



# Relationship Distress Monitor

Estimating levels of adult couple relationship distress across the UK

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## Key messages: Couple relationship distress in the UK

- Good quality, couple, family and social relationships are the basis of a thriving society – they are central to our health and wellbeing, and poor quality relationships have far-reaching consequences. Inter-parental relationships have also been recognised in research as well as government policy as a major determinant of children’s life chances.
- However, our analysis estimates that almost one-in-five (18%) people (2.87 million people) in adult couple relationships in the UK are in relationships which could be characterised as ‘distressed’. (A ‘distressed’ relationship is one with a severe level of relationship problems, which has a clinically significant negative impact on partner’s wellbeing. Those in ‘distressed’ relationships report regularly considering separation/divorce, quarrelling, regretting being in their relationship, being unhappy in their relationship, for example. Research shows clear links between relationship distress and depression, anxiety, increased blood pressure and heightened risk of heart attacks. Relationships are characterised as ‘distressed’ using a brief version of a scientifically validated scale for measuring relationship quality.)
- Partners of children under 16 are more likely to be in distressed relationships: 22% of parents of under-16s are in distressed relationships.
- A broad range of relationship support services are effective at improving relationship quality. We need to expand access to a spectrum of support for good quality relationships, overcoming barriers of accessibility, availability, and affordability to ensure that anyone who needs it can benefit from support. Support needs to be available to all, across a continuum of needs, from preventative interventions to build relational capability and promoting good quality relationships, to more targeted and intensive support (such as relationship counselling) for people facing greater difficulties.
- We urge policy makers to heed this disquieting evidence and take action: In a recent major report, Relate provided a comprehensive, evidence-based vision for how support for good quality relationships could be strengthened.<sup>1</sup> Now, in the light of this new evidence about the extent of relationship distress, we need to implement it.

## Why the quality of our couple relationships matters

The quality of our relationships has significant consequences for partners, children, and across wider society. A wealth of evidence now shows the benefits of good quality, stable couple relationships across the life course for physical and mental health.<sup>2</sup> People in good quality relationships have lower blood pressure and lower risk of coronary events than those in poorer quality relationships,<sup>3</sup> and marital quality even predicts patient survival among patients with chronic heart failure.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, poor quality relationships are also linked to increased risky health behaviours, including alcohol misuse,<sup>5</sup> smoking and substance abuse,<sup>6</sup> while relationship distress is linked to depression<sup>7</sup> and anxiety,<sup>8</sup> with studies indicating over 60% of those with depression attribute relationship problems as the main cause,<sup>9</sup> and that treatment of relationship distress may alleviate up to 30% of cases of major depression.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the distress that comes from unhealthy relationships can have far-reaching negative repercussions beyond the partners involved. Children growing up with parents who have low parental conflict enjoy better physical and mental health,<sup>11</sup> better emotional wellbeing,<sup>12</sup> higher academic attainment,<sup>13</sup> and a lower likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours,<sup>14</sup> while those whose parents have poor relationship quality have more externalising behaviour problems (e.g. hyperactivity, aggression).<sup>15</sup>

Inter-parental conflict can result in impaired parent-child relationships and can affect children's and adolescents' wellbeing and development,<sup>16</sup> leading to increased anxiety, withdrawal and depression, and behavioural problems including aggression, hostility and antisocial behaviour and criminality.<sup>17</sup> Thus a recent evidence review for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) by the Early Intervention found that the quality of parental relationships and family functioning have a significant impact on children's wellbeing – both in intact and separated families.<sup>18</sup>

The quality of the UK's relationships is, therefore, of great significance – to the partners themselves and their health and wellbeing (which is so intimately tied up with their relationships), but also to policy makers. In the face of the mounting evidence, policy makers have increasingly focused on supporting parents' relationships, and the forthcoming 'Life Chances' strategy has identified family stability and parent's relationship quality as a core pillar of attempts to improve the life chances of children in the UK.

