

“All or Nothing”: Attachment Avoidance and the Curvilinear Effects of Partner Support

Yuthika U. Girme and Nickola C. Overall
University of Auckland

Jeffrey A. Simpson
University of Minnesota

Garth J. O. Fletcher
Victoria University of Wellington

People high in attachment avoidance typically respond more negatively to partner support, but some research suggests they can be calmed by high levels of practical support. In the present research, we attempted to reconcile these inconsistencies by modeling curvilinear associations between romantic partners' support and support recipients' outcomes and testing whether these curvilinear associations were moderated by recipients' degree of attachment avoidance. We examined the effect of partner support during support-relevant discussions (Studies 1–3) and in daily life (Study 4) on support recipients' distress (Studies 1–4), self-efficacy (Studies 2 and 3), perceived partner control/criticism (Studies 2 and 4), and distancing from the partner (Study 4). The results and a meta-analysis across all four studies ($N = 298$ couples) demonstrated that the curvilinear effect of practical support on recipients' outcomes was moderated by attachment avoidance. Highly avoidant recipients exhibited more negative responses as their partner provided them low-to-moderate levels of practical support, including increasing distress, perceived partner control/criticism and distancing, and decreasing self-efficacy. However, as partners' practical support shifted from moderate to high levels, highly avoidant recipients experienced more positive outcomes, including decreasing distress, perceived partner control/criticism and distancing, and increasing self-efficacy. Less avoidant individuals were resilient and experienced better outcomes regardless of the level of partner support they received. These results demonstrate the utility of curvilinear models in reconciling the costs and benefits of support, and indicate that high levels of practical support can overcome the defenses of highly avoidant individuals by offering undeniable evidence of the partner's availability.

Keywords: support provision, attachment avoidance, support effectiveness, curvilinear effects

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The support literature is marked by a slew of inconsistent findings. Perceiving that others are available when needed fosters coping and well-being, but the actual receipt of support enacted by close others is not uniformly beneficial (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000; Kaul & Lakey, 2003; Reinhardt, Boerner, & Horowitz, 2006; Uchino & Garvey, 1997; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). One key factor determining whether support is beneficial is who is receiving support. Unfortunately, inconsistent patterns also emerge across studies examining how key individual differences shape reactions to support. For example, people high in attachment

avoidance, who strive to avoid dependence, react more defensively when they receive support from their partners (Rholes, Simpson, & Oriña, 1999; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). On the contrary, some research suggests that very high levels of support can effectively soothe the highly avoidant recipients (Simpson et al., 1992; Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, & Oriña, 2007). In the present research, we examine whether these inconsistencies can be reconciled by testing how the effects of support vary according to different levels of support provision. We do this by modeling curvilinear associations between romantic partners' support and recipients' outcomes and

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Yuthika U. Girme and Nickola C. Overall, School of Psychology, University of Auckland; Jeffrey A. Simpson, Department of Psychology, University of Minnesota; Garth J. O. Fletcher, School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Yuthika U. Girme or Nickola C. Overall, School of Psychology, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand. E-mail: yuthika.girme@auckland.ac.nz or n.overall@auckland.ac.nz

testing whether these curvilinear associations are moderated by recipients' degree of attachment avoidance.

Curvilinear Effects of Partner Support for Recipients High in Avoidance

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), people who have been rebuffed and rejected by their earlier caregivers, especially during times of need, develop attachment avoidance. Highly avoidant individuals believe they cannot trust and depend on close others and so eschew closeness and intimacy and become rigidly self-reliant (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Highly avoidant individuals' deep distrust of others and their associated goal to avoid dependence produces a unique style of regulating distress, involving suppressing attachment needs and defensively disengaging from the partner (Mikulincer, 1998a; Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich., 2001; Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Thus, when highly avoidant individuals could benefit from support, they actually seek *less* support and distance themselves from their partners (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Rholes et al., 2001; Simpson et al., 1992). Moreover, when their partners try to provide support, highly avoidant recipients typically evaluate their partner's support more negatively, and withdraw from their partner to reduce dependence and prevent the hurt they expect will occur if they rely on others (Rholes et al., 1999; Rholes et al., 2001; Simpson et al., 1992). These automatic defensive strategies indicate that highly avoidant recipients should typically exhibit negative responses to support.

