WHAT'S YOUR *love* STORY?

GETTY IMAGES (*LOVE STORY*); ISTOCKPHOTO (TELEVISION)

Rochester research finds that talking with your spouse about movies may increase your odds of finding your own happy ending.

Cait Powalski '08, '11M (MPH) admits that her husband, Will Chesebro '09, '10W (MS), doesn't like it when she asks questions while they watch movies at home.

But during a wintry night in February, the couple made a point of having a conversation as they streamed *Indecent Proposal,* a 1993 movie starring Demi Moore and Woody Harrelson. In the film, a financier played by Robert Redford offers the fictional couple $1 million if he can sleep with Moore's character.

The movie makes a point of putting the couple in an emotionally wrought situation, one designed to test their relationship by pushing hard on some hot marital buttons—fidelity, trust, honesty, ambition, money.

KISS & TELL: Can having focused discussions about movies like *Love Story* (opposite) help reduce the likelihood of divorce for young couples?

Prompted by a 12-question guide designed by Rochester psychologists, Powalski and Chesebro discussed the fictional couple's relationship—how they interacted, how they communicated, and how they treated one another—a conversation that took place during the movie and for a good 30 minutes afterward.

"I think it reaffirmed that we communicate a lot," says Powalski, noting that while the movie brought up some touchy subjects, she and Chesebro were in agreement about how they handle the sometimes tense situations that crop up for newlyweds. And although it was "a little bit weird" to watch a movie as a way to think about their relationship, she and Chesebro agree that the experience was an intriguing way to jump-start conversations about marriage. "It was really worthwhile in thinking about our relationship and relationships in general," Powalski says.

Could date night some day turn into marriage therapy night?

While the answer to that will take a few sequels, an innovative study by Rochester researchers and colleagues at UCLA is finding that giving couples some direction on how to watch movies together may be a powerful tool for marriage counselors.

Led by Ronald Rogge, associate professor of psychology at Rochester, and Thomas Bradbury, professor of psychology and codirector of the Relationship Institute at UCLA, the researchers found that a relatively simple program of watching a handful of movies and talking about them over the course of a month was as effective in reducing the divorce rate for young couples as more intensive, workshop-oriented programs.

"We thought the movie treatment would help, but not

By Scott Hauser

SCREEN TIME: Using onscreen relationships to prompt discussions between real-life couples, the Rochester study features a star-studded list, including *Terms of Endearment* (top), *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (middle, left), *Barefoot in the Park* (middle, right), *Love Jones* (bottom), and *A Star Is Born* (right).

nearly as much as the other programs in which we were teaching all of these state-of-the-art skills," says Rogge, the lead author of the study. "The results suggest that husbands and wives have a pretty good sense of what they might be doing right and wrong in their relationships.

"You might not need to teach them a whole lot of skills to cut the divorce rate. You might just need to get them to think about how they are currently behaving. And for five movies to give us a benefit over three years—that is awesome."

Involving 174 couples and published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology,* the study is one of the first long-term investigations to compare different types of early marriage education programs. In addition to the group that watched movies, one group of couples worked with trained counselors to learn how to better identify areas of friendship, agreement, and conflict, while another attended sessions on how to be more empathetic and work better as a team.

Overall, couples using the movie-and-talk approach had divorce rates of about 11 percent after three years, comparable to those in the traditional, educator-led programs, but less than half the 24 percent divorce rate of a group that completed none of the programs.

Scott Stanley, a research professor and codirector of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver, says the study has important findings for people in the field.

"What's nice about the study is that it raises important issues to grapple with in terms of the nature of what you do and the nature of what people respond to—and perhaps how they change," says Stanley, who was not involved in the study. "It raises good questions, and it shows the importance of working with different strategies."

With roughly half of all marriages in the United State ending in divorce, the researchers set out to test the underpinnings of many marriage education programs: whether couples will weather the friction of living together better if they can master certain relationship skills.

"When we started this study, the prevailing wisdom was that the best way to keep relationships healthy and strong was to help couples manage difficult, potentially divisive conversations," says Bradbury.

The team randomly assigned newlyweds to one of three groups: one took part in a long-standing marital education program known as PREP; one participated in a new program designed by Rogge and his colleagues; and the third were enrolled in the cohort that used

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GETTY IMAGES

HOME THEATER: Karla and Jonathan Hatley say they found the experience of discussing one of Karla's favorite movies, *Love Jones*, "eye-opening" because they realized that their real-life relationship mirrors some of the behaviors portrayed in the movie.

movies to become more aware of the dynamics of their relationships. The study concentrated on the first three years of marriage, because "relationship dissolution is front-ended," says Bradbury; one in four ends in divorce.