## Estimating levels of relationship distress in the UK

However, we currently lack sufficiently detailed national data on the quality of the UK's relationships. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) identifies relationships as a domain which influences subjective wellbeing<sup>19</sup> and includes satisfaction with family life, social life, and the extent to which people have a spouse, family member, or friend to rely on in its national wellbeing measures.<sup>20</sup> The most recent ONS data (from 2013/14) show that, on a scale of 0-10, the average satisfaction with family life is 8.2, and 84% of people say they have a spouse, family member, or friend to rely on.<sup>21</sup> However, we also know that many people do not enjoy the good quality relationships which are so central to the good health and wellbeing of adults and children. For example, across England and Wales, 42% of marriages lead to divorce,<sup>22</sup> and just over 2% of people in couples are likely to experience a separation over the course of a year.<sup>23</sup>

The DWP's 'Family Stability Indicator' also gathers limited data on family stability at the national level by measuring the proportions of children not living with both birth parents, children in low-

income households not living with both birth parents compared with children in middle-to-higher-income households, and the proportion of children living with both birth parents where the parents report happiness or unhappiness in their relationship. (This indicates that by the age of 16, 42% of children do not live with both birth parents.)<sup>24</sup> However, there is very limited national data on the *quality* of relationships, which the evidence shows is so important for adults' and children's wellbeing.

To address this existing data gap, the present report provides a window into the quality of the nation's relationships, estimating the proportion and number of people in the UK who are in relationships (married or cohabiting) which could be clinically considered to be 'distressed.' A 'distressed' relationship is one with a severe level of relationship problems, which has a clinically significant negative impact on partner's wellbeing. Those in 'distressed' relationships report regularly considering separation/divorce, quarrelling, regretting being in their relationship, being unhappy in their relationship, for example. As indicated above, research shows clear links between relationship distress and depression, anxiety, increased blood pressure and heightened risk of cardiovascular disease.

Levels of relationship distress are estimated by examining the most recent individual data from *Understanding Society* – the UK's prime longitudinal study of households, which annually surveys a nationally representative sample of 40,000 households (100,000 individuals). So far, results have been gathered through five waves of data collection from 2009-14 across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. (The methodology for this analysis is explained in the Appendix.)

## Results

The data indicate that 18% of adult people in couple relationships in the UK could be considered to be in 'distressed' relationships – which equates to an estimated 2.87 million married or cohabiting people across the UK in distressed relationships.

The table below provides a summary of the data.

**Table 1: Relationship distress in the UK 2009 – 2014**

		<b>Wave 1</b> (01/2009- 01/2011)	<b>Wave 3</b> (01/2011- 01/2013)	<b>Wave 5<sup>i</sup></b> (01/2013- 01/2015)
<b>1</b>	Proportion of the sample (who are in married or cohabiting relationships; n= 20,980, wave 5) in distressed relationships <sup>ii</sup>	13.53%	20.18%	17.98%
<b>2</b>	Proportion of the sample (in relationships) in distressed relationships, where individuals participated in all five waves of data collection <sup>iii</sup>	12.71%	19.71%	17.96%
<b>3</b>	Estimated proportion of the UK adult population as a whole in distressed relationships	4.40%	8.16%	4.51%
<b>4</b>	Estimated number of people in the UK currently in distressed relationships <sup>iv</sup>	2,748,691	5,182,005	2,866,127
<b>5</b>	Proportion of the sample who report at least occasionally considering divorce/separation (including 'occasionally', 'more often than not', 'most of the time' and 'all of the time')	9.67%	7.77%	9.20%

6	Proportion of the sample who report at least occasionally regretting getting married/living together	8.44%	9.02%	10.39%
7	Proportion of the sample who report at least occasionally quarrelling <sup>v</sup>	47.03%	49.58%	49.06%
8	Correlation between relationship quality and the presence of children under 16 <sup>vi</sup>	-0.08	-0.09	-0.09
9	Correlation between relationship quality and age of partners <sup>vi</sup>	0.03	0.06	0.05

<sup>i</sup> Wave 5 data were released November 2015

<sup>ii</sup> The average across all waves is 17.53%

<sup>iii</sup> The average where partner is present in all waves is 16.08%

<sup>iv</sup> See Appendix for calculations

<sup>v</sup> 6.22/6.65/6.83 for 'more often than not', or worse

<sup>vi</sup> Correlations not tested for statistical significance

## Discussion

### Relationship distress and relationship quality over time

According to the most recent data, 2.87 million partners (18% of partners) who were either married or living together were estimated to be in distressed relationships in 2013 and 2014. This would equate to over 1.4 million distressed UK families.<sup>a</sup> Digging a little deeper into the data, variations across the three waves of data collection also show interesting patterns over time.

