

WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP?

SUBJECTIVE BELIEFS OF OLDER MARRIED, DIVORCED AND WIDOWED INDIVIDUALS

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH AIMS

Subjective beliefs influence goals, motivations, and behavior in romantic relationships. Whereas prioritizing central characteristics of an ideal partnership seem to be universal, different marital transitions are thought to influence these personal templates. Marital transitions such as divorce or bereavement can generate a discrepancy between perceptions and individual standards, which drives emotions and cognitions and motivates behavior designed to reduce or resolve the discrepancy.

The present research

This study focus on differences between subjective beliefs of a successful partnership of divorced, widowed and long-term and continuously married persons ($N = 800$, age 62–91 years) and how their assumptions of a successful partnership relate to various dimensions of well-being.

Aims

- Exploration of subjective beliefs of a successful relationship in older adults.
- Examination whether these beliefs differ between long-term married, divorced and widowed persons.
- Investigation of a possible connection between subjective beliefs of a successful partnership, well-being and partnership satisfaction, and whether this connection might vary between continuously married, divorced and widowed persons.

Hypotheses

Based on existing research (e.g., Banse & Kowalick, 2007; Franiuk et al., 2004; Moorman et al., 2006), we expect that:

- a certain number of shared beliefs of a successful partnership could be extracted from open answers of persons across all marital status groups.
- subjective beliefs of successful partnerships differ between marital status groups.
- well-being is associated with different subjective beliefs of a successful partnership in long term married, divorced and widowed persons.

METHODS

Study description and statistical analyses

- Data stem from a survey-based study, which is part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research 'LIVES' (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation).
- Sample: 800 persons aged 62-91 years (302 long-term continuously married, 187 divorced and 311 widowed persons).
- Analytical strategy: Categorization of responses by using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2008). Persons in each marital status group were allocated to a high or low well-being group by using a median split.
- The Pearson chi-square tests were used to compare the subjective beliefs of a successful partnership by gender, marital status and level of well-being. All analyses were carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0.

Variables/Instruments

- **Subjective beliefs of a successful partnership:** single-item question (adapted from Schneewind, Wunderer & Erkelenz, 2004)
- **Partnership satisfaction:** single-item question
- **Life satisfaction:** Satisfaction with life scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Schumacher, 2003)
- **Depressive symptoms:** Center of Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) (Hautzinger & Bailer, 1993)
- **Subjective health:** single-item question

