

Seeking Security or Growth: A Regulatory Focus Perspective on Motivations in Romantic Relationships

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Using a multimethod approach, we examined how regulatory focus shapes people's perceptual, behavioral, and emotional responses in different situations in romantic relationships. We first examined how chronic regulatory focus affects romantic partners' support perceptions and problem-solving behaviors while they were engaged in a conflict resolution discussion (Study 1). Next, we experimentally manipulated regulatory focus and tested its effects on partner perceptions when individuals recalled a prior conflict resolution discussion (Study 2). We then examined how chronic regulatory focus influences individuals' emotional responses to hypothetical relationship events (Study 3) and identified specific partner behaviors to which people should respond with regulatory goal-congruent emotions (Study 4). Strongly prevention-focused people perceived their partners as more distancing and less supportive during conflict (Studies 1 and 2), approached conflict resolution by discussing the details related to the conflict (Study 1), and experienced a negative relationship outcome with more agitation (Study 3). Strongly promotion-focused people perceived their partners as more supportive and less distancing (Studies 1 and 2), displayed more creative conflict resolution behavior (Study 1), and experienced a negative relationship outcome with more sadness and a favorable outcome with more positive emotions (Study 3). In Study 4, recalling irresponsible and responsible partner behaviors was associated with experiencing more prevention-focused emotions, whereas recalling affectionate and neglectful partner behaviors was associated with more promotion-focused emotions. The findings show that regulatory focus and approach–avoidance motivations influence certain interpersonal processes in similar ways, but regulatory focus theory also generates novel predictions on which approach–avoidance models are silent.

Keywords: regulatory focus, close relationships, self-regulation, couples

Imagine two people who are in love and want a satisfying relationship. Although both partners strive toward this long-term goal, their underlying motivations may differ. One partner may be motivated by the promise of growth and advancement related to this goal and, therefore, focus on creating a nurturing and stimulating relationship. The other partner may be motivated by the emotional security and protection that the relationship might offer and, thus, endeavor to maintain a stable and enduring relationship. These interpersonal motivations, although similar at first glance, should spawn divergent perceptions and interpretations of the same relational events, color partners' thoughts and emotions in response to those events, and channel their behavior in unique ways as they strive to have a successful relationship (Baldwin, 1992; Berscheid, 1994).

In this article, we focus on one such motivational orientation, *regulatory focus* (Higgins, 1997, 1998), and systematically examine its associations with several important relationship-relevant outcomes. Although regulatory focus and related motivations, par-

ticularly approach–avoidance motivations, should affect certain interpersonal processes in similar ways, we propose that regulatory focus theory also generates novel predictions on which approach–avoidance models are silent. We present four studies that test how regulatory focus shapes people's behavioral (Study 1), perceptual (Studies 1 and 2), and emotional (Studies 3 and 4) responses to different situations in romantic relationships.

Regulatory Focus Theory

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998) identifies the following two motivational systems: (a) a *promotion focus*, which facilitates the fulfillment of people's nurturance needs through the pursuit of hopes and aspirations and is concerned with personal growth and advancement, and (b) a *prevention focus*, which allows people to achieve security needs through the fulfillment of duties and obligations and is concerned with safety and protection. When pursuing promotion concerns, people are in a state of eagerness. They strive toward rewarding outcomes (i.e., *gains*), and they try to avert the absence of positive outcomes (i.e., *nongains*, or missed opportunities). When people are prevention-focused, in contrast, they use vigilance strategies, in that they work to avert negative outcomes (i.e., *losses*) and strive toward the absence of negative outcomes (i.e., *nonlosses*, or absence of threats). Both regulatory focus systems exist in all people to some degree. A particular focus can be activated momentarily by situations that convey gain/reward-related information (and highlight nurturance/advancement needs) or loss/threat-related information (and highlight security

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needs; Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998). Stable individual differences in regulatory focus are believed to develop in part from socialization experiences with significant others, especially parenting practices that encourage promotion or prevention concerns (Higgins & Silberman, 1998; Manian, Papadakis, Strauman, & Essex, 2006).

A large literature has documented the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral manifestations of regulatory focus, both when it is measured as a chronic disposition and when it is activated temporarily (see Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008, for a review). Consistent with their concerns for growth and advancement, promotion-focused people are more likely to attend to and recall events that signal the presence or absence of positive outcomes (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994; Higgins & Tykocinski, 1992), experience positive outcomes more intensely and with more cheerfulness, and experience negative outcomes with lower intensity and more dejection-related emotions (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997; Idson, Liberman, & Higgins, 2000). Promotion-focused people tend to prefer approach strategies for goal attainment (e.g., pursuing all available means for advancement; Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998; Higgins et al., 1994); exhibit more abstract, global information processing (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Förster & Higgins, 2005); and generate and endorse more hypotheses for others' interpersonal actions (Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001).

Consistent with their concerns for safety and security, prevention-focused people are more inclined to attend to and recall events signaling the presence or absence of negative outcomes (Higgins et al., 1994; Higgins & Tykocinski, 1992), experience negative outcomes more intensely and with more agitation, and experience positive outcomes with lower intensity and more quiescence-related emotions (Higgins et al., 1997; Idson et al., 2000). Prevention-focused people prefer avoidance strategies for goal attainment (e.g., carefully avoiding mistakes; Förster et al., 1998; Higgins et al., 1994); engage in more concrete, local information processing (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Förster & Higgins, 2005); and generate and endorse fewer hypotheses for others' behaviors (Liberman et al., 2001).

Although regulatory focus theory proposes that chronic individual differences in regulatory focus emerge through caregivers' social regulatory styles that communicate distinct concerns about how to navigate the social world (Higgins & Silberman, 1998), researchers have just begun to explore the role of regulatory focus in close relationship contexts. Shah (2003), for example, found that individuals' representations of their fathers implicitly affected both the regulatory focus they adopt while pursuing a task and their emotional responses to manipulated performance feedback. Examining the consequences of regulatory focus in romantic relationships, Ayduk, May, Downey, and Higgins (2003) showed that having stronger prevention concerns affects the evaluative and behavioral tactics that highly rejection-sensitive people use when coping with rejection. Specifically, individuals who are both more rejection-sensitive and more prevention-focused evaluate potential dating partners less positively when they believe that a partner has rejected them. They also report greater withdrawal hostility during and after conflicts with their romantic partners (e.g., acting cold and distant) and less expressive hostility (e.g., yelling) during conflicts with them. In a study on forgiveness in relationships, Molden and Finkel (2010) showed that trust in a partner predicts forgiveness in promotion-focused people to a greater extent,

whereas commitment predicts forgiveness in prevention-focused people. Suggesting that promotion and prevention concerns vary in importance across different relationship stages, Molden, Lucas, Finkel, Kumashiro, and Rusbult (2009) also found that perceived support for promotion-focused goals (but not prevention-focused goals) independently predict personal and relationship well-being in unmarried partners during relationship stages when needs for growth and advancement dominate. Among married couples, however, perceived support for both types of goals predict well-being, suggesting that in more established relationships needs for security and growth are both important.

Approach–Avoidance Motivations

Although only a handful of studies have examined regulatory focus as a motivational variable in close relationships, more research has investigated approach–avoidance motivations in interpersonal contexts. One of the more extensively documented theories of motivation was developed by Gray (1990), who proposed that two distinct biologically based systems underlie individual differences in emotional and behavioral sensitivity to positive versus aversive stimuli. The behavioral activation system (BAS) is sensitive to rewards and relief from punishment, promotes positive affect in response to positive events, and facilitates appetitive behaviors toward potential rewards. In contrast, the behavioral inhibition system (BIS) is sensitive to punishments and nonrewards, elicits negative affect in response to aversive events, and inhibits behavior to avoid potential punishments or threats (see also Carver & White, 1994).

Informed by Gray's (1990) theory, Gable, Reis, and Elliott (2000) conducted diary studies to test whether dispositional BIS and BAS orientations predict people's emotional reactions to events that occur in their daily lives. They found that higher BAS sensitivity predicts greater daily positive affect, whereas higher BIS sensitivity predicts greater daily negative affect. Gomez and Gomez (2002) found that, dovetailing with these results, the BAS is linked to processing positive (but not negative) emotional information, whereas the BIS predicts processing of negative (but not positive) emotional information.

Researchers have also examined whether approach and avoidance systems govern thoughts, feelings, and actions in relationships (Gable & Reis, 2001). Gable (2006), for example, suggested that approach social goals should be associated with different social outcomes than are avoidance social goals. Supporting this model, research has shown that both dispositional social approach motivations and short-term social approach goals are associated with positive outcomes such as greater satisfaction with social bonds, more positive social attitudes, and less loneliness (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Gable, 2006). Avoidance social motivations and goals, in contrast, predict poorer outcomes (e.g., less satisfaction with social bonds, more loneliness, more negative social attitudes), increased frequency of and reactivity to negative but not positive social events, and the amount of negative emotions in response to those events. Elliot et al. (2006) also found that social approach motivation positively predicts longitudinal change in subjective well-being, whereas social avoidance motivation positively predicts longitudinal change in physical symptoms.

Gable and her colleagues have also documented that approach and avoidance motivations influence social outcomes via different

pathways. For instance, Gable (2006) found that increased *exposure* to positive events mediates the link between approach social motivation and positive outcomes and that increased *reactivity* to negative social events mediates the link between avoidance social motivation and unsatisfactory outcomes (see also Elliot et al., 2006; Gable et al., 2000). In addition, Strachman and Gable (2006) presented people with ambiguous essays containing positive, negative, and neutral events and then had them recall the events and evaluate the actors in the events. Avoidance social goals predicted greater memory of negative events and less memory of positive events, negative biases in interpretation, and more pessimistic evaluations of others. Approach social goals, however, played a weaker role in social information processing and were associated with interpreting only neutral events more positively.

Distinguishing Regulatory Focus From Approach–Avoidance in Relationships

Regulatory focus research and theorizing strongly suggest that promotion and prevention foci are not identical to either the approach system (which is primarily concerned with approaching positive outcomes) or the avoidance system (which is primarily concerned with avoiding negative outcomes; see Förster et al., 1998; Moorfadian, Herbst, & Matzler, 2008). Importantly, both regulatory focus systems are concerned with attaining positive outcomes (i.e., prevention focus with security/safety and promotion focus with growth/nurturance). Thus, although promotion-focused people tend to prefer approach strategies and prevention-focused people tend to prefer avoidance strategies for goal attainment (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins et al., 1994), both promotion-focused and prevention-focused people can and do mobilize approach-oriented and avoidance-oriented tactics to reach desired end states if need be.

That said, in certain situations, regulatory focus orientations and approach–avoidance motivations should influence interpersonal processes in similar ways. Regulatory focus has been shown to affect information processing in ways that help people achieve their desired end states in various situations (see Higgins & Scholer, 2008). Regulatory focus should also influence how people attend to and construe the behaviors of others within close relationships. In this context, motivated cognitive biases associated with regulatory focus should manifest themselves as perceived support, that is, the belief that others are able and willing to provide support in times of need (Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990). In relationship-threatening situations such as during relationship disagreements, their distinct motivations should influence the perceptual sensitivities of prevention-focused and promotion-focused people in ways that help them meet their needs for security versus growth/nurturance, respectively. Strongly prevention-focused people, similar to those high in avoidance motivation, should be sensitive/vigilant to negative partner behaviors to avoid escalation of the conflict or to preclude it from threatening relationship security. Promotion-focused individuals, similar to those high in approach motivation, should be sensitive to positive partner behaviors because this would support their underlying strategic concerns with successful conflict resolution and relationship growth and advancement.