However, in contrast to the defensive reactions found in the above studies, there is also evidence that the provision of very clear and direct support can have beneficial outcomes for highly avoidant recipients. For example, even though Simpson et al. (1992) found that avoidant recipients sought less support from their partners when they appeared more distressed, they also discovered they were more calmed (as rated by observers) when their partners delivered very high levels of support. Rholes et al. (2011) also found that lower levels of perceived cooperative care from romantic partners predicted increases in depressive symptoms in highly avoidant individuals, whereas higher levels of cooperative support focusing on solving problems with the partner forecasted *reductions* in depressive symptoms across time. These results indicate that when partner support is low, and therefore matches avoidant individuals' negative expectations of their caregivers, avoidant recipients' show heightened distress. In contrast, highly avoidant recipients can find support beneficial when partners contradict their expectations by delivering very high levels of support.

Closer examination of the research focusing on the destructive responses of highly avoidant recipients provides further evidence that avoidant individuals react differently to different *levels* of partner support. For example, Rholes et al. (1999) found that highly distressed avoidant women were angrier when their partners offered them low levels of support, but not when their partner's support was high. Collins and Feeney (2004) also found that highly avoidant individuals appraised low (but not high) amounts of support more negatively, and they performed more poorly during a speech task when their partners provided low (but not high) levels of support. Thus, although prior research has generally concluded that avoidant individuals react badly within support interactions, the pattern in this body of research indicates that

highly avoidant recipients: (a) evaluate their partners more negatively and behave defensively when partners provide relatively *low* levels of support, but (b) can reap the benefits of partner support when receiving *high* levels of support, such as experiencing less distress and performing more competently.

Why would highly avoidant recipients react defensively when receiving low levels of partner support, but respond more positively when receiving high levels of support? Highly avoidant individuals strive to maintain their self-reliance and avoid dependence, but do so in order to protect themselves from the neglect and hurt they expect from unreliable caregivers (Bowlby, 1973; also see Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Priming studies, for example, illustrate that their focus on independence is a defensive response rather than a replacement of their attachment needs; concerns about a partner's availability and proximity-related thoughts are just as accessible for individuals high versus low in avoidance, and are even more accessible when additional cognitive load reduces their ability to suppress their attachment needs (Mikulincer, Birnbaum, Woddis, & Nachmias, 2000; Mikulincer, Gilath, & Shaver, 2002). Avoidant individuals also experience increased positive mood and greater self-esteem when told they are accepted by others and that they will be successful in future interpersonal experiences (Carvalho & Gabriel, 2006). Thus, avoidant individuals still desire love and care from their partners (Rholes et al., 1999; Rholes et al., 2011; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002; Simpson et al., 1992), but have difficulty balancing these needs with entrenched fears that they cannot rely on their partners, who they often perceive to be less supportive and caring than they actually are (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Rholes et al., 2011). And, because receiving low-to-moderate levels of partner support confirms their expectations that partners cannot be depended on to be good and available caregivers (Collins & Feeney, 2004), low-to-moderate partner support should amplify avoidant recipients' fear of dependence, heightening their distress and interfering with their ability to cope. This threatening context should also trigger the automatic defenses associated with avoidance, including evaluating the partner's support more negatively, viewing the partner as being critical and controlling, and disengaging from them.

