New insights into love and depression are being uncovered by clinical psychology PhD researcher Simon Rice, whose early results indicate that young men’s self-esteem is significantly boosted by being romantically attached.

**Diagnosing depression in men**
Simon, who completed a Graduate Diploma of Education at the Melbourne Campus in 2002 and taught science, psychology and religious education in secondary schools for a few years in Australia and East Timor, found himself drawn to further study in psychology.

Enrolling in ACU National’s well-regarded Master of Clinical Psychology at the Melbourne Campus last year, Simon was encouraged by Professor of Psychology Barry Fallon to become involved in research, kicking off his doctoral studies.

Simon, pictured right, has hypothesised that men and women may show depression in different ways, so that depressed men often slip under the diagnostic radar and are therefore more at risk of failing to receive treatment.

Significantly, while women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression and to consider suicide, men are more likely to be successful in their attempts at suicide.

“Depressed women may tend to internalise feelings of depression, staying in bed, becoming lethargic and tearful and experiencing appetite changes,” Simon said. “Depressed men, on the other hand, may show more outward signs such as road rage, irritability, aggression and substance abuse.

“What I am looking at is coming up with a measure that asks questions about some of these outward behaviours, so that we can more successfully diagnose and treat depression in men.”

**Romance boosts self-esteem**
While Simon’s work on male depression looks at all age groups, some of his earlier findings on the self-esteem of young men have already attracted media attention. His presentation at the recent Australian Psychological Society’s 43rd annual conference in Hobart was on the impact of romantic relationships on the self-esteem of young adults aged 18 to 25.

“I found that it was the males who seemed to experience benefits in their self-esteem when they had a romantic partner,” he explained. “Their self-esteem showed a real boost. I tried to come up with an explanation.”

Simon believes that unless they are involved romantically with a female, many men find it very hard to break society’s expectations that men should be strong and silent and keep their feelings to themselves. Having a female romantic partner may provide these young men with the emotional support and care that may be missing in their friendships.

“Many men need to have been at the pub with their mates for five hours before they can express their feelings, whereas many women are far more open about discussing their needs and attitudes,” he said.

He believes that men may be more likely to be in touch with their own needs and feelings, and to communicate them more successfully, when romantically involved, and that there are flow-on benefits such as being more likely to recognise and pursue a personally satisfying career.

**Important research**
Simon and Professor Fallon’s latest findings were presented at the Eighth Annual Australian Psychological Society’s Psychology of Relationships Interest Group Conference in Melbourne in November.

As for Simon’s own career, he is enjoying the collegial relationship and research opportunities with fellow PhD students, who meet regularly with Professor Fallon to discuss their research. He has also found that practising psychologists, particularly graduates of ACU National, have welcomed students in placements.

“Postgraduate study in psychology at ACU National has broadened my horizons, introducing me to talented and respected practitioners in the field, and enabling me to pursue research of importance to our community.”