The PREP group learned ways to communicate more effectively, learned conflict management techniques, and were given strategies to preserve positives aspects of their lives together. Earlier studies have shown the program to be effective at promoting happier and more satisfying relationships over three to five years.

The compassion and acceptance training cohort participated in an intervention designed by Rogge and his collaborators aimed at helping couples work together as a team to find common ground around their similarities. Couples were encouraged through a series of lectures and exercises to approach their relationships with more compassion by doing things like listening as a friend, practicing spontaneous acts of kindness and affection, and using the language of acceptance.

Both programs involved weekly lectures, supervised practice sessions, and homework assignments over the course of a month, for a total investment of roughly 20 hours, all but two of which were with a trained facilitator.

By contrast, the movie-and-talk group devoted half as much time to their assignments and all but four hours took place in their own homes. Participants attended a 10-minute lecture on the importance of relationship awareness and how watching couples in movies could help spouses pay attention to their own behavior. They then watched *Two for the Road,* a 1967 romantic comedy about the joys and strains of young love, infidelity, and professional pressures across 12 years of a marriage. Afterward, each couple met separately to discuss a list of 12 questions designed to explore both constructive and destructive examples of behavior that the onscreen couples engaged in.

They chose from a list of 47 movies featuring intimate relationships as a major plot focus and were asked to watch one a week for a month, followed by the same guided discussion for about 45 minutes.

Karla Hatley, a doctoral student in higher education administration at the Warner School, and her husband, Jonathan, say they found the process "eye-opening." As with Powalski and Chesebro, the two were not enrolled in the study, but they completed the first assignment in the program, which was to watch a movie and then discuss it based on the questions devised by the researchers.

The Hatleys, who were married in 2010, watched *Love Jones,* a 1997 movie starring Larenz Tate and Nia Long about a Chicago couple who wind through an emotionally charged relationship. It is, Karla notes, one of her favorite movies, but watching it with the intention of having a focused discussion made her realize that the fictional couple's relationship mirrored hers and Jonathan's in ways she hadn't thought about but that were helpful to discuss.

ADAM FENSTER

Can Movies Help Your Love Connection?

Rochester researchers are developing the idea that movies featuring relationships can prompt important discussions about the dynamics of real-life couples. Tools to guide couples through the process are available at http://couples-research.com.

Movies in the Study

Couples were asked to watch one movie a week and then discuss it for about 45 minutes.

A Star Is Born
Adam's Rib
Anna Karenina
As Good As It Gets
Barefoot in the Park
Children of a Lesser God
Days of Wine and Roses
Desk Set
Dying Young
Fools Rush In
Forget Paris
French Twist
Funny Girl
Gone with the Wind
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner
Hanover Street
Husbands and Wives
Indecent Proposal
Jungle Fever
Love Jones
Love Story
Made for Each Other
Mississippi Masala
Move Over, Darling
Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House
My Favorite Wife
Nina Takes a Lover
Nine Months
On Golden Pond
Pat and Mike
Penny Serenade
Pfft!
Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker
She's Having a Baby
Steel Magnolias
Terms of Endearment
The Devil's Advocate
The Egg and I
The Male Animal
The Out of Towners
The Thin Man
The Way We Were
Untamed Heart
When a Man Loves a Woman
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf
With Six You Get Eggroll
Yours, Mine and Ours

Sample Questions

The couples used a guide featuring questions designed to elicit discussion about their own relationships. Here's a sample of some of the questions:

What was the main relationship portrayed in the movie? This is the relationship that you will focus on in the following questions.

What main problem(s) did this couple face? Are any of these similar to the problems that the two of you have faced or might face as a couple?

Did this couple strive to understand each other? Did they tend to accept one another, even if they were very different? Or did the couple tend to attack each others' differences?

In what way was this relationship similar to or different from your own relationship in this area?

Did the couple have a strong friendship with each other? Were they able to support each other through bad moods, stressful days, and hard times? Did they listen to each other like good friends? Did the couple in the movie do considerate or affectionate things for each other?

How did the couple handle arguments or differences of opinion? Were they able to open up and tell each other how they really felt, or did they tend to just snap at each other with anger? Did they try using humor to keep things from getting nasty? Did it feel like they were really trying to understand each other?

If the couple got into arguments, did they tend to become heated? Did the couple ever start attacking each other, getting increasingly mean and hostile? Did they end up saying things they didn't really mean? Once this started happening, how did the arguments tend to end?

When one of the partners brought up a problem, did he or she seem to do it in a constructive way (keeping things specific, explaining his or her feelings without attacking), or did it seem more like an attack? Did it seem like bringing up a problem became an assassination of the partner's character?

How did the couple in the movie handle hurt feelings? Did they apologize to each other? Did the apologies seem sincere? Did they tend to jump to negative conclusions when their feelings got hurt, or did they tend to give each other the benefit of the doubt?