Regulatory focus theory, however, also generates some novel predictions regarding interpersonal processes in relationship-

threatening contexts, especially with regard to behavioral responses. The theory predicts that prevention-focused people, despite their typical preference for avoidance behaviors, will modify their tactical repertoire and adopt approach-oriented means if such tactics are the only way to restore safety (Scholer, Zou, Fujita, Stroessner, & Higgins, 2010). More specifically, whereas prevention-focused people should strive to ensure relationship harmony by avoiding behaviors or situations that might intensify conflict or result in rejection in most situations (Ayduk et al., 2003), if a major conflict threatens long-term relationship stability, they should actively work to resolve the conflict in order to reestablish relationship security. Avoidance motivations, in contrast, predict avoidance behaviors designed to avert the threat and, therefore, merely contribute to the absence of a negative outcome but not to the creation of a positive outcome such as successfully negotiating a disagreement (Elliot et al., 2006).

Indeed, both regulatory foci are associated with distinct cognitive processing styles that should affect how promotion-focused and prevention-focused people approach conflict resolution. Promotion focus is associated with more global, flexible, and explorative information processing, whereas prevention focus is related to more local, concrete, and systematic information processing (Förster & Higgins, 2005; Friedman & Förster, 2001). According to Friedman and Förster's (2008) attentional tuning model, focusing perceptual attention broadly versus narrowly can facilitate or hinder activation of inaccessible conceptual representations in memory. To the extent that promotion-focused people broaden their perceptual attention during conflict resolution, they should display more creative conflict resolution behaviors, such as generating more novel solutions to the conflict and focusing less on the central details of the disagreement. Highly prevention-focused people, on the other hand, should remain more narrowly focused on the content of the conflict, such as discussing/analyzing the details that may have generated the conflict rather than trying to produce novel solutions.

The clear distinction that regulatory focus theory makes between the type and intensity of affect tied to promotion and prevention orientations permits additional predictions that cannot be derived easily from social approach–avoidance models. Whereas approach and avoidance motivations have been linked to experiencing positive and negative affect, respectively, promotion focus and prevention focus are associated with different types of positive and negative affect (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997; Idson et al., 2000), and both regulatory focus orientations should be related to both positive and negative emotions (see also Carver & Scheier, 1990). Promotion focus is related to greater shifts along the happiness–dejection dimension, whereas prevention focus leads to greater shifts along the relaxation–agitation dimension. Highly promotion-focused people, therefore, should not only be emotionally responsive to positive social events. If they interpret negative events as unrealized hopes (nongains), they should experience these events with more dejection-related emotions. Similarly, highly prevention-focused people should not only be more emotionally reactive to negative or threatening social events. If they interpret positive events as averted threats (nonlosses) or as indicative of security, they should experience these events with more quiescence-related emotions.

The Current Research

The purpose of the current research was to examine the consequences of people's regulatory focus orientations for interpersonal processes. Because individuals often look to close relationship partners for fulfillment of their security and growth/nurturance needs, regulatory focus should shape individuals' responses and experiences in romantic relationships. In order to document how and why regulatory focus affects individuals' outcomes in close relationships, we examined processes that are relevant to both areas of study. Regulatory focus research has already documented associations among promotion/prevention orientations and perceptual, behavioral, and emotional responses; in addition, these processes are commonly studied in the field of close relationships, and they are known to have important consequences for relationship functioning. Thus, in the current research, we tested how regulatory focus shapes people's partner support perceptions, conflict resolution behaviors, and emotional experiences in different situations. We chose to study these processes in situations that commonly occur in close relationships, such as during relationship conflicts and while waiting for one's partner to call back after one has left an urgent message. In these situations, people's self-regulatory systems are taxed and should direct people's perceptions, behaviors, and emotions to facilitate attainment of their specific relational needs and goals.

Our first two studies tested how chronic (measured) and manipulated (temporarily activated) regulatory focus influences individuals' perceptions of their relationship partners during conflict discussions. In Study 1, we tested the effects of individuals' chronic regulatory focus on perceptions of their partners during conflict discussions in which we rated their conflict resolution behaviors. We also examined whether the perceptions associated with different regulatory foci are related to different conflict resolution outcomes. In Study 2, we experimentally induced regulatory focus to test how it impacts individuals' perceptions of their partners when recalling a prior conflict discussion.

Studies 3 and 4 tested the effects of regulatory focus on individuals' emotional responses to relational events and partner behaviors. In Study 3, we investigated how chronic regulatory focus is related to specific emotional responses to hypothetical relationship events. In Study 4, we capitalized on regulatory focus theory's potential to identify relationship-relevant situations to which people should respond in regulatory goal-congruent ways. Because these situations often involve the actions of romantic partners, certain partner behaviors should evoke promotion or prevention concerns in individuals, which in turn should influence their emotional responses to their partners.

Study 1

In Study 1, we used a behavioral observation paradigm to test the effects of promotion and prevention focus on partner *perceptions* and conflict resolution *behaviors* during actual conflict discussions. We also tested whether perceptions associated with the two regulatory focus orientations were related to different conflict resolution outcomes. To do so, we first measured each partner's chronic regulatory focus. We then had each couple engage in a videotaped conflict discussion task. Immediately after each discussion, the individuals rated how supportive and distancing their

partner was during the discussion. Individuals also rated their own levels of supportiveness and distancing and how satisfied they were with the outcome of the conflict resolution. Independent observers then coded the discussions for the level of supportive, distancing, and conflict resolution behaviors that each partner displayed during each discussion. We also conducted discriminant validity analyses to ensure that the effects of regulatory focus on partner perceptions and conflict resolution behaviors were independent of related dispositions (i.e., approach/avoidance motivational orientations, attachment orientations, personality traits) as well as each partner's evaluations of relationship quality.

Partner Perceptions

Perceived partner support has many beneficial personal and interpersonal outcomes (Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990). Given their eagerness for rewarding outcomes, strongly promotion-focused individuals should be more attuned to prorelationship behaviors enacted by their partners and less likely to perceive distancing behaviors during the conflict discussions. Consistent with their vigilance toward negative outcomes, strongly prevention-focused individuals should screen their social environments for events that might jeopardize relationship security, such as their partner's emotional withdrawal. Accordingly, individuals who have stronger prevention orientations should be more attentive to distancing behaviors¹ displayed by their partners and more likely to overlook positive partner behaviors.

To test these predictions, we had dating couples engage in a discussion about an important, unresolved problem in their relationship. Subsequently, both individuals in each couple reported how supportive and distancing both they and their partners were during the discussion. We predicted that highly promotion-focused people would perceive more supportive behaviors from their partners, whereas highly prevention-focused people would report fewer supportive partner behaviors (Hypothesis 1). We also predicted that more prevention-focused people would perceive more distancing partner behaviors, whereas more promotion-focused individuals would perceive fewer of these behaviors (Hypothesis 2). If these effects are driven by individuals' chronic regulatory focus, they should be somewhat independent of the support behaviors actually enacted by their partners. It is conceivable, however, that more promotion-focused people have more supportive partners than more prevention-focused people do. If so, greater support perceptions could be an accurate appraisal of their partners. Thus, we had independent observers rate both partners for their level of enacted support, and we also asked participants to rate their own level of supportiveness. If individuals' support perceptions of their partners stem in part from their regulatory

¹ According to regulatory focus theory, distancing behavior could be defined as the absence of positive behavior (a nongain) as opposed to more direct expressions of hostility, which could be defined as the presence of negative behavior (a loss). During conflict resolution discussions, negative partner behaviors frequently involve a combination of both types of behavior (e.g., a partner appears emotionally withdrawn and then makes a brief sarcastic remark, scowls, or rolls his/her eyes to express contempt). Thus, most distancing behaviors do not simply reflect the absence of positive behaviors but also involve observable indicators reflecting the partner's discontent.

orientations, the hypothesized effects should remain significant when both observer ratings of partners' support behaviors and individuals' ratings of their own support behaviors are statistically controlled.

Conflict Resolution Behaviors

We also tested whether regulatory orientations were differentially related to specific conflict resolution behaviors. We assessed two different approach-oriented behaviors designed to attain resolution of the conflict: creative problem solving and discussion of conflict details. Consistent with their quest for advancement, highly promotion-focused people should display greater creative conflict resolution such as generating more novel solutions to the conflict, whereas highly prevention-focused people should engage in less novel idea generation (Hypothesis 3). Conversely, highly prevention-focused people should focus more narrowly on the details of the conflict and systematically discuss its sources and consequences, whereas highly promotion-focused individuals should do so to a lesser extent (Hypothesis 4).

We also tested whether associations between regulatory focus and conflict resolution behaviors were mediated by individuals' perceptions of their partners during the conflict discussions. Their different partner perceptions might lead promotion- and prevention-focused people to appraise the conflict discussion differently (Kelly, 1955), leading them to respond in distinct goal-congruent ways (Higgins, 1987). Perceiving their partners as highly supportive might signal to promotion-focused people that the conflict discussion is going well and moving toward resolution, which would allow them to think more divergently about the conflict and to generate novel ideas about how it could be resolved (Hypothesis 5). Perceiving their partners as less supportive, in contrast, might suggest to highly prevention-focused people that resolving the conflict will be effortful, leading them to narrow the focus of their attention to the content of the conflict and to adopt a more detail-oriented, analytic approach to understanding the situation to improve it (Hypothesis 6).²

Conflict Resolution Outcomes

Finally, we tested whether partner perceptions associated with different regulatory orientations are related to conflict resolution outcomes. If highly prevention-focused people perceive their partners as more distancing, they should be less satisfied with the outcome of their discussion (Hypothesis 7). If highly promotion-focused people perceive their partners as more supportive, they should be more satisfied with the outcome of their discussion (Hypothesis 8). We also examined whether the associations between regulatory focus and conflict resolution satisfaction were mediated by individuals' partner perceptions.

Method

Participants. Participants were 148 dating couples from a large Southwestern University. At least one member of each couple was enrolled in an introductory psychology course and brought his/her current romantic partner to the study. To ensure that participants were involved in meaningful relationships, partners had to have been dating for at least 3 months. The mean length of

dating relationships was 19.93 months ($SD = 16.36$ months; range = 3–108 months). Most couples were involved in dating relationships (89%), and a few were engaged (8%) or married (3%). Mean ages of men and women were 19.72 and 19.00 years, respectively (ranges = 18–30 for men, 18–30 for women). Eighty percent of participants were Caucasian, 12% were Hispanic, 5% Asian American, 1% African American, and 2% multiracial.

Procedures and measures for the videotaped conflict resolution discussions. Upon arriving at the lab, each couple was told they were participating in a study on "personality and romantic relationships." Each partner was led to a private room to complete questionnaires, which included measures of the variables relevant to the hypotheses of this study.³ Participants were assured that their responses would be confidential and would never be seen by anyone, including their partners.

