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The Importance of Relational Support for Attachment and Exploration Needs

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss theory and research on social support and caregiving processes in adult close relationships. We first outline key theoretical principles of attachment theory and of a theoretical perspective on thriving through relationships that builds on attachment theory. We then review empirical research that has tested key theoretical postulates regarding the importance of relational support for both attachment and exploration needs. The empirical review is divided into two components that reflect the two major functions of support/caregiving in close relationships, and that reflect the two different life contexts in which relational support/care is crucial (support in adversity and support for exploration and pursuit of opportunities). We conclude by emphasizing important directions for future research.

Key Theoretical Principles

Attachment theory provides an ideal framework for understanding social support and caregiving processes because it stipulates that the need for security is a fundamental human need and provides a basis for understanding the complex interpersonal processes involved in three interrelated components of human nature: attachment, exploration, and caregiving [1, 2]. All three systems are presumed to have survival value and to be inherent, but their particular expression is learned through experiences with attachment figures.

The *attachment system* maintains an individual's safety and security through contact with nurturing caregivers. The attachment system becomes activated most strongly in adversity so that when distressed, the individual feels an urge to seek protection, comfort, and support from an attachment figure [1, 2]. The desire for support and care in adversity is not childish or immature, but an intrinsic part of human nature that contributes to health and well-being.

The *exploration system* motivates individuals to explore their environment - to work, play, discover, pursue goals, and interact with peers [2]. When individuals are confident that an attachment figure is available and accessible, and will be responsive when called upon, they

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feel secure enough to explore the environment, take on challenges, and engage in independent activities. Unencumbered exploration occurs only when attachment needs are satisfied (i.e., the attachment system is deactivated). Exploration also contributes to optimal health and well-being.

The *caregiving system* supports an individual's attachment and exploration behavior [2,3] and serves two major functions: providing a *safe haven* for an attached person by meeting needs for security, and providing a *secure base* by supporting autonomy and exploration [4, 5]. Individuals who thrive emotionally and socially, and who make the most of their opportunities, have at least one caregiver (e.g., parent, spouse) who is encouraging of their autonomy yet responsive when needed. Being *sensitive* and *responsive* to needs is crucial for being an effective caregiver [6, 7]. Individuals learn caregiving patterns from the significant others who have previously been responsible for their care.

Feeney and Collins proposed a theoretical model of thriving through relationships that builds on attachment theory by emphasizing thriving (growth) as the desirable end state of receiving care from others, rather than simply maintenance or restoration of baseline levels of functioning [7, 8]. First, the model defines thriving as a multi-dimensional construct that includes five components of well-being (hedonic, eudaimonic, psychological, social/ relational, and physical), and specifies two contexts through which people thrive: *experiences of adversity* and *opportunities for growth in the absence of adversity*. Second, it identifies specific social support processes that enable people to thrive in each context: *source of strength support* for thriving through adversity (which includes providing a safe haven) and *relational catalyst support* for thriving through opportunities for growth (which includes providing a secure base). Third, it identifies mechanisms through which support, carried out in dyadic interaction, is likely to have long-term effects on thriving. This perspective provides an integrative framework for considering how social support processes in two life contexts work together to promote optimal well-being.

Key Empirical Findings

Support in Adversity

Activation of Attachment and Caregiving Systems.—Research supports attachment theory's postulate that when individuals are distressed (attachment system activation) they seek proximity to attachment figures, and that attachment behavior is activated with greater intensity as perceived threat increases. Care-seeking behavior in adulthood increases in response to stressful or threatening events [9], and secure individuals have a higher threshold for attachment system activation than insecure individuals [10] and show a greater willingness to seek support [9, 10, 11, 12]. Correspondingly, signs of need in a close other activate the attachment figure's caregiving system. More care is provided as greater need is expressed, and care-seeking and caregiving behaviors are coordinated in complementary ways [9, 11, 13, 14].

Predicting Outcomes.—Individuals who receive responsive care during adversity should experience beneficial outcomes including reduced physiological arousal, better coping, and enhanced feelings of security and relationship satisfaction. An observational study of

couples in which one partner disclosed a personal worry showed that care-recipients experienced immediate improvements in emotional well-being when their partner provided more responsive support [9]. Similarly, participants who were waiting to begin a stressful procedure were more calmed when their romantic partners made more supportive remarks, and less calmed when their partners avoided or downplayed their concerns [12]. Another study experimentally manipulated a romantic partner's attentiveness in a frightening virtual world and found that individuals with an attentive/responsive partner (relative to those with an inattentive/neglectful partner) reported lower anxiety, more positive self-evaluations, and increased relationship satisfaction following the task, and moved physically closer to their partner during a subsequent task [15]. In related research, support given by one romantic partner was experimentally manipulated before and after the other partner participated in a stressful task [16]. Insecure recipients of lower quality support perceived less support, misremembered an earlier support interaction with their partner as unsupportive, and performed more poorly on the task. Finally, dating and married adults are more satisfied in their relationships when their partners are more responsive caregivers [17, 18].