Relationship distress increased by over 6.5 percentage points between waves 1 and 3. A plausible explanation for this variation is the severe recession during this period. Indeed, wider research – including by Relate<sup>25</sup> – suggests that economic recession has a social counterpart in a negative impact on the quality of people's relationships. Relate's research found a clear correlation between negative experiences of recession and deterioration in relationships, with those who felt the greatest impact of recession being up to eight times as likely as those who were not negatively affected by recession to see their relationships break down, even after accounting for background characteristics such as income, family structure, education and relationship length.

However, the proportions of people who report considering divorce/separation at least occasionally was lower during the recession years – only 7.77% of partners considered divorce during 2011 and 2012 compared to 9.67% before and 9.20% after this period. Did hard economic conditions discourage partners from divorce/separation considerations despite increased relationship distress? Such an explanation is certainly a plausible candidate. Several studies from the US have indicated that an increase in the unemployment rate leads to a *decrease*, not increase, in the divorce rate<sup>26</sup> – because when economic conditions are least favourable, the gains from leaving an unhappy relationship may be outweighed by the prohibitive cost of separation (legal

<sup>a</sup> We follow the ONS definition of 'families' in the *Families and Households* statistical bulletins: 'A family is a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent with at least one child.' However, it should be noted that both partners in the relationship may not necessarily characterise their relationship in the same way: some partners may have quite different perceptions of their relationship, so while we know that 18% of people in couple relationships consider their relationship to be of a quality which clinical practice would regard as distressed, it is possible that their partners might not agree.

costs, changes in household income, establishing new households, etc.). The recession may have reduced 'divorce/separation considerations' by about 1.5 percentage points.<sup>b</sup>

It is also worth highlighting that while the 2013/14 levels of relationship distress where 1.4 million couples are distressed represent an improvement on the more than 2.5 million distressed couples in 2011-2012, this level is still higher than the 2009-2010 level. Levels of relationship distress in wave 5 show improvement by over 2 percentage points compared to wave 3 but this is still 4.5 percentage points higher than in wave 1. Thus, relationship quality has not returned to pre-recession levels. Furthermore, rows 5 and 6 suggest a sustained worsening in relationship quality between 2009 and 2014. This is indicated by increasing proportions of partners considering divorce/separation or regretting marrying/living with their partners.

### Levels of conflict in relationships

6.8% of partners report severe levels of quarrelling, something that should negatively affect relationship quality. Row 7 indicates that nearly half of partners quarrel 'occasionally', 'more often than not', 'most of the time' or 'all of the time'. This number would be evidently alarming for the health of relationships were it not for the large number of partners who quarrel 'occasionally' – if we exclude those who quarrel only occasionally, the proportion who report quarrelling 'more often than not', 'most of the time' or 'all of the time' falls to less than 7%. Since some level of arguing is simply a part of life, even in good quality relationships and it is how people *deal with conflict* rather than simply the presence of arguments which matters most, the near-50% of people who report quarrelling at least occasionally should not be interpreted as an indication of poor quality relationships. If we look instead at people who report more severe levels of conflict, we can see that 6.8% of partners in the sample report quarrelling at least 'more often than not' in 2013 and 2014.

### Relationship distress and parenthood

We also investigated the proportion of parents (with a child under 16) in relationships which could be characterised as 'distressed'. In Wave 5 there were 7,989 partners with children under 16, and of these 1,782 were in relationships which could be characterised as distressed. The proportion of parents of under-16s in distressed relationships was therefore higher than the proportion of all partners: 22.31%, compared to 17.98%.

