationships, particularly females, will be the most satisfied with their lives.

### **Method**

#### **Participants and Procedures**

Participants in this study were 509 friends and family members of students in an experimental psychology course at Tulane University. Participants were mainly female (81.5%), employed (56%), and educated (90.1% completed or plan to complete at least a Bachelor's Degree). They ranged from under 20 years old to over 60 years old, with most participants in the 20-29 year age range (61.9%) and under 20 year age range (23.2%). Approximately half were not in romantic relationships (54.4%) and few were parents (13.8%). Finally, participants were geographically dispersed (26.9% originally from the Southern U.S., 38.5% from the Northeast, 15.5% from the Midwest, 14.1% from the West, and 4.9% from outside the U.S.).

Students in the course created a survey of 128 items, measuring various constructs, and participants responded to the survey items online through Qualtrics.com. For this set of

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analyses, only the following variables were analyzed: life satisfaction, sociability, friendship importance, neuroticism, gender, and relationship status.

### Measures

*Life Satisfaction.* This variable is designed to measure how content a participant is with his or her life. Response options are on an 11 point Likert scale from -5= below average to +5= above average. High scores mean participants are very satisfied with their lives.

*Sociability.* This variable is designed to measure how social a person identifies his or herself to be. Response options are on a 10 point Likert scale from 0= not at all to 10= extremely. High scores mean participants see themselves as very social people.

*Friendship Importance.* This variable is designed to measure how important friendships are to each participant. Response options are on a 10 point Likert scale from 0= not at all to 10= extremely. High scores mean participants place high importance on their friendships.

*Neuroticism.* This variable is designed to measure how participants rate their levels of neuroticism in comparison to their peers. In the survey item, neuroticism is defined as “the tendency to feel stressed, overwhelmed, sad, worried, or self-conscious”. Response options are on an 11 point Likert scale from -5= below average to +5= above average. High scores mean participants view themselves as more neurotic than their peers.

*Gender.* Response options are dichotomous categorical options. 0= female and 1= male. High scores mean participants identify as males.

*Relationship Status.* This variable is designed to measure if participants are currently in romantic relationships. Response options are dichotomous categorical options. 0= no and 1= yes. High scores mean participants are currently involved in romantic relationships.

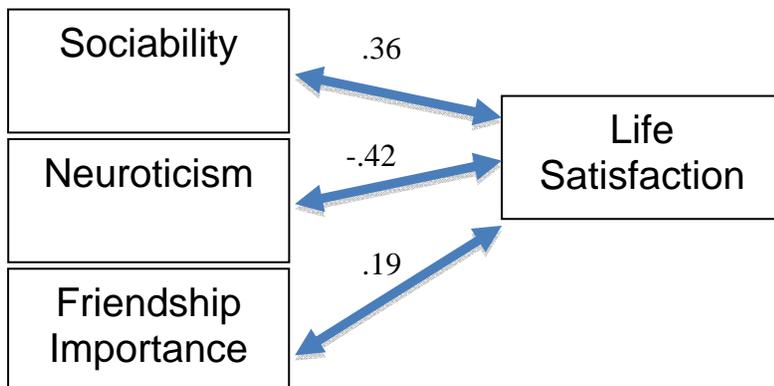
### Results

The relationships between life satisfaction, sociability, neuroticism, and friendship

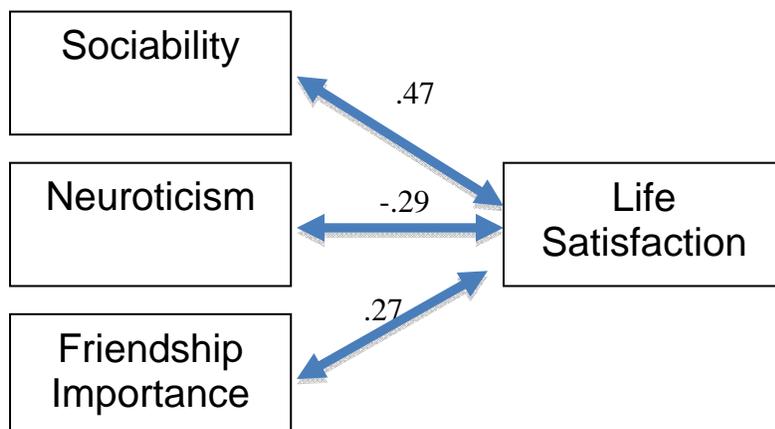
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importance are being tested to determine how these relationships differ by gender and by relationship status. First, a correlation analysis was run with the file split by gender and relationship status. For single females ( $N= 229$ ), life satisfaction was directly related to friendship importance ( $r= .19, p= .00$ ) and sociability ( $r= .36, p= .00$ ), and inversely related to neuroticism ( $r= -.42, p= .00$ ). For females in a romantic relationship ( $N= 186$ ), life satisfaction was also directly related to friendship importance ( $r= .27, p= .00$ ) and sociability ( $r= .47, p= .00$ ), and inversely related to neuroticism ( $r= -.29, p= .00$ ). For single males ( $N= 48$ ), life satisfaction was not significantly related to friendship importance ( $r= .05, p= .73$ ), was directly related to sociability ( $r= .48, p= .00$ ), and inversely related to neuroticism ( $r= -.43, p= .00$ ). For males in a romantic relationship ( $N= 46$ ), life satisfaction was neither significantly related to friendship importance ( $r= -.03, p= .83$ ), sociability ( $r= -.06, p= .72$ ), nor neuroticism ( $r= -.24, p= .11$ ).