Regulatory focus in relationships measure. Regulatory focus was assessed with a modified version of a regulatory focus scale developed by Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda (2002). Their original scale consists of 18 items that assess chronic promotion and prevention concerns about life in general (e.g., "In general, I am focused on preventing negative events in my life"). Because we wanted to test whether regulatory focus yields theoretically meaningful effects in romantic relationships, we modified the original Lockwood scale items for an interpersonal context (see Appendix). Items were rated on 9-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*not at all true of me*) to 9 (*very true of me*). The 18 revised items were then factor-analyzed using principal-axis extraction with varimax rotation, which revealed two factors accounting for 45% of the variance. As expected, the first factor had high loadings ($> .50$) on items tapping promotion concerns; the second factor had high loadings on items assessing prevention concerns.⁴ Thus, participants' responses on the items from each factor were averaged to compute prevention and promotion scores for each participant. Both subscales had good internal reliabilities (promotion $\alpha = .84$, prevention $\alpha = .77$). Promotion and prevention scales were somewhat correlated for men ($r = .18, p < .03$) but were uncorrelated for women.

General approach and avoidance measures. Participants also completed Carver and White's (1994) Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) and Behavioral Activation System (BAS) scales.

² We also tested whether individuals' distancing (rather than support) perceptions mediated the effects of regulatory focus on conflict resolution behaviors. A test of the direct path from promotion focus to creative conflict resolution, controlling for participants' perceptions of distancing partner behaviors, revealed that perceptions of distancing partner behaviors remained a significant predictor ($b = -0.09, t(292) = -3.01, p = .003$, as did participants' promotion focus ($b = 0.04, t(290) = 3.42, p = .001$). Sobel's test confirmed that the effect of promotion focus on creative conflict resolution was partially mediated by lower perceived distancing partner behaviors ($z = 2.40, p < .02$). The link between prevention focus and discussion of conflict details was not mediated by distancing perceptions.

³ The data for Study 1 were collected as part of another project.

⁴ One potential prevention item was dropped because it loaded on the promotion factor, and another item was dropped because it did not load on either factor. In addition, one item from the original scale was excluded because it could not be meaningfully modified and was redundant with other items.

The BIS and BAS scales were included to ensure that the effects of regulatory focus on support perceptions and conflict resolution behaviors were independent of participants' general approach (BAS) and avoidance (BIS) tendencies.

The BIS/BAS measure is a 20-item scale that assesses the strength of people's general approach (BAS) and avoidance (BIS) motivations. The BIS scale contains seven items that assess concerns about aversive outcomes and negative responses to such events. The BAS scale contains 13 items that form three subscales: Fun Seeking measures willingness to try new things; Reward Responsiveness taps positive reactions to rewards; and Drive assesses willingness to approach positive outcomes. Participants answered these items on Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*very true for me*) to 4 (*very false for me*). The BAS subscales were combined to form a single BAS scale. Reliabilities were .68 for the BIS scale and .83 for the BAS scale. BAS scores correlated somewhat with promotion focus scores ($r = .25, p < .01$), and BIS scores correlated somewhat with prevention focus scores ($r = .23, p < .05$).

Adult attachment measure. Promotion and prevention orientations may be related to adult attachment orientations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001) due to similar developmental antecedents (e.g., similar parenting histories of rejection or overprotection). Thus, participants also completed the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). This 17-item measure assesses two attachment dimensions: anxiety (e.g., "I usually want more closeness and intimacy than others do") and avoidance (e.g., "Others often want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being"). Participants rated each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*I strongly disagree*) to 7 (*I strongly agree*). Alphas were .80 for the avoidance scale and .78 for the anxiety scale. Attachment anxiety correlated positively with prevention focus ($r = .42, p < .01$). Attachment avoidance was positively related to prevention focus ($r = .32, p < .01$) and negatively related to promotion focus ($r = -.25, p < .05$).

Personality measures. In previous work, associations between extraversion and promotion focus and between neuroticism and prevention focus have been found (Grant & Higgins, 2003; Higgins et al., 2001). Moreover, personality traits are associated with support-related outcomes in relationships (see e.g., Cutrona, Hessling, & Suhr, 1997). Thus, participants also completed a Big Five Scale (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991) to assess their levels of neuroticism and extraversion. They answered each item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). Reliabilities were adequate ($\alpha = .88$ for extraversion; $\alpha = .78$ for neuroticism). As expected, extraversion was somewhat positively related to promotion focus ($r = .19, p < .05$), and neuroticism was positively related to prevention focus ($r = .34, p < .01$).

Relationship quality measure. Affective qualities in a relationship tend to be associated with support perceptions and support provision. Hence, we measured the perceived quality of participants' current romantic relationship by having them complete the Perceived Relationship Quality Component Inventory (PRQC; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). Using 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*), participants rated their relationship on subscales of satisfaction, commitment, closeness, trust, passion, and love (α s ranged from .78 to .95). We then calculated an overall PRQC scale score for each participant

by summing the six subscales. Promotion focus was positively correlated with relationship quality ($r = .43, p < .01$), and prevention focus was negatively related to relationship quality ($r = -.27, p < .01$).

Conflict resolution discussion. Once participants completed their questionnaires, they were reunited with their partner. At this point, the experimenter said the following:

In all relationships, there are times when partners don't necessarily agree or see eye-to-eye on issues. We are interested in the types of problems or issues that cause disagreements in romantic couples. To study this, we are going to videotape the two of you discussing two of the most serious, unresolved problems in your relationship. The videotape of your discussions will be seen and coded only by professionally trained observers at some later point in time. We will tape you for about 8 minutes while you discuss and try to resolve each of two major relationship problems that you and your partner identify. Before we start the discussions, please think about and then list what you feel is the most serious unresolved problem in your relationship as well as the second most serious unresolved problem. Please write both problems down on this list.

After both partners had separately identified and rank-ordered two unresolved issues in their relationship, they were led to a room that contained two video cameras, where they completed both conflict resolution discussions. Participants received the following instructions:

(NAME OF PARTNER A) has identified an area of current conflict in your relationship. (NAME OF PARTNER A), please state the problem at the top of your list. We would now like both of you to think about this issue for a few moments. Think about what it is that upsets you, why this is an issue of concern in your relationship, and how it might be resolved. We will tape your discussion for about 8 minutes. I will leave the room so that you will have privacy during your discussion. Please begin once I've left the room. I will give you a warning buzz on the intercom when you have 1 minute left in your discussion. Are you ready to begin?

After a 5-min break, the procedure was repeated for the second discussion, during which the second partner's issue was discussed for 8 min. The experimenter made sure that two different issues were discussed by selecting the second most serious issue for one of the partners if the issue identified as most serious was the same for both partners.

Perceptions of partner support during the discussions. Immediately following the second discussion, participants were led to separate rooms. To assess their perceptions of how supportive their partners had been during the discussion in which their own issue was discussed, participants rated their partner's degree of support on a 10-item scale adapted from Cutrona (1996). Items were rated on a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*extremely*). Principal-axis factor analysis indicated that the items loaded on two factors, one related to supportive partner behaviors (sample item: "My partner was sympathetic to my point of view"), and one related to distancing partner behaviors (sample item: "My partner was emotionally distant"). These items were then averaged to create a supportive partner perception score ($\alpha = .96$) and a distancing partner perception score ($\alpha = .70$) for each participant.

Perceptions of own support during the discussions. To control for partners' reports of their own level of support in the

analyses, participants also rated how supportive of their partner they were on the adapted Cutrona scales for the discussion in which their partner's issue was discussed. The items were averaged to create an own supportive behavior score ($\alpha = .92$) and an own distancing behavior score ($\alpha = .69$) for each participant.

Behavioral coding of the videotaped discussions. The conflict discussions were then viewed and coded by trained independent observers, who were blind to all hypotheses and participants' other data.

Observer ratings of enacted support. To obtain a more objective assessment of enacted support, observers made ratings that paralleled participants' ratings of partner and own support (see earlier). Before making the ratings, raters were given detailed training on each construct. Four raters evaluated the women's degree of support, and five raters evaluated the men's degree of support. Average interrater reliability was .81 across all items. Thus, each item was summed across the raters. Principal-axis factor analysis confirmed that the rated items loaded on two factors. Paralleling participants' own support and partner support ratings (see earlier), we computed an observer-rated supportive behavior score ($\alpha = .99$) and an observer-rated distancing behavior score ($\alpha = .82$) for each participant. Higher scores indicated greater support and distancing, respectively.

Conflict resolution behaviors. A different group of trained coders rated the degree to which each participant tried to resolve the conflict by (a) creative problem solving (e.g., by generating novel solutions to the conflict or offering a fresh perspective) and (b) discussion of details of the conflict (e.g., by discussing the sources/origin of the conflict or discussing specific instances related to the conflict). Before making the ratings, raters were given detailed instructions and training on each construct. Six raters rated the male partners, and three raters rated the female partners. All ratings were made on 9-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*a great deal*). The interrater reliability was .71 across all rated items. We therefore aggregated the ratings across the raters, creating global indices of creative problem solving and discussion of conflict details. Higher scores indicated more creative problem solving and more discussion of conflict details.

Outcome of the conflict discussion. Finally, a separate team of six observers rated the degree to which each participant appeared satisfied with the resolution of the conflict at the end of the discussion on a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*a great deal*). Average interrater reliability was

.76, and the ratings were aggregated across the raters. Higher scores indicated more favorable outcomes.

Results

Descriptive statistics. Table 1 contains means, standard deviations, mean differences, and matched-pairs *t* tests for the primary variables. Matched-pairs *t* tests revealed four statistically significant gender differences. Women had higher promotion focus scores than did men, and men were rated as displaying more supportive behaviors during the conflict discussions than were women. Moreover, women engaged in more creative problem solving, and men were more concerned with discussing relationship-related details that contributed to the conflict. Zero-order correlations for all the variables are displayed in Table 2.

Analyses of the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, 1996). As shown in Table 2, partners' scores were significantly correlated for several variables, indicating that some degree of dyadic interdependence existed within couples. To address this issue, we analyzed the data using the APIM, which properly models the covariance and statistical dependency that naturally exists within dyads. The APIM allows one to estimate actor and partner effects separately in dyadic data. That is, the APIM tests not only whether an actor's (i.e., the person providing a response or behavior) own attributes predict his/her responses and behaviors (*actor effects*) but also whether the attributes of the actor's partner predict the actor's responses and behaviors (*partner effects*), controlling for the actor's own attributes.

All analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 16. The predictor variables were centered on the grand sample mean (see Aiken & West, 1991). Actor and partner effects are reported as regression coefficients, all of the independent variables are standardized, and all of the dependent variables are unstandardized. The degrees of freedom were calculated for each step (i.e., they were estimated for both the between-dyads and the within-dyad variables). All statistically significant effects that emerged are reported later.