In contrast, although highly avoidant individuals should react defensively when low levels of support confirm their expectations that their partners will fail them in times of need, high levels of support may "break through" these avoidant defenses by sharply contradicting the negative expectations highly avoidant recipients hold and providing undeniable evidence of their partner's availability. Indeed, providing clear and irrefutable evidence of the partner's supportive presence may be the only way in which avoidant recipients can let their guard down and receive help from their partners. This proposition is consistent with recent research showing that avoidant defenses can be ameliorated when partners behave in ways that disconfirm avoidant individuals' negative expectations (Overall, Simpson, & Struthers, 2013; Simpson & Overall, 2014). The relative power and importance of the partner actually being available for highly avoidant individuals should reduce their need to engage in strategies designed to protect against the vulnerability of dependence. Thus, very high levels of partner support should counteract any distress and coping interference caused by the deep-seated fear of dependence initially activated within support contexts. Very clear support should also reduce avoidant recipients' negative evaluations of their partner's

support and their defensive psychological and behavioral distancing.

In sum, we predicted that partner support would have a curvilinear association with the responses of highly avoidant recipients. When partners provide increasing levels of support at low-to-moderate levels, highly avoidant recipients should exhibit increasingly negative responses as avoidant recipients' automatic self-protection strategies are progressively activated. However, as partners' support provision increases from moderate to high levels, highly avoidant recipients should receive the benefits of undeniably clear, direct support that contradicts their negative expectations and eliminates the need to protect against the pain that would occur if partners were unavailable.

Effects of Partner Support for Recipients Low in Avoidance

In contrast to highly avoidant people, secure people (i.e., those who are low in attachment avoidance) do not harbor concerns about being dependent or relying on their partners (Mikulincer et al., 2000; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). Instead, low avoidant individuals hold positive views of others and believe that caregivers are (and will be) available and responsive when needed (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Possessing trust in the goodwill and responsiveness of their partners, recipients low in avoidance are unlikely to see low levels of support as confirmation that their partners are rejecting, and so should not exhibit the immediate self-protective reactions that highly avoidant recipients display. Rather, secure recipients should respond relatively positively even when partner support is low, most likely because they rely on their more general beliefs that they are cared for and supported.

Prior research examining the links between avoidance and reactions to support does indicate that low avoidant individuals do not react negatively when partner support is at *low* levels. Instead, secure (low avoidant) individuals perceive their partners as more supportive and evaluate their partner's support more positively, regardless of whether they receive low or high support messages (Collins & Feeney, 2004). Low avoidant individuals are also more calmed during stressful discussions, even when their partners exhibit low levels of instrumental support (Simpson et al., 2007). In addition, during the transition to parenthood, low avoidant parents experience lower levels of depressive symptoms, even when they perceive their partner is providing low levels of proximal care (Rholes et al., 2011). These findings indicate that low avoidant recipients may generally experience more positive outcomes because their trust that they can draw upon support if needed helps them cope, regardless of the levels of support their partners are currently providing.

Ironically, however, because they do not require explicit evidence of their partner's care and availability, the very high levels of support that we predict will be beneficial for highly avoidant recipients might *interfere* with low avoidant recipients' general resilience. Indeed, very direct and visible support can exacerbate anxiety and depressed mood (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger et al., 2000; Gleason, Iida, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008) as well as reduce recipients' confidence and self-efficacy (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Girme, Overall & Simpson, 2013; Howland & Simpson, 2010). These costs of support are believed to occur because overt partner support challenges recipients' competence by signaling they are

unable to cope on their own (Bolger et al., 2000). Research showing that avoidant individuals respond more positively at very high levels of support indicates that these potential costs may be offset for highly avoidant recipients because clear and direct support provides the evidence of partner availability they need to be willing to depend on their partners. However, because low avoidant recipients are unencumbered by concerns about their partner's reliability and thus do not require as much overt evidence of their partner's support, the coping and efficacy threats that very direct, visible support can have may outweigh the benefits of very high support for low avoidant recipients. If this is true, a reverse curvilinear pattern might be found for low (compared to high) avoidant recipients, one characterized by upswings in negative responses when partner support reaches very high levels.