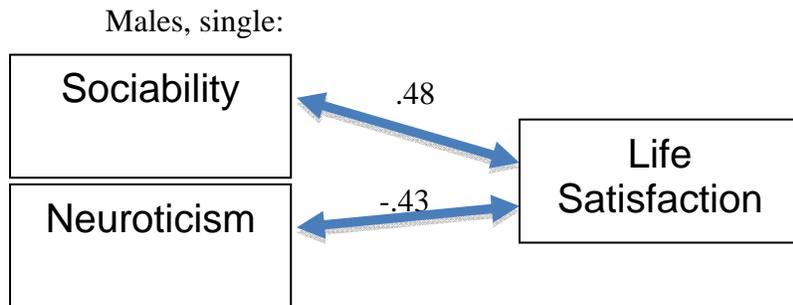
Females, single:



Females, romantic relationship:



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After running the correlation analysis, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to see how friendship importance, sociability, and neuroticism predicted life satisfaction among single females, females in a romantic relationship, and single males. For single females, friendship importance, sociability, and neuroticism all significantly predict life satisfaction, with  $R=.51$ . This means that 26% of the variability in life satisfaction is predicted by friendship importance, sociability, and neuroticism. For females in a romantic relationship, friendship importance, sociability, and neuroticism all significantly predict life satisfaction, with  $R=.53$ . This means that 28% of the variability in life satisfaction is predicted by friendship importance, sociability, and neuroticism. A separate multiple regression analysis was conducted for single males because friendship importance did not correlate with life satisfaction. For single males, sociability and neuroticism significantly predict life satisfaction, with  $R=.59$ . This means that 35% of the variability in life satisfaction is predicted by sociability and neuroticism.

	Females, single	Females, romantic relationship	Males, single
$R=$	.51	.53	.59

The final analysis was a correlation between life satisfaction, gender, and relationship status. Life satisfaction correlates with neither gender ( $r= -.02, p= .66$ ) nor relationship status ( $r= .00, p= .98$ ) in this sample.

### Discussion

Research on happiness is limited, but the findings from positive psychology could impact people's daily lives in a positive and proactive way. The results of this study are particularly valuable to college-age young adults because the sample is primarily composed of this age group. Research on the well-being of college students is important because this group is highly susceptible to depression and substance abuse. Additionally, depressive symptoms negatively impact college students' academic success and functioning across all domains (Whitton, Weitbrecht, Kuryluk, & Bruner, 2013, p. 176). Past studies have found that romantic relationships serve as a buffer for mental health regardless of gender (Mookherjee, 1997, p. 102).

This research studied how predictors of life satisfaction vary across gender and relationship status. The three predictors chosen for this study based on past research had varied effects across gender and relationship status. Sociability, neuroticism, and friendship importance all predicted variability in life satisfaction for single females and females in a romantic relationship. Only sociability and neuroticism predicted variability in life satisfaction for single males, and none of the chosen predictors predicted any variability in life satisfaction for males in romantic relationships. The hypothesis that sociability, neuroticism, and friendship importance would all be significantly correlated with life satisfaction for both males and females does not hold up in this study. This may be due to the sample being overwhelmingly composed of females. The second hypothesis that neuroticism will negatively affect females' life satisfaction scores more than males' scores did not hold up for this study either. This is potentially due to females experiencing more positive emotions than males, and these positive emotions counterbalancing females' neuroticism (Schimmack, Oishi, Furr, & Funder, 2004, p. 1073). The third hypothesis that friendship importance will have a greater effect on females' life satisfaction scores was confirmed by the results, but friendship importance did not affect single males' life

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satisfaction scores more than those of males in romantic relationships as predicted. Life satisfaction scores for all males regardless of relationship status were not significantly correlated with friendship importance. The final hypothesis that life satisfaction in general would vary across gender and relationship status did not hold up for this study either. Females were not shown to be more satisfied than males, and those in romantic relationships were also not shown to be more satisfied than those who are single. These results may be due to college students having many social connections other than romantic partners for social support, valuing independence over relationships (Whitton, Weitbrecht, Kuryluk, & Bruner, 2013, p. 177), and placing importance on preparation for work instead of marriage (Facio & Resett, 2013, p. 27).

This study suggests that the factors that predict life satisfaction would be more valuable to promote on college campuses than the promotion of relationships. Some college campuses offer relationship education programs to promote the formation and maintenance of relationships among college students (Whitton, Weitbrecht, Kuryluk, & Bruner, 2013, p. 181), but according to this study these programs may not be effective on every college campus. The promotion of sociability, extraversion (due to the tendency to feel positive emotions) (Schimmack, Oishi, Furr, & Funder, 2004, p. 1063), and high-quality friendships would be most beneficial for all college students regardless of relationship status.

Future research in this area should be composed of a more representative sample. This particular research only applies to college-age young adults because the sample is primarily composed of the 20-29 year age group with 90.1% planning to obtain at least a Bachelor's degree. Also, the results of this study only apply to females because the sample is composed of 81.5% females. Due to the male samples being so small ( $N= 48$  for single males,  $N= 46$  for males in a romantic relationship), it is likely that my results contain a Type II error and that there are relationships among the predictors of life satisfaction for males. Future samples should

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represent males and females equally, and could be composed of more diverse age groups if the researcher wants results to apply to the larger population.

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# Romantic Relationships as a Protective Factor for College Students' Mental Health

## **Appendix**

SPSS Output

CITI Training Printout