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Women's [Stressful] Experiences in Intimate Relationships with Men

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Women's [Stressful] Experiences in Intimate Relationships with Men (REB#18-195)

From a young age, women learn that they are expected to maintain relationships with intimate partners. This results in some women learning *self-silencing*, behaviours that involve putting aside what they want and need and not “rocking the boat” so that they can maintain their intimate relationships. The goal of this study was to better understand self-silencing in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV). IPV can be physical (e.g., hitting, shoving, slapping, biting, etc.), sexual (e.g., threats so that one will engage in sexual activity, threats if one refuses sexual activity, etc.), or emotional/psychological (e.g., insults or put-downs, swearing, controlling behaviours, etc.). Negative or abusive behaviours by intimate male partners have been shown in studies with older women to increase the likelihood that women will silence themselves and suppress their own needs. Research has also shown that self-silencing has many negative consequences, including a reduced ability to talk openly with one's partner about one's emotions. So, we wanted to learn how self-silencing may affect women in intimate relationships with men, and whether showing compassion toward themselves can reduce some of the consequences of self-silencing for women who are experiencing IPV. We recruited 301 women from the university and 34 from the community. We found that the more often they experienced male-perpetrated IPV, the less compassion they showed themselves and the more they silenced themselves. These women were also less able to openly communicate with their partners and were more likely to consent to sexual activity they did not want. The findings in this study suggest that self-silencing is common and when it occurs in the presence of IPV, it has negative consequences for women. Future researchers may want to use qualitative methods to understand whether self-silencing is relationship-dependent or longer-lasting, disrupting future relationships as well.