Partner Support and Attachment Anxiety

Another form of insecure attachment is attachment anxiety. Attachment anxiety develops when people have experienced inconsistent caregiving during times of need, which creates a craving for closeness and intimacy coupled with an intense fear of rejection and relationship loss (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Highly anxious individuals' preoccupation with acceptance and sustaining attachment bonds leads them to continually seek reassurance and persistently strive to attain their partner's care and support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Accordingly, the dependence inherent in support interactions does not threaten highly anxious individuals, and they do not respond in the same defensive, dependence-reducing manner as highly avoidant individuals often do in these contexts. However, anxious individuals are acutely sensitive to signs that their partner is not the committed and caring partner they desire, and so they display more negative emotions when their partners fail to provide sufficient support (Rholes et al., 1999). At low levels of support, therefore, highly anxious individuals may experience more distress and evaluate their partners more negatively. However, rather than negative responses increasing across levels of low-to-moderate support, as when activating avoidant defenses, highly anxious individuals should respond less negatively as the partner provides them increasing levels of support.

Indeed, high levels of partner support might be effective at eliminating highly anxious individuals' unfulfilled desires for love and acceptance. For example, highly anxious individuals feel more cared about and accepted when their partners provide evidence of their regard, such as conveying high levels of affection (Lemay & Dudley, 2011). But there are also reasons to think that increasing levels of support would not meet highly anxious individuals' insatiable desire for closeness and care, particularly in interactions that create expectations that the partner should provide care, such as when anxious individuals are in the role of the support recipient. Indeed, partner support is often relatively ineffective at soothing highly anxious support recipients (Moreira et al., 2003; Simpson et al., 1992), and highly anxious recipients consistently evaluate the partner support they do receive more negatively (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Gallo & Smith, 2001; Priel & Shamai, 1995). Thus, in contexts in which highly anxious individuals expect high levels of attention, care, and support, even very high levels of partner support may not satiate their need for closeness. Moreover, if very high levels of direct visible support communicate negative evaluations by the partner, such as low competence and efficacy, this

may activate the rejection concerns and negative self-evaluations of anxious individuals.

In sum, we did not expect the same curvilinear pattern for highly anxious recipients as we did for highly avoidant recipients. Although highly anxious recipients may respond more negatively to low levels of support, increasing levels of low-to-moderate levels of support should not activate increasingly defensive responses in highly anxious recipients. Moreover, even high levels of partner support may fail to meet the strong desires and expectations that anxious individuals hold in this context, and may even threaten their sense of self and fear of negative evaluations by the partner. Thus, their dual motivation of wanting closeness but being sensitive to any signs of devaluation may mean that the heightened benefits *and* costs of support for anxious individuals cancel each other out. Accordingly, the existing literature has revealed that partner support produces stronger effects for avoidant compared to anxious recipients (Rholes et al., 1999; Simpson et al., 1992; Simpson et al., 2007).

Summary and Overview of Current Research

Prior research has found that people high in attachment avoidance typically respond more negatively to partner support. However, some studies have shown that highly avoidant recipients can be calmed when they receive very high and clear levels of support from their partners. In the present research, we investigate whether these inconsistencies reflect a curvilinear association between romantic partners' support and the responses of highly avoidant recipients. In particular, because low levels of partner support confirm their expectations that caregivers are unresponsive and unreliable, we predicted that highly avoidant recipients would protect themselves from the vulnerability of dependence and respond more negatively and defensively as partners provided low-

to-moderate levels of support. However, we also predicted that these defensive responses would be ameliorated as moderate-to-high levels of support offer increasingly clear and undeniable evidence of the partner's availability. We did not expect the same curvilinear pattern would emerge for low avoidant (secure) recipients because their steadfast trust that partners will be responsive, if needed, enables them to be resilient, even in situations when partners provide low levels of support. Instead, because low avoidant recipients are unencumbered by concerns about their partner's availability, very high levels of support might result in the coping and efficacy costs that overt and visible support is known to produce, resulting in upswings in negative responses by low avoidant recipients when partner support reaches very high levels.