Tests of hypotheses. In the APIM, actor and partner effects are aggregated across gender. All of the analyses reported next also tested for moderation effects of gender. These effects were not statistically significant, unless reported otherwise. The primary predictor variables in our analyses were actors' promotion focus

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Study 1

Variable	Men: <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Women: <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Mean difference (<i>SD</i>)	Matched-pairs <i>t</i> test
Promotion focus	68.25 (12.98)	70.63 (10.49)	-2.38 (14.91)	$t(147) = -1.94, p = .05$
Prevention focus	25.47 (9.45)	24.36 (9.28)	1.11 (11.33)	$t(147) = 1.20, ns$
Partner supportive behaviors (self-report)	48.34 (11.86)	49.73 (14.01)	-1.39 (12.60)	$t(146) = -1.34, ns$
Partner distancing behaviors (self-report)	7.34 (4.73)	7.33 (4.78)	0.01 (6.44)	$t(146) = 0.03, ns$
Partner supportive behaviors (observer-rated)	38.87 (9.35)	35.31 (9.59)	-3.56 (9.16)	$t(146) = -4.71, p < .001$
Partner distancing behaviors (observer-rated)	9.64 (2.75)	9.46 (3.65)	-0.18 (4.20)	$t(146) = -0.52, ns$
Creative problem solving (observer-rated)	6.35 (2.24)	8.48 (2.36)	-2.13 (2.52)	$t(147) = -10.30, p < .001$
Discussion of relationship difficulties (observer-rated)	9.01 (2.47)	8.08 (2.39)	0.93 (2.31)	$t(147) = 6.40, p < .001$

Table 2
Correlations in Study 1

Gender and variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Men																		
1. Promotion focus	—	.18*	.15	-.15	.21*	-.19*	.26**	-.10	.03	.21*	-.03	.19*	-.18*	-.06	-.10	.08	-.02	.02
2. Prevention focus		—	-.30**	.21*	-.27**	.22*	-.12	.18*	-.24**	.03	.27**	-.24**	.23**	-.27**	.14	-.10	.20*	-.17*
3. Perceived supportive partner behaviors			—	-.49**	.47**	-.29**	.28**	-.39**	.48**	.13	-.16	.54**	-.24**	.61**	-.12	.34**	-.36**	.44**
4. Perceived distancing partner behaviors				—	-.44**	.22*	-.37**	.27**	-.45**	-.08	.12	-.42**	.08	-.37**	.34**	-.32**	.27**	-.38**
5. Observer-rated distancing behaviors					—	-.76**	.63**	-.68**	.64**	.03	-.16	.68**	-.31**	.53**	-.17*	.31**	-.51**	.59**
6. Observer-rated distancing behaviors						—	-.46**	.37**	-.39**	.01	.12	-.46**	.41**	-.32**	.16	-.22**	.22**	-.29**
7. Creative problem solving							—	-.58**	.66**	.07	-.10	.50**	-.29**	.40**	-.18*	.40**	-.36**	.50**
8. Discussion of negative aspects								—	-.72**	.02	.15	-.54**	.13	-.55**	-.03	-.35**	.59**	-.62**
9. Conflict resolution satisfaction									—	.02	-.22**	.57**	-.10	.62**	-.15	.46**	-.57**	.77**
Women																		
10. Promotion focus										—	.04	.26**	-.25**	.09	-.15	.14	-.02	.09
11. Prevention focus											—	-.23**	.12	-.20*	.16	-.17*	.21**	-.15
12. Perceived supportive partner behaviors												—	-.39**	.49**	-.06	.32**	-.44**	.52**
13. Perceived distancing partner behaviors													—	-.15	.21*	-.13	.02	-.04
14. Observer-rated supportive behaviors														—	-.34**	.50**	-.59**	.61**
15. Observer-rated distancing behaviors															—	-.27**	.05	-.15
16. Creative problem solving																—	-.49**	.74**
17. Discussion of negative aspects																	—	-.67**
18. Conflict resolution satisfaction																		—

Note. N = 148 women and 148 men. Higher scores indicate higher values on each variable.
* p < .05. ** p < .01.

and prevention focus scores and partners' promotion focus and prevention focus scores.⁵

Regulatory focus and partner perceptions. We first tested whether regulatory focus orientations differentially predict perceptions of partners' supportive behaviors during the conflict discussions (Hypothesis 1). To do so, we performed an APIM analysis using actors' and partners' regulatory focus scores to predict actors' perceptions of their partners' supportive behaviors. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, more promotion-focused participants perceived more supportive behaviors from their partners ($b = 0.23$), $t(268) = 3.89$, $p < .0001$, whereas more prevention-focused participants perceived their partners as less supportive ($b = -0.35$), $t(277) = -4.72$, $p < .0001$. In addition, participants who had more promotion-focused partners perceived them as more supportive ($b = 0.15$), $t(267) = 2.60$, $p = .01$, whereas those who had more prevention-focused partners viewed them as less supportive ($b = -0.21$), $t(277) = -2.79$, $p = .006$.

Next, we tested whether regulatory focus differentially predicted perceptions of partners' distancing behaviors (Hypothesis 2). To do so, we conducted a second APIM analysis treating actors' promotion and prevention focus scores as predictor variables and actors' perceptions of their partners' distancing behaviors as the dependent variable. As predicted, more promotion-focused participants perceived less distancing behaviors from their partners ($b = -0.08$), $t(278) = -3.29$, $p = .001$, whereas more prevention-focused participants perceived more distancing behaviors ($b = 0.07$), $t(269) = 2.50$, $p < .02$. Moreover, individuals who had more promotion-focused partners perceived them as less distancing ($b = -0.05$), $t(278) = -2.00$, $p < .05$, whereas those who had more prevention-focused partners perceived them as more distancing ($b = 0.08$), $t(269) = 2.59$, $p = .01$.

To discount the possibility that these effects are attributable to promotion-focused participants' having more supportive partners and prevention-focused participants' having more distancing partners, we repeated the earlier analyses while statistically controlling for both observer ratings and partners' reports of their own supportive and distancing behavior during the conflict discussions. The effects of regulatory focus remained significant when we did so (all $ps < .04$). To further demonstrate that these effects stem mainly from participants' regulatory focus orientations, we repeated the APIM analyses reported earlier again, this time including participants' approach-avoidance motivation scores (the BIS and the BAS scales) and their attachment scores (avoidance and anxiety) as covariates. When we did so, all previously reported regulatory focus effects remained statistically significant (all $ps < .03$). Finally, to ensure that these regulatory focus effects were not due to differences in relationship quality, we conducted the previously explained APIM analyses again, this time including participants' PRQC scores as a covariate. All regulatory focus effects remained significant (all $ps < .03$).

Regulatory focus and conflict resolution behaviors. Next, we tested whether regulatory focus orientations are associated with different conflict resolution behaviors. An APIM analysis using actors' and partners' regulatory focus scores to predict actors' creative conflict resolution behavior (Hypothesis 3) indicated that greater promotion focus predicted more creative problem solving rated by observers ($b = 0.05$), $t(290) = 4.43$, $p < .001$, whereas greater actor prevention focus predicted less creative problem solving ($b = -0.05$), $t(287) = -3.20$, $p < .005$. We then performed

an APIM analysis using actors' and partner' regulatory focus scores to predict the extent to which actors' attempts at resolving the problem focused on discussing factors related to the conflict (Hypothesis 4). As predicted, more prevention-focused participants discussed such factors more ($b = 0.05$), $t(274) = 3.42$, $p = .001$, whereas more promotion-focused participants discussed them less ($b = -0.03$), $t(264) = -2.10$, $p < .05$. Moreover, a marginal partner effect revealed that participants discussed conflict details more when their partners were more prevention-focused ($b = 0.03$), $t(274) = 1.89$, $p = .06$.

Following this, we repeated the APIM analyses reported earlier, treating participants' BIS and BAS scores, attachment scores, and perceived relationship quality scores as covariates. All regulatory focus effects remained significant when these variables were controlled (all $ps < .05$).

Did partner support perceptions mediate the associations between regulatory focus and conflict-resolution behaviors? To test whether partner support perceptions mediated the effects of (a) promotion focus on creative problem solving and (b) prevention focus on discussing conflict details, we followed the steps outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). In all the analyses reported next, partner perceptions (the mediator) were significantly related to conflict resolution behaviors. We then tested whether partner perceptions predicted conflict resolution behaviors when controlling for regulatory focus. The significance of the mediation effects was assessed using Sobel tests (Krull & MacKinnon, 2001).

A test of the direct path from promotion focus to creative problem solving, controlling for participants' perceptions of supportive partner behaviors, revealed that these perceptions remained a significant predictor ($b = 0.05$), $t(234) = 4.51$, $p < .00001$, as did participants' promotion focus ($b = 0.03$), $t(285) = 3.10$, $p < .003$. Sobel's test confirmed that the effect of promotion focus on increased creative conflict resolution behavior was partially mediated by heightened partner support perceptions ($z = 2.23$, $p < .03$; Hypothesis 5; see Figure 1).

A test of the direct path from prevention focus to discussing conflict details, controlling for participants' partner support perceptions, revealed that support perceptions remained a significant predictor ($b = -0.06$), $t(277) = -5.37$, $p < .0001$, and the effect of participants' prevention focus was marginal ($b = 0.03$), $t(289) = 1.86$, $p = .06$. Sobel's test revealed that the effect of prevention focus on discussing conflict details was mediated by lower perceptions of supportive partner behaviors ($z = 3.24$, $p = .001$; Hypothesis 6; see Figure 2).

Regulatory focus and conflict resolution outcomes. We next tested whether regulatory focus orientations differentially predicted satisfaction with conflict resolution outcomes. An APIM analysis using actors' promotion and prevention focus scores to predict actors' observer-rated satisfaction with the conflict resolution revealed that, as predicted, more prevention-focused participants were less satisfied with the outcome of their conflict resolution ($b = -0.05$), $t(220) = -3.41$, $p = .001$ (Hypothesis 7). Greater promotion focus, however, was not associated with greater

⁵ Given that promotion and prevention foci are independent systems, we examined the interaction terms involving both foci in Studies 1 and 3. There were no significant Prevention \times Promotion interaction effects on any of the dependent variables.

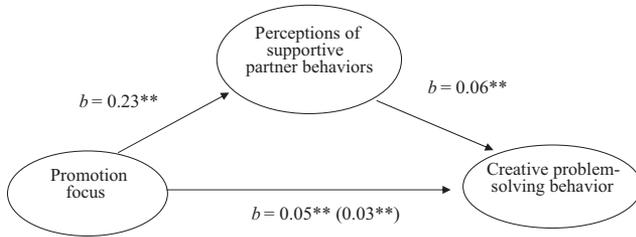


Figure 1. Study 1: Mediation of effects of chronic promotion focus on creative problem-solving behavior by perceptions of supportive partner behaviors during the conflict discussions.

outcome satisfaction ($b = 0.02$), $t(210) = 1.40$, *ns* (Hypothesis 8). In addition, individuals who had more prevention-focused partners were less satisfied with their discussion outcome ($b = -0.04$), $t(220) = -2.41$, $p = .02$.