Recent theoretical and experimental research on affectionate touch shows personal and relational benefits of receiving supportive touch [19, 20, 21, 22, 23]. Affectionate touch may be a particularly effective form of support because it boosts feelings of security [20], makes proximity and availability particularly salient, may be easier to enact responsively, and does not have the costs that sometimes occur with other forms of social support (e.g., the recipient feeling vulnerable, indebted, incapable, evaluated [21]).

Additional evidence for the importance of responsive support comes from studies showing that cardiovascular reactivity is buffered in individuals who experience a stressor in the presence of a close, non-evaluative support provider relative to individuals who experience the stressor alone, with a stranger, or with an evaluative other [24, 25]. In addition, soothing touch or close physical contact (with a close other) during a stressful task decreases heart rate and blood pressure [26] and attenuates neural activity in brain regions associated with emotional and behavioral responses to threat [27]. Simply seeing a picture of a supportive partner during the experience of physical pain produces increased activity in reward-related brain regions, decreased activity in threat-related regions, and decreases in self-reported pain [28]. The mental activation of supportive ties also reduces cardiovascular reactivity to stress [29]. Thus, supportive others can have beneficial effects even when not physically present.

Finally, a large literature indicates that social support during adversity is associated with better mental and physical health [30, 31]. This literature generally indicates that people with satisfying levels of social support are healthier, recover from illness more quickly, and are better adjusted (personally and socially).

Individual Differences in Support/Care Provision.—Sensitive and compassionate reactions to the needs of others are products of a well-functioning caregiving behavioral system, which cannot function effectively when one's own needs for security are not met [32]. Corroborating this, self-report studies reveal that secure attachment is associated with more effective caregiving [3, 13, 33]. Secure adults are sensitive to their partner's cues, willing to provide physical comfort, more cooperative than controlling, and less likely to be

over-involved in their caregiving efforts. Importantly, studies in which attachment security was primed show that experimentally induced security increases empathy, endorsement of prosocial values, and prosocial behavior [34], providing evidence for a causal link between feeling secure and compassionate responses to others in need.

In contrast, insecure attachment is associated with less effective caregiving, but the particular pattern of care depends on the type of insecurity. Self-report studies find that avoidant individuals are relatively neglectful and controlling, whereas anxious individuals are relatively intrusive, over-involved, and controlling. Observational and experimental research provides converging evidence. Avoidant adults tend to find their partner's expressions of need to be aversive, and they respond by providing less support, expressing more anger, and distancing themselves [12, 35, 36]. Anxious adults are less responsive and exhibit more negative support behavior, especially when their partner's needs are less clear [9]. Both avoidant and anxious individuals tend to be out of synch with their partners' needs [13].

Explanatory Mechanisms.—Effective caregiving requires a constellation of skills, resources, and motivations [7, 37]. One study using observational, survey, and experimental methods [13] showed that unique patterns of motives, skills, and resources explain why people with different attachment characteristics differ in their caregiving. Avoidant adults are unresponsive because they lack knowledge about how to support others, lack prosocial orientation, and fail to develop the deep sense of closeness, commitment, and trust that are critical for motivating effective caregiving. Anxious adults are over-involved caregivers because although they feel close and committed, they simultaneously distrust their partners and are selfishly motivated in their caregiving attempts.

Other research examining specific motives [37] revealed that avoidant individuals helped their partners for egoistic reasons (e.g., feel obligated, want to avoid sanctions), whereas anxious individuals helped for egoistic and altruistic reasons (e.g., feel concern for partner's welfare, but also want to gain their partner's love or make them dependent). These motives, in turn, predicted the quality of support provided. Altruistic motives were linked with responsive caregiving, whereas egoistic motives were linked with unresponsive or overinvolved caregiving [38].

Regarding emotional mechanisms, caregivers who are unable to regulate their own emotions or who are uncomfortable with others' emotion expression have negative reactions to witnessing a significant others' distress, which can impede effective caregiving [36, 39]. For example, anxious individuals tend to feel nervous when their partners are in distress, and avoidant (and sometimes anxious) individuals display anger when their partners express distress or seek support from them.