RESULTS

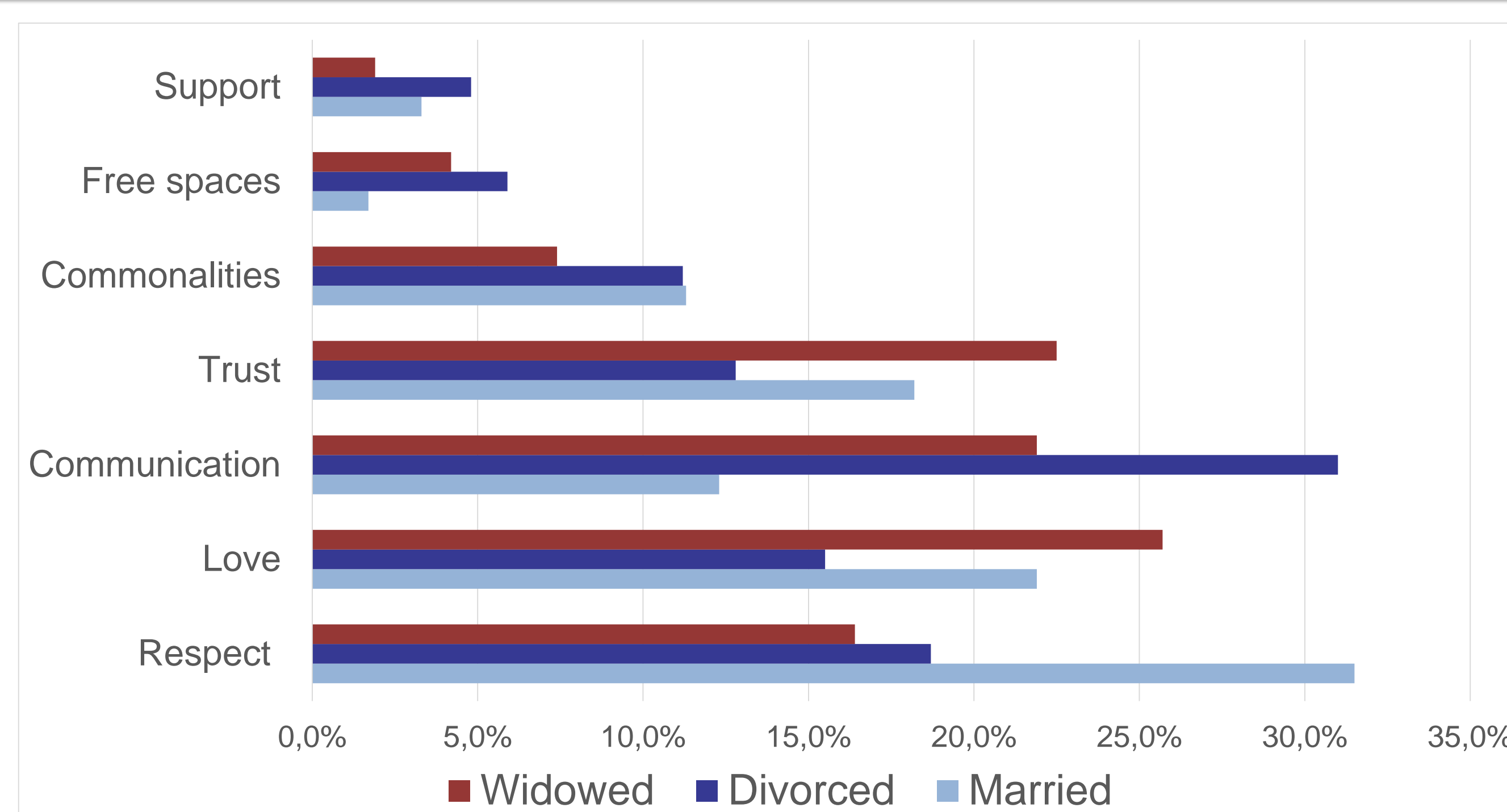


Figure 1. Subjective beliefs of a successful partnership by marital status (frequency of responses in %).

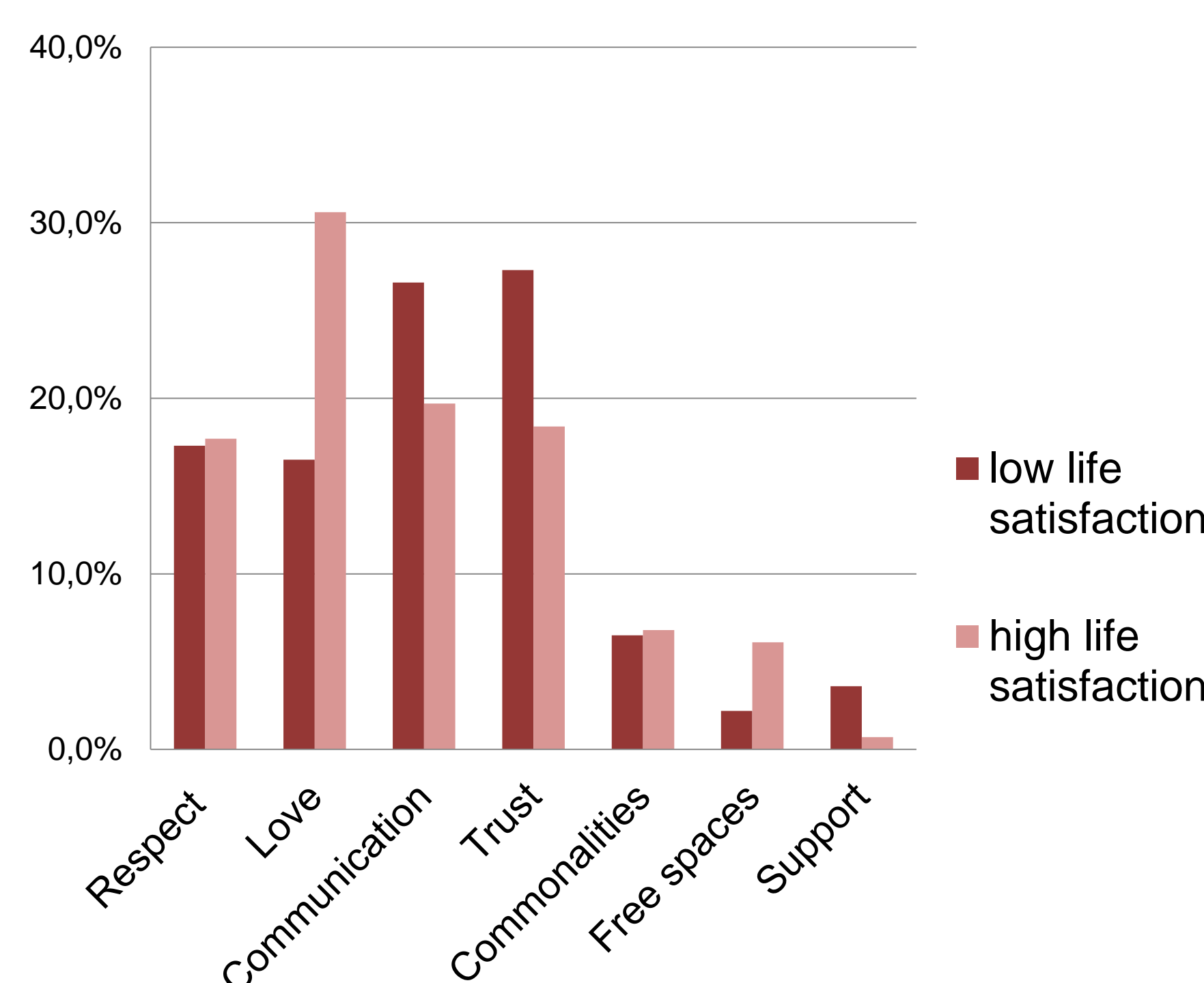


Figure 2. Responses of widowed individuals with high vs. low life satisfaction.