Mediation analyses. We followed the Baron and Kenny (1986) procedures to test whether partner perceptions mediated the connection between prevention focus and satisfaction with the outcome of the conflict discussion. Perceptions of supportive partner behaviors predicted greater satisfaction with the conflict resolution ($b = 0.06$), $t(287) = 5.46$, $p < .0001$. A test of the direct path from participants' prevention focus to their satisfaction with the discussion outcome, controlling for their perceptions of supportive behaviors, revealed that these perceptions were the sole predictor of conflict outcome satisfaction ($b = 0.05$), $t(282) = 5.10$, $p < .0001$, and the effect of prevention focus was no longer significant ($b = -0.02$), $t(227) = -1.57$, *ns*. Sobel's test assessing whether perceived supportive partner behaviors carried the influence of participants' higher prevention focus scores on lower conflict resolution satisfaction was significant ($z = -2.04$, $p < .05$; see Figure 3). Perceptions of distancing partner behaviors did not mediate the link between prevention focus and satisfaction with the conflict resolution.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 show that people who have a stronger chronic promotion focus perceive their romantic partners as more supportive and less distancing when discussing relationship conflicts. People who are chronically more prevention-focused, on the other hand, perceive their partners as more distancing and less supportive when discussing relationship conflicts, and these more pessimistic perceptions also resulted in lower satisfaction with

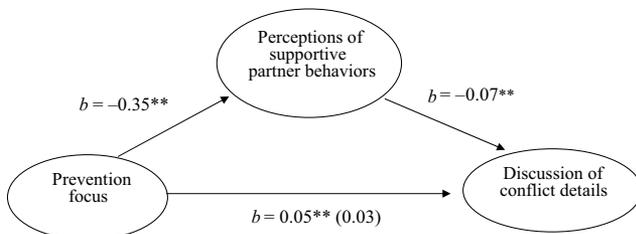


Figure 2. Study 1: Mediation of effects of chronic prevention focus on discussion of conflict details by perceptions of supportive partner behaviors during the conflict discussions.

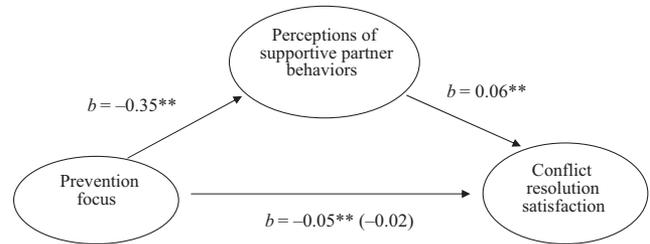


Figure 3. Study 1: Mediation of effects of prevention focus on conflict resolution satisfaction by perceptions of partner's supportive behaviors during the conflict discussions.

conflict discussion outcomes. These effects were independent of both observers' ratings of partner support and partners' ratings of their own support. This suggests that partner perceptions arise at least in part from people's regulatory focus orientations rather than from highly promotion-focused people's having more supportive partners or highly prevention-focused people's having more distancing partners.

Both regulatory focus orientations were also systematically linked to approach-oriented conflict resolution behaviors. People who had a stronger chronic promotion focus tried to resolve their conflicts more creatively, whereas more prevention-focused people approached resolutions by discussing the details related to the conflict. In addition, promotion-focused people's greater partner support perceptions partially accounted for their increased use of creative conflict resolution behaviors. Highly prevention-focused people's lower partner support perceptions completely accounted for their heightened focus on the details of the conflict.

One potential limitation of Study 1 is the way in which we assessed regulatory focus. The original Lockwood scale correlates with general approach-avoidance motivations as well as affectivity. Summerville and Roesse (2008) have reported that promotion focus as measured by the original Lockwood et al. (2002) scale correlates with both approach tendencies (BAS scores) and positive affect and that the prevention focus scale correlates with both avoidance tendencies (BIS scores) and negative affect. Although we modified the original Lockwood et al. scale to assess motivations in romantic relationships, and we ruled out the BIS and the BAS as possible confounds, we cannot fully discount the possibility that the results of Study 1 might be attributable to affectivity. Although we did not measure affect in Study 1, we did assess how participants felt about their relationships, and the effects of regulatory focus remained significant when we controlled for relationship quality perceptions. This provides good albeit preliminary evidence that our Study 1 findings are not likely to be attributable to participants' affective state as it relates to their current relationships.

We conducted a second study to (a) provide additional converging evidence for the pattern of partner perceptions obtained in Study 1 and (b) further eliminate the possibility that either individuals' general approach-avoidance tendencies or their affective qualities contributed to the hypothesized results. In addition to chronic individual differences, regulatory focus can also be operationalized as a temporarily activated state. In Study 2, therefore, we manipulated regulatory focus to induce promotion and prevention concerns in participants. We also included a standard measure

of positive and negative affect to test whether the hypothesized effects were independent of affectivity.

Study 2

In Study 2, we experimentally manipulated regulatory focus and tested how induced regulatory focus orientations influence the way in which individuals remember their romantic partners' actions during past conflicts. We used a priming manipulation adapted from Freitas and Higgins (2002; see also Freitas, Liberman, & Higgins, 2002). Specifically, in order to make promotion or prevention concerns temporarily accessible, we asked participants to think about and list either their current hopes/aspirations or their current duties/obligations. We then asked them to recall and briefly describe a conflict resolution discussion they had with their romantic partner within the past 3 months. As in Study 1, participants then rated how supportive or distancing their partner was during the discussion and how satisfied they were with the final resolution. We predicted that individuals in promotion-focused states would remember their partners as more supportive and less distancing and would be more satisfied with the final resolution. In contrast, those induced to be prevention-focused should recall their partners as more distancing and less supportive and would be less satisfied with the final resolution. To ensure that the effects of manipulated regulatory focus were independent of affect and severity of the recalled conflict, participants also completed a standard mood measure and rated how intense the conflict was.

Method

Participants. Seventy-seven undergraduate students (56 women and 21 men) at a West Coast university participated in exchange for extra credit in a psychology course. To participate, individuals had to currently be involved in a romantic relationship or have been in one within the past 3 months. Sixty-eight percent of the sample were currently dating a partner, 12% were engaged or married, and 20% were single. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 45 years, with a mean age of 23.63 years ($SD = 5.49$). Thirty percent of participants were Caucasian, 32% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 22% were Hispanic, 12% were Black, and 4% were multiracial.

Procedure.

Regulatory focus priming procedure. Each participant first completed the priming manipulation (adapted from Freitas & Higgins, 2002). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two priming conditions: a promotion focus condition or a prevention focus condition. To induce a promotion focus, participants were instructed to think about their current hopes and aspirations. Specifically, they read: "Please think about something you ideally would like to do. In other words, think about a hope or an aspiration that you currently have. Please list the hope or aspiration below." To induce a prevention focus, participants read: "Please think about something you think you ought to do. In other words, think about a duty or obligation that you currently have. Please list the duty or obligation below." Within each condition, participants were told they could list one to three goals or obligations.

Conflict resolution recall task. Next, participants were asked to complete a purportedly unrelated task. The conflict resolution recall task was described as an "independent study on personality

and relationship memories." Participants were asked to recall and describe a conflict resolution discussion they had had with a romantic partner within the past 3 months. The instructions were adapted after those in Study 1, which asked couples to identify an unresolved relationship issue. Specifically, participants read:

In all relationships, there are times when partners don't necessarily agree or see eye-to-eye on issues. We are interested in the types of issues that cause disagreements in romantic couples. To study this, we ask you to think back to a time in the past 3 months when you discussed a serious, unresolved issue with your romantic partner. Please describe briefly what it was that upset you, why it was an issue of concern in your relationship, and how you tried to resolve it.

Participants then completed the same ratings of partner support used in Study 1. As in Study 1, principal-axis factor analysis indicated that the items loaded on two factors, one assessing supportive partner behaviors and the other assessing distancing partner behaviors. The rated items were thus averaged to compute a supportive and a distancing partner perception score for each participant. Both scales had good internal reliabilities (supportive partner perceptions $\alpha = .93$, distancing partner perceptions $\alpha = .77$).

Participants then rated (a) the extent to which they were satisfied with the resolution of the problem and (b) how severe/intense the conflict was. These ratings were made on a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*a great deal*). Participants next completed the Positive Affect/Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), which assessed their current mood. Participants reported how they currently felt on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Cronbach's α for positive mood was .90; for negative mood, it was .85.

Results

We performed a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) for condition (promotion vs. prevention prime) on partner support perceptions, partner distancing perceptions, and satisfaction ratings of the conflict resolution outcome. The MANOVA yielded a significant effect for condition, $F(1, 73) = 20.02, p < .0001$. As predicted, participants in the promotion focus condition rated their partners as more supportive ($M = 6.82$) during the recalled conflict discussion than did those in the prevention focus condition ($M = 4.48$), $F(1, 75) = 37.82, p < .0001$. Moreover, participants induced to experience a prevention focus rated their partners as more distancing ($M = 4.69$) than did those in promotion focused states ($M = 2.47$), $F(1, 75) = 30.77, p < .0001$. Finally, participants in the promotion focus condition reported greater satisfaction with the conflict outcome ($M = 6.86, SD = 1.88$) than did those in the prevention focus condition ($M = 4.85, SD = 2.01$), $F(1, 75) = 15.94, p < .0001$. There were no gender interactions.

We then repeated these analyses, adding ratings of conflict severity as a covariate. The covariate was not statistically significant ($F < 0.50$), and all reported effects remained significant. We also examined whether conflict severity varied in the two priming conditions and found no significant differences between them. Finally, we repeated the analyses with positive and negative mood included as covariates. Neither covariate was significant ($F < 2.0$), and all of the regulatory focus effects for the three dependent

variables remained significant (all $ps < .003$). In addition, there were no significant differences in mood states between the promotion and prevention priming conditions. In fact, mean ratings of positive and negative mood were nearly identical in the two conditions. Viewed together, this discriminant validity evidence increases our confidence that the effects of the regulatory focus primes on partner perceptions and conflict resolution satisfaction are independent of both mood, which might have been induced by the primes, and how severe the recalled conflict was.

Discussion

Using an experimental design, Study 2 replicated and extended the findings of Study 1 by priming regulatory focus rather than measuring participants' chronic regulatory focus. The results of Study 2 were consistent with the pattern of partner perceptions documented in Study 1. Moreover, we controlled for differences in the severity of conflicts recalled, which could have affected the partner perceptions or the conflict satisfaction ratings. We also discounted the possibility that affect might explain the differential partner perceptions associated with temporarily activating promotion and prevention concerns. Thus, Study 2 confirmed that the effects of regulatory focus on partner perceptions and satisfaction with conflict resolution are independent of both participants' affect and the severity of the conflict they remembered.

To further examine the role of regulatory focus in relational contexts, we examined another interpersonal process with important implications for relationship functioning—emotional experience—in Study 3. Different regulatory orientations have been linked to different emotional experiences that seem to flow from promotion- and prevention-focused people's distinct cognitive appraisals of positive and negative events (Idson et al., 2000). Little if any research, however, has examined the impact of regulatory focus on emotional responses to events in romantic relationships. Study 3 was designed to address this gap.

Study 3

Regulatory focus should influence people to cognitively appraise and to emotionally respond to situations in ways that help them achieve their self-regulatory goals. Although an aversive situation that involves uncertainty should be threatening to some extent to all people, due to their construal of this event as the absence of a desired outcome or an unrealized hope, people who have a stronger promotion focus should experience this situation with more dejection. In contrast, given their construal of the same situation as the presence of an undesired outcome or a threat to the relationship, those who have a stronger prevention focus should experience the same situation with more agitation or anxiety. If this ambiguous situation is followed by a positive outcome, regulatory focus theory further predicts that a stronger promotion focus should generate more happiness-related emotions due to the construal of the event as the presence of a desired outcome (gain). In contrast, a stronger prevention focus should generate more quiescence, due to the construal of the event as an averted threat (nonloss).