Similarly, the Row 8 results suggest that having children under 16 is negatively correlated with relationship quality, whereas age is positively correlated with relationship quality: the older the partner, the better their relationship quality according to (row 9). These findings are complementary since older partners are less likely to have young children under 16. Despite the small size, these correlations are still qualitatively informative. On average, the correlation between lower relationship quality and the presence of younger children is supported by wider research, which shows that becoming a parent can have a major impact on the couple relationship and becoming a parent is one of life events most likely to reduce relationship quality.<sup>27</sup> In particular, first-time parents are at risk of experiencing personal and marital distress,<sup>28</sup> and after becoming parents, many couples engage in less positive interactions and argue more<sup>29</sup> while also typically spending significantly less time together.<sup>30</sup> Parents do not all experience parenthood in the same way, however, and some show a stabilisation or even increase in relationship quality.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>b</sup> This interpretation is only speculative. For a conclusive interpretation, a more rigorous study of divorce/separation dynamics during this period would be required.

However, it is estimated that 40-70% of couples experience a decline in relationship quality in their first year of parenthood.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

Given the importance of the quality of our relationships to our health and wellbeing and to children's outcomes, it is clearly of concern that according to the latest data, an estimated 2.87 million people (18% of people in relationships) are in relationships which would be characterised as 'distressed'.

A broad range of relationship support services, across a spectrum from preventative interventions to build relational capability and promoting good quality relationships, to more targeted and intensive support (such as relationship counselling) for people facing greater difficulties, have proven effective at improving relationship quality, and thereby improving mental health and wellbeing.<sup>33</sup> An evaluation for the Department for Education showed relationship counselling resulted in statistically significant positive changes in individuals' relationship quality, wellbeing and communication, according to validated scores of relationship quality, communication and wellbeing, with the effect size particularly large for wellbeing.<sup>34</sup>

We therefore need to expand access to a spectrum of support for good quality relationships, overcoming barriers of accessibility, availability, and affordability to ensure that anyone who needs it can benefit from support. Support needs to be available to all who need it.

We therefore urge policy makers to heed this disquieting evidence. In a recent major policy and research report, Relate provided a comprehensive, evidence-based 10-year vision for how support for good quality relationships could be strengthened.<sup>35</sup> Now, in the light of this new evidence about the extent of relationship distress, we need to see action to implement this and improve the quality of the nation's relationships as the basis of a stronger society. In particular, we would highlight the need for a coordinated, cross-government, national strategy for supporting good quality relationships, to deliver joined-up national leadership, in light of the evidence for the importance of good quality relationships and the worrying estimated levels of relationship distress. A crucial part of this strategy must be the development of more nuanced and robust data on the quality of relationships at national and local levels. Our analysis here, in estimating levels of relationship distress nationally, is a significant contribution towards this. Now we need government to take up this torch and gather and disseminate robust data on levels of relationship distress which could inform local planning and commissioning.

One further recommendation from this 10-year vision report which bears highlighting here, given the apparent greater likelihood of parents of younger children to experience poor quality relationships, is the need for building support for inter-parental relationships into family support services around new parents and parents of younger children (e.g. Children's Centres). The strong evidence on the links between couple relationship quality, parenting and child wellbeing<sup>36</sup> presents a compelling case for joining-up parenting and family support and developing local hubs to support all families and the relationships within them.

# Appendix

## Data and Methodology

We estimate the levels of distressed relationships in the UK by analysing data from the Understanding Society survey (USS) collected by the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER).<sup>37</sup> The USS collects data on 40,000 UK households (approximately 100,000 individuals). We only focus on participants in relationships (married or cohabiting) who are interviewed annually, starting in 2009. There were 23,597 individual respondents in relationships in wave 1; 24,469 in wave 3; and 20,980 in wave 5. The fifth wave of data was released in November 2015. All raw data were analysed using Stata.

The determination of a relationship as ‘distressed’ or not is calculated from individuals’ responses in the USS, using a brief, ten-item scale derived from a scientifically validated scale for measuring relationship quality called the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), developed by Graham Spanier, Ph.D.<sup>38</sup> The USS questionnaire includes ten items from this 32-item scale – examples of which are given below:

- How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation, or terminating your relationship? (‘All the time’ to ‘Never’)
- Do you ever regret that you married or lived together? (‘All the time’ to ‘Never’)
- Please fill in the circle which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship (‘Extremely unhappy’ to ‘Perfect’)

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The DAS gives the respondent a total score out of a possible 151 by adding up the responses to all of the 32 questions (each question has a response format from 0 to 4/5/6, depending on the question). The DAS also has a cut-off to distinguish distressed and non-distressed relationships.