As summarized in Table 1, we tested our curvilinear prediction in four studies that reflect the most common methods employed by prior research examining the effectiveness of partner support, including assessing the effect of partner support observed within couples' discussions of recipients' personal goals (Studies 1 and 2) and the support that recipients perceived during discussions of significant stressors (Study 3) and daily interactions (Study 4) with their partners. Across these studies, we examined four recipient outcomes that capture (a) the way support effectiveness has often been tested in the support literature, and (b) the types of defensive reactions shown by highly avoidant recipients. Prior research has typically explored the effectiveness of support by assessing recipients' *distress* and *self-efficacy* (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Collins & Feeney, 2000, 2004; Howland & Simpson, 2010; Simpson et al., 2007). Attachment-based research has also focused on the defensive reactions characteristic of attachment avoidance, including negative evaluations of partners' intentions, such as *perceiving the partner as controlling and critical* (Collins & Feeney, 2004), and

Table 1
Method and Measures of Each Study

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
Method	Support during couples' discussions of personal goals	Support during couples' discussions of personal goals	Support during couples' discussions of a significant stressor	Support experienced during couples' daily interactions
Measures of partner support	Observer-rated practical and emotional support provision during discussion	Observer-rated practical and emotional support provision during discussion	Perceived practical and emotional support from partner during discussion	Perceived practical and emotional support from partner each day
Outcomes of support				
Distress	Distress	Distress	Distress	Depressed mood
Efficacy		Goal-related efficacy	Stressor-related efficacy	
Perceived partner control and criticism		Perceived Partner control and criticism		Perceived partner control and criticism
Distancing				Distancing
Alternative explanations				
Support need	Desired change in goal	Desired change in goal	Severity of stressor	Daily support need
Support-seeking	Observer-rated support-seeking	Observer-rated support-seeking		
Desired support		Desired practical support Desired emotional support		Desired practical support Desired emotional support
Emotional suppression		Emotional suppression	Emotional suppression	Emotional suppression

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psychological and behavioral *distancing* from the partner (Simpson et al., 1992).

In all four studies, we also assessed the two most commonly investigated forms of support: *practical* (e.g., giving advice, helpful information, and guidance) and *emotional* (e.g., listening, offering reassurance, and providing comfort) (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). The curvilinear effects we predict will occur for highly avoidant recipients could emerge for both forms of support because high levels of either support could signal the partner availability needed to counteract avoidant individuals' self-protective defensive strategies. However, there is also evidence to suggest that highly avoidant individuals tend to respond better to practical forms of support. Simpson et al. (2007), for instance, found that highly avoidant individuals were rated by observers as being more calmed when their partners provided practical support, but not emotional support. Similarly, Mikulincer and Florian (1997) found that highly avoidant individuals reported decreases in negative affect and fear of an upcoming stressful task when their partners were randomly assigned to provide practical support, but they reported increased negative affect and fear when given emotional support. These prior studies indicate that, even though high levels of emotional support may provide irrefutable evidence of the partner's care, the emotionally laden and intimacy-inducing nature of emotional support may require too much vulnerability and intimacy for highly avoidant people to lower their self-protective defenses.

As outlined in Table 1, across all four studies, we also attempted to rule out four key alternative explanations for the hypothesized effects. First, we measured and statistically controlled for the extent to which recipients: (a) needed support (Studies 1–4), (b) actively sought support (Studies 1 and 2), and (c) desired support (Studies 2 and 4) from their partners. The more recipients need, seek, or desire support, the more responsive their partners should be, on average, in providing it. For highly avoidant recipients, therefore, the benefits of greater partner support could occur because highly avoidant individuals are more soothed by support when they truly need or desire it from their partners. Avoidant individuals also tend to suppress threatening emotions and feelings (Fraley & Shaver, 1997; Mikulincer, 1998a), which could lead them to defensively suppress their distress and report more positive outcomes at high levels of (threatening) partner support. However, if highly avoidant individuals' defenses are activated (rather than terminated) at high levels of partner support, they should exhibit increasing levels of negative partner evaluations and distancing from the partner rather than the decreases in these partner-related responses we predict. Nonetheless, we tested this alternative explanation by measuring and controlling avoidant recipients' tendencies to suppress their thoughts and feelings (Studies 2–4; see Table 1).