To test these ideas, we examined the effects of people's chronic regulatory focus on their emotional responses to positive versus negative outcomes involving a hypothetical relationship partner.

We predicted a series of specific interactions between regulatory focus and experimental condition (positive outcome or negative outcome) on emotion types, as just described.

Method

Participants. In this study, 172 undergraduate students (50 men and 122 women) at a midwestern university participated in exchange for extra credit in a psychology course. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 38 years, with a mean age of 20.95 years ($SD = 2.48$). Forty-seven percent were not currently dating anyone, 44% were currently dating one partner exclusively, 2% were dating more than one partner, and 7% were engaged or married.

Procedures and materials. Participants were told they were participating in a study on "how people react to relationship events." After completing individual difference measures, participants read a short scenario (see later) and were asked to imagine themselves in this situation with a romantic partner. They then rated how they would feel about the outcome if they were in that situation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: positive outcome or negative outcome.

Regulatory focus in relationships measure. Promotion and prevention focus were assessed using the adapted Lockwood et al. (2002) measure. Both scales had good internal reliabilities (promotion $\alpha = .83$, prevention $\alpha = .79$), and they were somewhat correlated ($r = .21, p < .01$).

Personality and adult attachment measures. Participants also completed a brief measure of the Big Five personality dimensions (the Ten-Item Personality Inventory; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). The Extraversion subscale ($\alpha = .70$) correlated negatively with prevention focus ($r = -.18, p < .02$), and the Neuroticism subscale ($\alpha = .74$) correlated positively with prevention focus ($r = .40, p < .01$). Participants also completed the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (Simpson et al., 1996). Avoidance ($\alpha = .83$) was positively related to prevention focus ($r = .37, p < .01$) and negatively related to promotion focus ($r = -.22, p < .01$). Anxiety ($\alpha = .84$) correlated positively with prevention focus ($r = .51, p < .01$).

Scenario and emotion ratings. Participants were then asked to imagine a specific scenario that described an event involving a hypothetical relationship partner. To increase the personal relevance of the scenario, they were told to imagine themselves in each depicted situation. All participants first read the following statement:

You have had a particularly bad day. As you finally get home at night, you are looking forward to talking to your partner. You call him/her, but no one answers and you leave a message telling him/her that you had a rough day and really need to talk to him/her soon. You are waiting for several hours for his/her call.

For half the participants, the scenario had a positive outcome that described the partner suddenly showing up with a surprise present; for the other half, it had a negative outcome that described the partner never calling back. Participants then rated the extent to which they would feel certain emotions in response to the outcome on a scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). The specific emotions that were rated tapped the four quadrants believed to underlie the experience of emotions in promotion and prevention situations (see Higgins et al., 1997). Specifically, the

happiness associated with effective promotion success was measured by the emotions “cheerful” and “happy.” The quiescence associated with prevention success was assessed by “relaxed” and “relieved.” The agitation presumed to underlie prevention failure was tapped by “on edge,” “worried,” and “fearful.” And the dejection associated with promotion failure was measured by “disappointed” and “low.” After completing the study, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Separate simultaneous multiple regression analyses were conducted on participants’ distinct types of emotions (dejection, agitation, happiness, and quiescence) using the following predictor variables: condition (−1 = negative outcome condition, 1 = positive outcome condition), participants’ promotion focus and prevention focus scores, and the interaction terms involving condition and regulatory focus. All significant effects that emerged are reported next. All of the analyses reported next tested for gender effects. No significant gender effects were found unless they are reported here.⁶

The first regression analysis on dejection revealed a main effect for condition ($\beta = .87, t = 22.59, p < .0001$), indicating that dejection ratings were higher in the negative condition ($M = 3.70, SD = 0.89$) than in the positive condition ($M = 1.29, SD = 0.48$). Moreover, higher promotion scores were associated with greater dejection ($\beta = .08, t = 2.05, p < .05$). In addition, the expected Promotion Focus \times Condition interaction was found ($\beta = -.15, t = -3.90, p < .0001$; see Figure 4). Simple slope analyses indicated that promotion focus had no significant effect on dejection ratings in the positive condition ($\beta = -.16, t = -1.50, ns$). However, in response to the negative outcome, stronger promotion focus predicted greater dejection ($\beta = .37, t = 3.51, p < .001$).

The second regression analysis on agitation revealed a condition main effect ($\beta = .74, t = 14.41, p < .0001$), revealing greater anxiety in the negative condition ($M = 3.10, SD = 0.91$) than in the positive condition ($M = 1.47, SD = 0.56$). A main effect for prevention focus showed that higher prevention scores were associated with greater anxiety ($\beta = .15, t = 2.92, p < .005$).

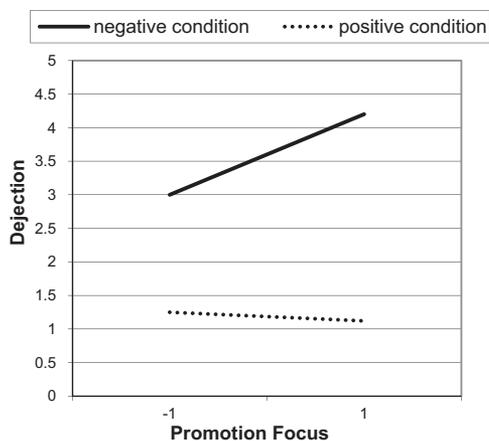


Figure 4. Study 3: Dejection ratings as a function of chronic promotion focus and experimental condition.

Additionally, the predicted Prevention Focus \times Condition interaction was found ($\beta = -.10, t = -2.00, p < .05$; see Figure 5), showing that prevention focus did not predict anxiety ratings in the positive condition ($\beta = .15, t = 1.40, ns$). As expected, however, greater prevention focus predicted more anxiety in the negative condition ($\beta = .33, t = 3.01, p < .005$).

The third regression analysis on happiness showed a main effect for condition ($\beta = -.93, t = -33.24, p < .001$), revealing greater happiness in the positive condition ($M = 4.27, SD = 0.69$) than in the negative condition ($M = 1.25, SD = 0.44$). The predicted Promotion Focus \times Condition interaction also emerged ($\beta = .08, t = 2.81, p = .005$; see Figure 6), indicating that stronger promotion focus was associated with more happiness in the positive condition ($\beta = .25, t = 2.31, p < .03$), and with marginally less happiness in the negative condition ($\beta = -.19, t = -1.72, p = .09$).

The analysis on quiescence revealed a main effect for condition ($\beta = -.86, t = -21.62, p < .001$), indicating greater quiescence in the positive condition ($M = 3.56, SD = 0.71$) than in the negative condition ($M = 1.43, SD = 0.54$). In addition, a Promotion Focus \times Condition interaction emerged ($\beta = .13, t = 3.16, p < .005$; see Figure 7), showing that greater promotion focus predicted more quiescence emotions in the positive condition ($\beta = .28, t = 2.57, p < .02$) and marginally lower quiescence ratings in the negative condition ($\beta = -.21, t = -1.90, p = .06$).⁷

Discussion

The findings of Study 3 confirm that the emotional experience of certain relationship-relevant events are moderated by people’s chronic regulatory focus. People who had a stronger promotion focus experienced a negative outcome with more dejection (but not with greater agitation) and a positive outcome with more happiness (but also with more quiescence). Moreover, those who had a stronger prevention focus experienced the negative outcome with greater agitation (but not more sadness). Highly prevention-focused people did not, however, report more quiescence-related emotions in response to the positive outcome. Although the predictions for the different types of negative emotions that promotion-focused and prevention-focused people should experience were supported for aversive events, they were not fully in line for positive emotions. We discuss this unexpected finding further in the General Discussion.

Our vignette method in Study 3 had the advantage of providing participants with a common set of stimuli. However, participants’

⁶ Because there were significant correlations between dejection-related and anxiety-related emotion ratings ($r = .80, p < .001$) and between happiness-related and quiescence-related emotions ($r = .87, p < .001$), we examined the unique associations between a specific regulatory focus (e.g., promotion focus) and a specific type of emotion (e.g., dejection) by statistically controlling for the alternative type of regulatory focus (e.g., prevention focus) and the alternative emotion type (e.g., anxiety; see Higgins et al., 1997, for similar procedures). When we did so, all effects remained at least marginally significant ($p \leq .08$).

⁷ To discount the possibility that these results are due to shared variance with extraversion, neuroticism, attachment anxiety, or attachment avoidance, we repeated these analyses controlling for each of these variables. When we did so, all of the effects remained statistically significant ($p < .05$), and none of these variables significantly predicted emotional ratings.

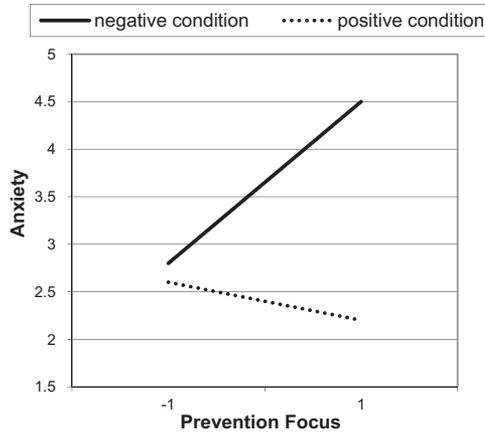


Figure 5. Study 3: Anxiety ratings as a function of chronic prevention focus and experimental condition.

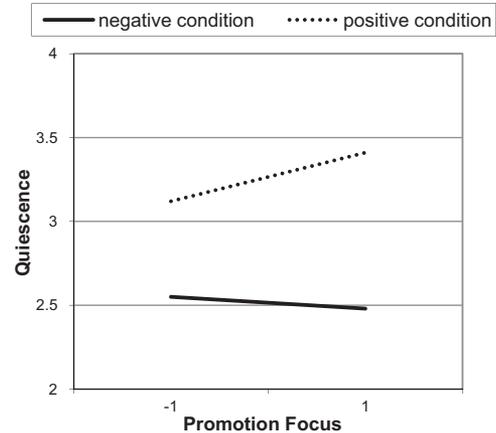


Figure 7. Study 3: Quiescence ratings as a function of chronic promotion focus and experimental condition.

emotional responses to hypothetical events might not fully correspond to the emotions they would feel in response to actual relationship events, and they might not be able to accurately forecast their emotions in response to such events. In Study 4, therefore, we asked participants to remember actual positive and negative events that had occurred in their relationships and to report the emotions they felt in response to those events.

Study 4

The purpose of Study 4 was to identify the types of interpersonal events that elicit promotion-type and prevention-type emotions. According to regulatory focus theory, the way in which a significant other reacts to a person's nurturance and safety needs earlier in life should contribute to the development of individual differences in regulatory focus (Higgins & Silberman, 1998; Manian et al., 2006). Thus, independent of one's own chronic regulatory focus, certain behavioral responses from romantic partners should

make prevention or promotion concerns temporarily salient. Although most people should feel good about positive or benevolent partner behaviors, different types of positive behaviors might make promotion or prevention concerns more salient, generating different kinds of pleasurable experiences. Similarly, whereas negative partner behaviors should make most people feel bad, the pain associated with different types of negative behaviors should be experienced in different ways, depending on whether the behavior activates promotion or prevention concerns.