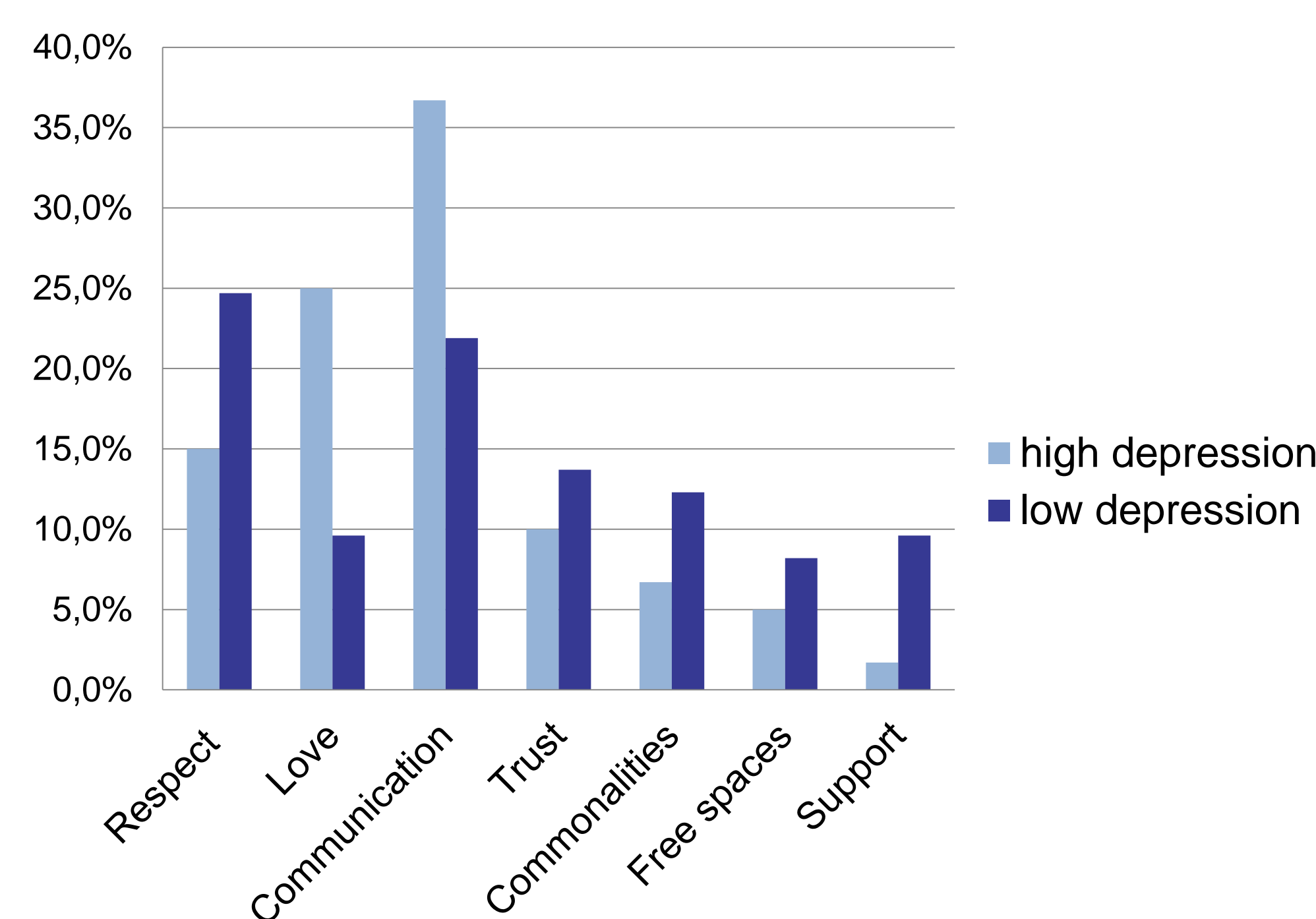


Figure 3. Responses of divorced individuals with high vs. low depression.

DISCUSSION

- Our results demonstrate that mutual *respect*, *love*, *trust* and effective *communication* are central components of a successful partnership regardless of marital status.
- However, prioritization of these central components differ between marital status groups: *Respect* was considered to be the most important for continuously married, functional *communication* for divorcees, and *love* for widowed persons.
- Our findings confirm that life satisfaction and depressive symptoms are strongly associated with the different combinations of beliefs in divorced and widowed persons. While the importance of shared *love* could be helpful in improving well-being in the widowed group (Costello & Kendrick, 2000), stronger emphasis on love was associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms in the divorced group.
- The findings provide important insights for couples therapy as well as for counselling of persons after the loss of a partner due to separation, divorce or death. Therapy that considers partnership ideals and contrasts them with the partnership experiences could help to reduce the discrepancy between ideals and reality.