Finally, we expected that partner support would have a curvilinear effect on the outcomes of highly avoidant recipients in all four studies. However, given the complexity of our moderated curvilinear predictions and the probability that Type I and Type II errors could emerge in one or more of the studies, we tested the robustness of the predicted curvilinear effect for each recipient outcome (see Table 1) and each type of support (practical vs. emotional) by conducting a series of meta-analyses across all four studies. We also relied on these meta-analyses to test the robust-

ness of any incidental findings beyond our primary predictions that emerged in any of the studies.

Study 1

We first drew upon an existing sample (Overall et al., 2010) that involved long-term romantic couples engaging in two video-recorded discussions in which each individual (as the support recipient) discussed a personal goal with his or her partner (as the support provider). The attachment orientation of each partner was assessed prior to the discussions. Immediately following each discussion, support recipients rated the level of distress they experienced during the discussion. To measure partner support, independent coders rated the degree to which support providers displayed practical and emotional support (see Table 1). We predicted that highly avoidant recipients would react to low-to-moderate levels of partner support more negatively and show increasing levels of distress, but increasing levels of moderate-to-high support would appease avoidant recipients' distress by providing clear and undeniable evidence of their partner's availability (i.e., an inverted U-shape curve).

Method

Participants. Sixty-one heterosexual couples responded to campus advertisements placed across a New Zealand University and were paid NZ\$40 for participating. Couples were involved in serious (15% married, 49% cohabiting, 30% serious dating) and long-term ($M = 2.81$ years, $SD = 2.82$) relationships. The mean age of participants was 23.38 ($SD = 5.37$).¹

Procedure. After completing scales assessing attachment avoidance and anxiety, each participant identified and ranked (in order of importance) three aspects of themselves they wanted to change or improve, which they were told they might discuss with their romantic partners. The top-ranked personal goal was then selected for discussion by the experimenter, and both partners rated how much they desired change in their targeted goal. After a short warm-up discussion, each couple engaged in two 5-min video-recorded discussions about the most important personal goal of each partner. Both partners were instructed to simply discuss the issue as they normally would. Half of the couples discussed the women's goal first, and half discussed the man's goal first. We refer to the partner whose goal was discussed as the "support recipient" and their partner who could be supportive as the "support provider."

Materials

Attachment orientations. Participants completed the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ; Simpson, Rholes & Phillips, 1996). Eight items assessed attachment avoidance (e.g., "I'm not very comfortable having to depend on romantic partners") and nine items assessed attachment anxiety (e.g., "I often worry that

¹ Analyses of the support interactions presented in Study 1 have been reported by Overall et al. (2010, Study 2) and by Girme, Overall, and Simpson (2013). However, the specific measures, hypotheses, and curvilinear analyses reported here have not been previously examined or reported. No results from the samples used in Studies 2–4 have been previously reported or published.

my romantic partners don't really love me" 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Items were scored and averaged so that higher scores represent higher avoidance (Cronbach's alpha [α] = .75) and anxiety (α = .83).

Support need. To assess how much recipients might need support from their partner (see Table 1), prior to the support discussions, recipients reported on how much they desired change with regard to their goal ("To what extent do you desire change in this feature of yourself?" 1 = *no desire to change*, 7 = *strong desire to change*).

Distress. Following each discussion, support recipients reported how stressful they found the discussion (1 = *not at all stressful*, 7 = *extremely stressful*) and how upset they were during the discussion (1 = *not at all upset*, 7 = *extremely upset*). These items were averaged, $r = .60$, $p < .01$ to index recipients' distress during the discussion.