In Study 4, therefore, we asked people to remember situations in their own relationships that made promotion or prevention concerns salient, and we then measured the degree to which they felt specific emotions. We hypothesized that situations in which a relationship partner demonstrated his/her affection and appreciation (positive promotion-focused behavior) should be associated with the presence of positives (gains), indicating that the relationship is progressing well and successfully. This, in turn, should evoke happiness-related emotions. Situations characterized by a partner's responsible, trustworthy behavior (positive prevention-focused behavior) should signal the absence of threats (nonlosses), conveying that the relationship is safe. This, in turn, should evoke quiescence-related emotions. Situations characterized by neglectful partner behaviors (negative promotion-focused behavior) communicate the absence of positives (nongains), which should cause people to feel dejection-related emotions. And situations in which one's partner behaves in an irresponsible manner (negative prevention-focused behavior), representing the presence of harm (losses), should cause people to feel agitation-related emotions.

Method

Participants. In this study, 94 undergraduate students (25 men and 69 women) at a West Coast university participated in exchange for extra credit in a psychology course. To participate, individuals had to either currently be in a romantic relationship or have been in one that lasted at least 3 months. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 41 years, with a mean age of 23.71 years ($SD = 4.19$). Fifty-two percent were currently dating a partner, 35% were not currently dating anyone, and 13% were engaged or married.

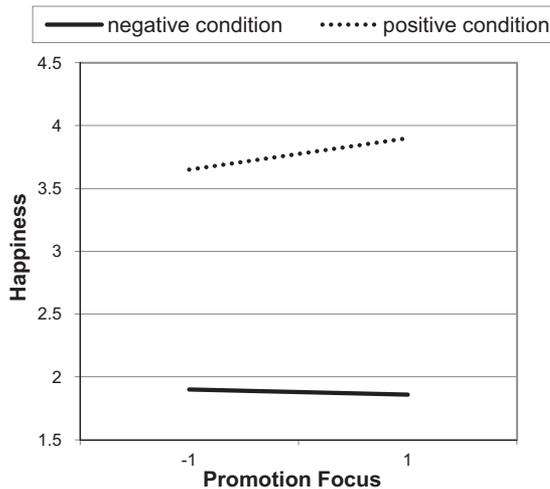


Figure 6. Study 3: Happiness ratings as a function of chronic promotion focus and experimental condition.

Forty percent of participants identified themselves as Caucasian, 29% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 13% as Hispanic, 11% as Black, and 7% as multiracial.

Procedure. Participants were told that the study examined “personality and relationships.” Upon arrival in the lab, they were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. In each condition, participants were asked to remember and briefly describe a situation in which their romantic partner behaved in negative or positive ways.

To activate promotion concerns, we asked participants to recall a situation in which their partner behaved either neglectfully (negative promotion-focused behavior) or in an affectionate/nurturing manner (positive promotion-focused behavior). Specifically, participants read either “Please think back to a time when your romantic partner acted indifferently to you, behaved in a way that made you feel unimportant or insignificant, or did some other type of behavior that made you feel neglected” or “Please think back to a time when your romantic partner showed how much he/she valued or appreciated you, behaved in a way that showed you his/her deep affection, or did some other type of loving behavior that made you feel special.”

To activate prevention concerns, we asked participants to recall a situation in which their partner behaved either irresponsibly (negative prevention-focused behavior) or responsibly (positive prevention-focused behavior). Participants read either “Please think back to a time when your romantic partner lied to you, took advantage of you, betrayed your trust, or did some other type of irresponsible behavior that hurt you” or “Please think back to a time when your romantic partner did not lie to you, did not take advantage of you, did not betray you, or did some other type of responsible behavior that you felt was the right thing to do.”

After describing the recalled partner behaviors, participants rated the extent to which they would feel the following emotions when their partner behaved in this way: Happiness-related emotions were assessed by “excited” and “thrilled,” quiescence-related emotions by “relieved” and “at ease,” agitation was assessed by “tense” and “agitated,” and dejection by “sad.” All of the emotions were rated on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a great deal*). After completing the study, participants were debriefed and thanked.

An inspection of participants’ written descriptions of the recalled partner behaviors confirmed that the manipulations were interpreted as intended. Examples of recalled negative promotion-focused behaviors included the partner forgetting the participant’s birthday or anniversary or neglecting the participant at a party. Examples of positive promotion-focused behaviors included times when participants were surprised by the partner or when they received a loving note from the partner before a challenging job interview. Examples of recalled negative prevention-focused behaviors included the partner cheating, lying about what he/she did, or being rude. Examples of positive prevention-focused behaviors included the partner’s telling the truth when he/she could have lied or behaving in a responsible manner (e.g., refraining from drinking at a party).

Results

To determine whether different types of positive and negative partner behaviors elicit promotion- or prevention-focused emo-

tions, we performed a 2 (valence of partner behavior: positive vs. negative) \times 2 (type of partner behavior: promotion vs. prevention) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA), treating the different emotion ratings as dependent measures. We first examined participants’ emotional responses to the two types of positive partner behaviors (see Figure 8). The ANOVA on ratings of quiescence-related emotions revealed a main effect of valence, $F(1, 94) = 432.80, p < .0001$. Not surprisingly, participants reported more quiescence in response to positive partner behaviors ($M = 5.34$) than negative ones ($M = 1.33$). A main effect of behavior type indicated that participants reported more quiescence when recalling prevention-type behaviors ($M = 3.51$) than promotion-type behaviors ($M = 2.60$), $F(1, 94) = 19.28, p < .01$. Importantly, the ANOVA also yielded the predicted Situation Type \times Valence interaction, $F(1, 94) = 7.70, p < .01$, showing that participants reported more quiescence when recalling positive, prevention-type behaviors (i.e., responsible partner behaviors; $M = 6.03$) than when recalling positive, promotion-type behaviors (i.e., affectionate partner behaviors; $M = 4.65$).

A second ANOVA on participants’ happiness-related emotions yielded a main effect of valence, $F(1, 94) = 552.80, p < .0001$, revealing that participants reported more happiness when recalling positive events ($M = 4.95$) than negative ones ($M = 1.07$). A main effect of situation type indicated that participants reported more happiness when recalling promotion-type behaviors ($M = 3.20$) than prevention-type behaviors ($M = 2.17$), $F(1, 94) = 63.85, p < .01$. More central to our predictions, there also was a Situation Type \times Valence interaction, $F(1, 94) = 51.19, p < .001$, showing that participants reported more happiness when recalling positive, promotion-type behaviors (i.e., affectionate partner behaviors; $M = 6.20$) than positive, prevention-type behaviors (i.e., responsible partner behaviors; $M = 3.70$).

Next, we examined participants’ emotional response to the two types of negative partner behaviors (see Figure 9). An ANOVA on agitation-related emotions revealed a main effect of valence, $F(1, 94) = 287.11, p < .0001$, indicating that participants reported more agitation when recalling negative behaviors ($M = 5.53$) than positive behaviors ($M = 1.68$). A main effect of behavior type indicated that participants also reported more agitation when recalling prevention-type behaviors ($M = 4.46$) than promotion-type behaviors ($M = 3.39$), $F(1, 94) = 22.97, p < .01$. Moreover, the predicted Situation Type \times Valence interaction emerged, $F(1,$

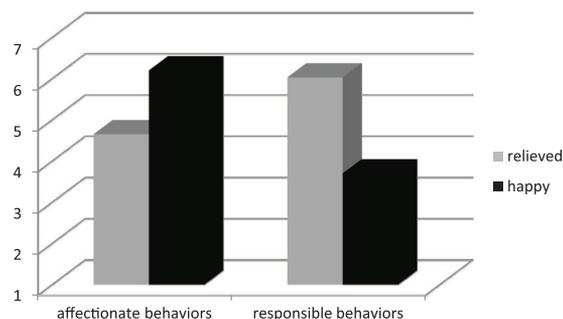


Figure 8. Study 4: Mean ratings of positive emotions as a function of recalled promotion-type (affectionate) and prevention-type (responsible) partner behaviors.

94) = 3.86, $p < .05$, indicating that participants reported more agitation when recalling negative, prevention-type behaviors (i.e., irresponsible partner behaviors; $M = 6.35$) than when recalling negative, promotion-type behaviors (i.e., neglectful partner behaviors; $M = 4.79$).

A final ANOVA on dejection-related emotions yielded a main effect of valence, showing that participants reported more dejection when recalling negative partner behaviors ($M = 5.33$) than positive partner behaviors ($M = 1.55$), $F(1, 94) = 269.13$, $p < .0001$. As predicted, a Situation Type \times Valence interaction revealed that participants reported more dejection when recalling negative, promotion-type behaviors (i.e., neglectful partner behaviors; $M = 6.10$) than negative, prevention-type behaviors (i.e., irresponsible partner behaviors; $M = 4.46$), $F(1, 94) = 36.31$, $p < .01$.

General Discussion

The overarching goal of this research was to test how regulatory focus shapes perceptual, behavioral, and emotional responses in romantic relationships—a context in which people often seek to fulfill their needs for security or growth. Regulatory focus theory and approach–avoidance models make overlapping predictions for certain interpersonal processes, but important distinctions can also be drawn.

Prevention Focus

Prevention focus, similar to avoidance motivation, should be associated with greater perceptual sensitivity and emotional reactivity to negative social events or partner behaviors that signal a threat to relationship stability. In the current research, we found that having a stronger prevention focus, operationalized as either a chronic individual difference variable (Study 1) or as an experimentally manipulated variable (Study 2), predicted heightened perceptions of distancing partner behaviors and lowered perceptions of partner support during conflict negotiation. Consistent with regulatory focus theory, strongly prevention-focused people also responded with more high-arousal negative emotions (i.e., agitation-related emotions) to a hypothetical negative relationship event (Study 3). In addition, individuals reported more agitation-related emotions after recalling irresponsible (i.e., negative prevention-focused) behaviors (Study 4).

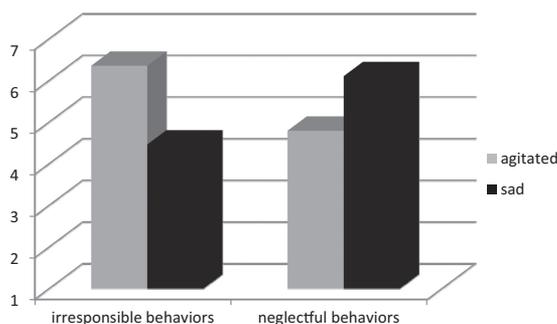


Figure 9. Study 4: Mean ratings of negative emotions as a function of recalled promotion-type (neglectful) and prevention-type (irresponsible) partner behaviors.

Although promotion-focused and prevention-focused people prefer eagerness means and vigilance means, respectively, regulatory focus theory stipulates that both should mobilize approach-oriented and avoidance-oriented behavioral tactics to reach desired outcomes if need be. For example, prevention-focused people's preferred mode of self-regulation in relationships should involve the use of "conservative" tactics designed to circumvent situations (e.g., disagreements or verbal hostility) that might escalate into conflicts and result in rejection. Indeed, Ayduk and her colleagues (2003) found that people who are both more prevention-focused and more rejection-sensitive report greater withdrawal hostility and are less likely to express overt negativity during and after relationship conflicts. Regulatory focus theory, however, also predicts that prevention focus should be associated with approach-oriented tactics, at least in certain situations. Consistent with this premise, the current research documents that highly prevention-focused people approach conflicts directly by discussing details and concerns when attempting to resolve them (Study 1).