Did the partners seem to have similar expectations of their relationship? Where did their expectations differ? Did it seem like they were aware of their own expectations? Were their expectations reasonable? Did they share their expectations with each other?

ISTOCKPHOTO

"The sad truth is that when life knocks you down, you come home and the people you are most likely to lash out at in frustration are the ones you love the most. For these couples to stop and look and say, 'You know, I have yelled at you like that before. I have called you names before and that's not nice. That's not what I want to do to the person I love the most.' Just that insight alone, is likely what makes this intervention work." *—Ronald Rogge, associate professor of psychology*

In particular, the characters take a long time to realize that they were undermining their relationship by failing to admit that they could be headstrong.

"They let their pride get in the way," Hatley says. "That mirrored us as well. Pride sometimes gets in the way, and neither one of us wants to be the first to say, 'I'm sorry.' "

One of the questions in the program asks whether the partners approach problems constructively or "Did it seem like bringing up a problem became an assassination of the partner's character?"

"We both do that to some degree," Jonathan says. "We start off trying to build each other up, but it ends up being an assassination. It definitely opened our eyes."

Rogge hopes that such self-directed reflection can open new possibilities for nurturing nuptial ties on a broader scale.

"It's incredibly portable," he says of the movie-and-talk approach. "There are really great marriage education programs available now but most require facilitators trained in a particular program to administer them. If couples can do this on their own, it makes it much easier to help them," he says.

The results suggest that many couples already possess relationship skills, they just need reminders to put these into practice, the authors conclude. "And that's an amazingly fertile idea. It's more sensible and it's cheaper," says Bradbury.

The researchers note that religious groups have long-standing traditions of offering marriage preparation classes, initiatives that secular institutions are beginning to experiment with in efforts to reduce the likelihood of marital separation. For example, Fairfax County, Va., offers free "compassion training" to newlyweds, the U.S. military has an "oxygen for your relationships" program, and Oklahoma, home to one of the nation's highest divorce rates, has poured millions into a "marriage initiative."

Chesebro says that he and Powalski learned the lessons of communication early in their lives together. After they met on the River Campus in 2007, they were regularly separated by jobs and post-graduation pursuits that took them to different cities—and at times, different countries—before their marriage in 2012. They were struck by how in tune they were when they enrolled in a Pre-Cana workshop, the Roman Catholic Church's premarriage counseling program required of couples who want to get married in the Church. The program made clear that couples have to be prepared to address a lot of touchy subjects over the course of a marriage.

"They really force you to talk at Pre-Cana about all aspects of marriage—finances, sex, relationships, everything," he says, noting that he was surprised at how few of the couples in their group seemed to be able to articulate how they thought about such topics.

"We were like, 'Oh, this is how we would handle that because we already discussed it,' " Chesebro says. "Pre-Cana was a way to see how we were communicating, and it reinforced that communication was important for relationships to work."

But he imagines that he and Powalski could find themselves watching movies and having similar discussions in the future.

Rogge says it's not that movies have a special magic when it comes to helping make relationships last. The goal is to help couples find a relatively easy way to keep important conversations going.

"I think it's the couples reinvesting in their relationship and taking a cold hard look at their own behavior that makes the difference," he says. "The sad truth is that when life knocks you down, you come home and the people you are most likely to lash out at in frustration are the ones you love the most. For these couples to stop and look and say, 'You know, I have yelled at you like that before. I have called you names before and that's not nice. That's not what I want to do to the person I love the most.' Just that insight alone, is likely what makes this intervention work."

For Denver's Stanley, the new study underscores that it's important for couples to think about and talk about their relationships, which isn't always easy to do. Some will be able to do that on their own through a program like watching movies, but many will need the prompting of a structured program.

"Anybody who's going to invest the time, you're going to get some traction in your relationship," he says. "I haven't thought for a long time that one approach is likely to be the be-all-and-end-all for all couples. I think this study is a great example that other thoughtful approaches, in fact, seem to work well."

Rogge says that being able to provide alternatives to couples is important, especially for people who are uncomfortable with relationship workshops and group interventions.

"You might not be able to get your husband into a couples group, especially when you are happy," says Rogge. "But watching a movie together and having a discussion, that's not so scary. It's less pathologizing, less stigmatizing."

Since some of the newlyweds in the study had been together for as many as seven years, Rogge speculates that the movie method would be helpful for long-term marriages as well.

"Taking time to sit down and take an objective look at your relationship with your partner is going to be helpful for any couple at any stage. They can make it a yearly thing they do around their anniversary—watch a movie together and talk about it. That would be a fantastic thing to do and a great present to give themselves each year." R

Susan Hagen, who writes about social sciences for University Communications, contributed to this story.