Accordingly, using an equivalised cut-off for the 10 items in the USS questionnaire (DAS items 16, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, and 31), USS responses by qualifying participants were scored against these ten items from the DAS to calculate a partner’s estimated relationship distress status. It should be noted that this 10-item version of the DAS has not been tested for correlation with the full 32-item DAS. Shorter versions of the DAS, comprising 14,<sup>39</sup> 10,<sup>40</sup> 7,<sup>41</sup> and 4 items,<sup>42</sup> have been validated by researchers and found to show good consistency with the full 32-item DAS and good reliability in measuring relationship distress. However, unfortunately, the DAS items included in the USS questionnaire do not together constitute any of these shorter validated versions. Consequently, further work to assess the consistency of this 10-item scale with other validated shorter versions of the DAS – or inclusion of one of these validated versions in the USS questionnaire – would need to be undertaken in order to estimate levels of relationship distress with greater certainty. (The DWP’s Family Stability Indicator, for example, could be updated in this way, to provide more robust figures on the extent of poor quality relationships nationally – and locally, since the USS data set is large enough to provide data at the upper-tier local authority level.)

Our method is a linear extrapolation of a brief validated four-item version of the DAS developed in Sabourin et al (2005), who define a score of less than 12/21 as distressed while above 14/21 is non-distressed.<sup>43</sup> Rather than having a single cut-off point below which a partner is characterised as

being in a distressed relationship, we follow the approach taken by Sabourin et al (2005) and construct an interval to minimise misclassifying partners. Within this interval lie borderline scores which may indicate distressed relationships but which are less clear-cut determinations of relationship distress.

A partner is classed as in a distressed relationship if their total score against the 10 DAS items is less than 28/49. Between 28/49 and less than 33/49 is classed as borderline, while a score of 33/49 and above designates a non-distressed relationship. 0 is the minimum score while 49/49 is the maximum score.

### Total UK Population calculations

The UK population is approximated from the ONS.<sup>44</sup> The USS includes approximately 100,000 participants aged 10 and above. The overall USS sample is a nationally representative sample,<sup>45</sup> and we assume our sub-sample of those in relationships (20,980 in wave 5) is representative of the corresponding UK population. Consequently, the ratio of partners in distressed relationships to the number of adults (aged 16 and above) in the USS should approximate the ratio of distressed partners nationally to UK population aged 16 and above.

Only for wave 5 could we find data for both total UK population (64,351,250) and UK population for those aged 15 and above (53,189,000).<sup>c</sup> We assume that the ratio between the two (0.83) is constant across the sample and thus can be used to calculate the respective waves 1 & 3 populations aged 15 and above.

Wave 1 survey: 60,000 adults surveyed. 62,510,000 average total UK population for 2009-2010

Wave 3 survey: 50,000 adults surveyed. 63,495,050 average total UK population for 2011-2012

Wave 5 survey: 70,000 adults surveyed. 64,351,250 average total UK population for 2013-2014

Wave 1: 3,192 distressed partners. UK population aged  $\geq 15$  years: 51,667,130

Wave 3: 4,937 distressed partners. UK population aged  $\geq 15$  years: 52,481,315

Wave 5: 3,772 distressed partners. 2014 UK population aged  $\geq 15$  years: 53,189,000

Wave 1: UK adult population in distressed relationships =  $(3,192 \times 51,667,130) \div 60,000 = 2,748,691$

Wave 3: UK adult population in distressed relationships =  $(4,937 \times 52,481,315) \div 50,000 = 5,182,005$

Wave 5: UK adult population in distressed relationships =  $(3,772 \times 53,189,000) \div 70,000 = 2,866,127$

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<sup>c</sup> Ideally we would use UK population data for those aged 16 and above but this data is currently unavailable

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## About Relate

Relate is the UK's leading relationship support organisation, serving more than one million people through information, support and counselling every year. Our vision is a future in which healthy relationships are actively promoted as the basis of a thriving society.

We aim to develop and support healthy relationships by:

- Delivering inclusive, high-quality services that are relevant at every stage of life
- Helping couples, families and individuals to make relationships work better
- Helping both the public and policy makers improve their understanding of relationships and what makes them flourish.

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