We believe that these findings highlight a unique behavioral manifestation of prevention focus. Scholer, Stroessner, and Higgins (2008) have recently broadened the concept of prevention-focused vigilance, proposing that vigilance can be served by either conservative or risky tactics, depending on the situation. Scholer et al. (2008) found that individuals in prevention-focused states tend to adopt a *risky bias* (e.g., they tolerate more false alarms and make more mistakes) when they are exposed to negative or threatening stimuli. In threatening situations, therefore, prevention-focused individuals *do what it takes* to remove the threat and restore safety and security, even at the cost of making mistakes. Scholer et al. (2010) also documented that, in situations involving loss, prevention focus predicts increased risk seeking when the risky option is the only one to return things to the status quo. The results of Study 1 are consistent with these findings. When a major conflict threatens to undermine relationship stability, prevention-focused people strive to reestablish security in their relationships. In Study 1, where partners discussed and tried to resolve the most serious problem in their relationship, highly prevention-focused individuals tackled the threatening problem head-on, even at the cost of exacerbating the conflict.

According to regulatory focus theory, prevention focus should not be exclusively associated with sensitivity/reactivity to threats. Unlike avoidance motivation, prevention focus should also predict greater emotional reactivity to certain positive partner attributes and relationship events, especially when such events or behaviors convey that the relationship is stable and secure. Supporting this prediction, we found that recalling responsible (positive prevention-focused) partner behaviors predicted more quiescence-related emotions in Study 4. In Study 3, however, chronic prevention focus did not predict more quiescence-related emotions in response to a hypothetical positive relationship outcome. Previous research has found that prevention-focused people respond with quiescence to positive outcomes in response to favorable feedback following prevention-framed tasks (Higgins et al., 1997; Idson et al., 2000). However, these experiments did not involve outcomes relevant to close relationships. Future research needs to clarify when and how prevention focus is associated with positive emotional experiences in more affect-laden social contexts that involve relationship expectations, partner perceptions, or interaction histories.

Promotion Focus

Consistent with their concerns for advancement, strongly promotion-focused people displayed approach-orientated behaviors when trying to steer their conflict discussion toward resolution (Study 1). Specifically, they used more creative problem-solving tactics such as generating novel solutions to their conflicts and were less narrowly focused on the origins and details of their disagreements. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that promotion focus and approach-related states or cues tend to be associated with enhanced creative insight and attentional flexibility (Friedman & Förster, 2000, 2001, 2005).

Regulatory focus theory further predicts that promotion focus should be associated with increased sensitivity/reactivity to rewarding social events and positive partner behaviors. Past research on social approach–avoidance motivations has shown that people who are more strongly approach-motivated tend to experience positive events more frequently, but they are not more perceptually sensitive to positive or negative events (Gable, 2006; Strachman & Gable, 2006). Consistent with these findings, approach motivation (BAS) in Study 1 did not predict support perceptions. Promotion focus, however, did influence information processing. We documented that both chronic (Study 1) and experimentally manipulated (Study 2) promotion focus predicted greater perceptions of supportive partner behaviors and lower perceptions of distancing behaviors. Moreover, individuals who had a stronger chronic promotion focus responded with more positive emotions to a hypothetical relationship event (Study 3), and individuals' recall of behaviors with which one's partner showed affection and appreciation (i.e., positive promotion-focused behaviors) elicited more happiness-related emotions (Study 4).

According to regulatory focus theory, promotion focus should not only be related to reward sensitivity but it should also be systematically related to sensitivity and reactivity to negative events. Supporting this prediction, chronically promotion-focused people responded with more low-arousal negative (i.e., dejection-related) emotions to a hypothetical negative relationship event (Study 3). In addition, consistent with regulator focus theory, when asked to recall times when a partner made them feel neglected or inconsequential (i.e., negative promotion-focused behaviors), individuals also reported more dejection-related emotions.

Perceptions, Behavioral Tactics, and Conflict Resolution

The distinct partner perceptions that people with different regulatory orientations had during the discussions partly explained the behaviors they used when trying to solve conflicts in Study 1. Mediation analyses revealed that the greater support perceptions harbored by highly promotion-focused people partially explained their greater use of creative conflict resolution behaviors, whereas highly prevention-focused people's perceptions of their partners as less supportive fully explained their heightened focus on the details of their conflicts and their lower satisfaction with the outcome of the conflict discussion.

Focusing one's attention broadly versus narrowly can promote or undermine activation of mental representations that are difficult to access (Derryberry & Tucker, 1994; Friedman & Förster, 2001, 2008). Perhaps perceiving their partners as more supportive allows

highly promotion-focused people to broaden their attentional scope, which could facilitate brainstorming and looking beyond the details of a current conflict for novel solutions. Perceiving their partners as less supportive, on the other hand, might constrict highly prevention-focused people's attentional focus. This might lead them to focus more narrowly on the particulars that generated and maintain the conflict but make it more difficult for them to look beyond the current conflict to generate novel ideas about how it might be resolved.

Methodological Issues

There is some debate about whether the original Lockwood scale (which we adapted to a relationship context for this research) assesses regulatory focus. Summerville and Roese (2008), for example, claimed that the Lockwood promotion scale is more similar to measures of approach (the BAS) and positive affect, whereas the prevention scale is more similar to measures of avoidance (the BIS) and negative affect. In the current research, we found that promotion focus as measured by the adapted Lockwood scale was associated with the BAS and that prevention focus was related to the BIS (Study 1). However, all of the significant promotion and prevention effects obtained with the adapted Lockwood measure remained at least marginally significant when the BIS and the BAS were statistically controlled. Furthermore, the effects remained significant when we controlled for perceived relationship quality and attachment orientations, suggesting that our findings are not accounted for by participants' affect as it pertains to their relationships. Hence, the Regulatory Focus in Relationships Scale explains variance in several different dependent measures across two studies, above and beyond relationship-related affective tendencies and general approach and avoidance motivations. We do, however, caution researchers to control for affect and general approach–avoidance motivations when using this scale, especially when examining processes in affect-laden contexts.

Caveats and Conclusions

The current set of studies has some limitations. All of the studies involved college students, who represent a narrow cross-section of people involved in romantic relationships. Although we have no reason to believe the current results would not generalize to older people or those involved in different types of romantic relationships (e.g., long-term marriages), one cannot generalize the current findings to older individuals or other types of relationships in which different regulatory goals and concerns might be important (see Molden et al., 2009). Our effects might also be confined to the particular experimental tasks used in this research. The reported effects should be replicated outside the lab to determine whether regulatory focus has long-term effects on relationships in more ecologically valid settings. Finally, as we have discussed, regulatory focus is not the only motivational factor that affects how people think, feel, and behave in romantic relationships.

These caveats notwithstanding, the current research fills several important gaps in our knowledge. As the results of these studies indicate, a regulatory focus approach clarifies one's understanding of how prevention and promotion motivations affect specific perceptions, feelings, and behaviors in close relationships, above and

beyond general approach and avoidance motivations. Even though regulatory focus theory and approach–avoidance models generate some overlapping predictions for certain interpersonal processes, regulatory focus theory also makes some novel predictions that approach–avoidance models do not. Regulatory focus theory also specifies novel antecedent stimuli that should trigger promotion and prevention concerns along with the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses that should flow from each motivational system.

How does the current research extend one's understanding of the way in which motivational factors guide relationship functioning and outcomes? One major conclusion from the approach–avoidance motivation literature is that approach motivation is more advantageous for social interactions than is avoidance motivation, partly because strongly approach-oriented people assume a more active role in creating positive social outcomes. In contrast, avoidance motivation is typically associated with less satisfying social bonds and poorer interpersonal outcomes, probably because of the increased sensitivity and reactivity to negative social events characteristic of avoidance-motivated individuals (Gable, 2006; Impett et al., 2010; Strachman & Gable, 2006).

Basic needs for growth (promotion) and security (prevention) motivate individuals to perceive and respond to relational events in ways that help them achieve their unique relationship-relevant needs and goals, and thus both promotion and prevention motivations should facilitate or impede relationship outcomes in certain contexts. Having a promotion focus in relationships has some clear advantages. In fact, highly promotion-focused people tend to have more positive relationships (Grant & Higgins, 2003). This could be the result of processes that increase perceived partner support or more generous partner perceptions among highly promotion-focused people, as we found in Studies 1 and 2. In some situations, however, having a strong promotion focus could result in poorer relationship outcomes, such as when highly promotion-focused people become overly focused on rewarding outcomes and relationship success and ignore other important aspects of their relationships (e.g., their partners' emotional withdrawal, signs that their partners are becoming unhappy). Indeed, in certain contexts, being prevention-focused may protect relationships from harmful consequences. For example, highly prevention-focused people may more accurately estimate the full costs of ending a relationship, and they might be more cognizant of potential relationship threats at earlier stages, both of which would allow them to redress problems or threats before they escalate into unsolvable issues. Furthermore, prevention-focused people might also be better at fulfilling relationships responsibilities and engage in more relational maintenance behaviors, thereby contributing to the stability and longevity of their relationships. When and how promotion and prevention foci constitute vulnerabilities in relationships, and when and how they operate as resources, are important avenues for future research.

Until now, most research investigating whether and how motivational variables impact relationships has adopted a single theoretical approach; little research has simultaneously examined and tested different theoretical approaches within the same set of studies. When and under what specific conditions do regulatory focus and approach–avoidance models make the same predictions? When do they generate different ones? In which social contexts does one motivational theory predict relationship outcomes better than does the other? When do promotion-focused and prevention-

focused people adopt approach tactics, and when do they adopt avoidance tactics in interpersonal contexts? The systematic integration of different motivational theories may be the most important task for future scholars interested in understanding how core motives influence close relationships.

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Appendix

Regulatory Focus in Relationships Scale (Winterheld & Simpson)

Prevention items:

- I am often anxious that I am falling short of my duties and obligations in my relationships.
- I often worry that I will fail to accomplish my relationship goals.
- I often imagine myself experiencing bad things (e.g., rejection, betrayal, pain) that I fear might happen in my relationships.
- I am primarily striving to make my relationships what they “ought” to be like—to fulfill my relationship duties and responsibilities.
- In general, I am striving to protect and stabilize my relationships.
- Overall, I am more oriented toward preventing *negative outcomes* in my relationships than I am toward achieving positive outcomes.
- I often think about what I fear might happen to my romantic relationships in the future.

Promotion items:

- I often think about how I can achieve (or create) a successful relationship.
- Overall, I want to feel inspired and uplifted in my relationships.
- I often imagine myself experiencing good things (e.g., intimacy, affection) that I hope will happen in my relationships.
- I am primarily striving to create my “ideal relationships” - to fulfill my relationship dreams and aspirations.
- Overall, I am more oriented toward creating *positive outcomes* than preventing negative outcomes in my relationship.
- I typically focus on the success (e.g., the happiness) I hope to achieve in my relationships.
- In general, I am striving to nurture, grow, and enhance my relationships.
- I am typically striving to fulfill the hopes and dreams I have for my relationships.

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