Individual Differences in Responses to Receiving Support/Care.—Research considering the moderating effects of care-receiver's attachment on outcomes has shown that avoidant individuals are more calmed than secure individuals by the supportive comments of their partners, despite being less likely to mention the stressor to their partners [12]. Similarly, individuals low in perceived support (characteristic of insecure individuals) performed better on a difficult task when support was experimentally offered to them,

whereas those high in perceived support (characteristic of secure individuals) performed equally well regardless of the support manipulation [40]. This suggests that supportive behaviors may have a stronger impact on insecure individuals who do not typically expect to receive support. Other research shows attachment differences in preferences for specific forms of care. For example, secure individuals were more calmed when their partners provided emotional support, whereas insecure (dismissive) individuals reacted more favorably to instrumental support [41].

Studies examining attachment differences in the extent to which the mere presence of a partner buffers autonomic reactivity have shown that separation from a partner during a stressful situation had adverse effects on insecure individuals' cardiovascular reactivity [42], and that their physiological reactivity was greater when the partner was present than absent [43]. Perhaps insecure individuals were dealing not only with the threat of the stressor, but also with the prospect of being rejected by their partner. In contrast, partner proximity had no effect on secure individuals' autonomic responses - perhaps because (a) the psychological availability of their partner transcends physical separation, (b) they are confident of their ability to cope with stress, or (c) they have a higher threshold for attachment system activation.

Support for Exploration and Pursuit of Opportunities

Predicting Outcomes.—Although adults routinely give credit for their accomplishments to the support of the significant people in their lives, investigations into this support function is a newer research area. Existing research has centered primarily on establishing immediate and longer-term outcomes of receiving support in this context. One study revealed that when recipients felt that their goals were supported by their partners (during a personal goals discussion), they experienced increases in self-esteem and positive mood, and rated the likelihood of achieving their goals to be greater after the discussion than before [44]. Similarly, spouses' secure base support during a laboratory exploration activity, in which "explorers" worked on a novel task, predicted positive changes in the explorer's mood and state self-esteem, greater enthusiasm for the task, greater persistence, and better performance [45]. Longitudinal and observational research shows that individuals whose partners exhibited availability to them during a discussion of an important goal were more likely to accomplish their goal six months later, and showed increases in independent functioning over time (coined the dependency paradox) [46]. In contrast, spousal intrusiveness or interference (e.g., taking over an activity/goal or providing unneeded advice/assistance) predicted decreases in self-esteem and positive affect, and poor performance on exploration tasks [44, 45]. Daily diary investigations with newlywed and elderly couples showed that spousal support fostered same-day and next-day goal progress, which, in turn, predicted improved psychological, physical, and relational well-being [47].

Research aimed at testing a model of relational support for thriving [7] showed that partner support of goal strivings predicted thriving over time through increasing feelings of capability and perceived partner responsiveness [48]. Also, a study designed to examine relational influences on decisions to embrace or forego challenging life opportunities revealed that spousal support encouraged decision-makers to accept the challenge, and this

decision predicted long-term thriving [49]. Other research revealed that reports of goal support received from romantic partners predicted the enactment of both relationship and individual goals over time and enhanced well-being [50]. Taken together, this work indicates that support of goal attainment is linked in important ways with personal and relational outcomes.

Individual differences.—Very little research has considered individual differences in support provision in non-adverse circumstances. One study revealed that avoidant spouses are less available to their partners during exploration, whereas anxious spouses are more interfering and less encouraging of exploration [45]. In addition, both avoidant and anxious individuals receive less availability from their spouses during exploration, and avoidant individuals receive less encouragement [45]. Future research is needed to examine whether attachment moderates outcomes of receiving support in this context.

Future Directions and Conclusion

In the next generation of research, it will be important to (a) increase focus on actual behaviors that are enacted in dyadic interaction and the degree to which those behaviors are responsive, (b) recognize that relational support occurs not only in adversity and can do much more than buffer negative effects of adversity, (c) take a broader view on the desirable end-state of receiving responsive support/care, (d) work to understand mechanisms and mediating pathways, and (e) examine long-term effects. An ultimate goal of this work should be to develop and test theory-based interventions aimed at enhancing thriving outcomes.

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Highlights

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The Importance of Relational Support for Attachment and Exploration Needs *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Special issue on Attachment in Adulthood

- We review attachment theory postulates related to relational support

- We review a perspective on thriving that builds on attachment theory

- We emphasize two major functions of support in two life contexts

- Source of strength support promotes thriving in the face of adversity

- Relational catalyst support promotes thriving though exploration and growth

- We review research on the importance of relational support in each life context