Support provision. Two coders blind to the study aims and all participant data independently coded the videotaped discussions for the degree to which partners exhibited practical and emotional support behaviors. *Practical support* included offering advice and information, generating solutions, and suggesting actions to produce change. *Emotional support* included expressions of love and concern, providing reassurance and comfort, and communicating understanding and empathy. The specific behaviors targeted are described in Overall, Fletcher, and Simpson (2010), and a detailed scheme is available in the online supplemental materials. Coders were instructed to take into account the frequency, intensity, and duration of relevant support behaviors during each discussion (1–2 = low, 3–5 = moderate, 6–7 = high). Coders' ratings were highly consistent and averaged to construct scores for practical (*intraclass correlation coefficient* [ICC] = .91) and emotional (ICC = .95) support.

Support seeking. Two coders also independently rated how much recipients sought support from their partners. Based upon prior conceptualizations and coding of direct support seeking (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998), coders rated the presence of direct support-seeking behaviors, including recipients' directly seeking help, advice, reassurance, or physical proximity as well as describing the problem, disclosing thoughts and emotions, and discussing potential solutions with their partner. These behaviors signal that recipients desire and are seeking support from their partners. Coders were instructed to take into account the frequency, intensity, and duration of relevant support behaviors during each discussion (1–2 = low, 3–5 = moderate, 6–7 = high). Coders' ratings demonstrated high consistency (ICC = .91), and were averaged to construct an overall support seeking score.

Results

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 2 (first column marked Study 1).² To test whether support provision had curvilinear associations with recipients' distress, and whether any curvilinear associations were moderated by attachment avoidance, we followed the approach outlined by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006) and ran a series of dyadic multilevel models that accounted for the dyadic dependencies in the data using the MIXED procedure in SPSS 20. We first modeled recipients' distress as a function of: (a) the linear effect of their partner's practical support, (b)

the quadratic or curvilinear effect of their partner's practical support, (c) recipients' attachment avoidance, and the interactions between recipients' avoidance and (d) the linear and (e) quadratic effect of the partner's practical support. To isolate the effects of avoidance and anxiety, we also included: (f) recipients' attachment anxiety, and the interactions between recipients' anxiety and (g) the linear and (h) quadratic effects of the partner's practical support. An analogous model was run to test the effects of emotional support. All predictor variables were grand-mean centered, and the quadratic effects were calculated by modeling the squared grand-mean centered support scores. We also modeled the main effect and interaction effects of gender (coded –1 women, 1 men) to test for differences between men and women. No significant gender differences emerged ($ts = -.04$ to -1.55 , $ps > .12$) and so we dropped these additional parameters from the models.

The results are presented in Table 3. We first focus on the predicted effects for attachment avoidance, and then turn to the effects for attachment anxiety.

Attachment avoidance and curvilinear effects of partners' support.

Practical support. The results testing the effects of practical support are presented in the top section of Table 3. No linear or curvilinear associations emerged between partners' practical support and recipients' distress. However, as predicted, the curvilinear association between practical support and recipients' distress was moderated by recipients' attachment avoidance (see the significant Partners' practical support² × Attachment avoidance interaction). This interaction is plotted in Figure 1. The values on the x -axis represent the range of practical support provided by partners during the discussions (1 = no practical support, 6.5 = highest levels of practical support), and the values on the y -axis represent the predicted values of distress that fell within the range of distress recipients reported in Study 1. To evaluate the meaning of each curve we: (1) calculated the simple linear and curvilinear effects for recipients high versus low in avoidance (see Table 4), and (2) calculated the inflection points for the curves for recipients high versus low in avoidance.³

The curvilinear effect of partner support for recipients high in avoidance (+1 SD) is depicted by the solid line in Figure 1. As

² The key correlations are described in the text. Full correlation tables for each study are available in the online supplemental materials (see link on the first page of the article).

³ To calculate the inflection curves, we used standard unconstrained optimization techniques (see Aiken & West, 1991; Stewart, 2011) to compose an equation reflecting the moderated curvilinear effect, where x = partners' practical support and z = recipients' attachment avoidance,

$$y(x, z) = B_0 + B_1x + B_2x^2 + B_3z + B_4xz + B_5x^2z.$$

We then took the partial derivative with respect to x and solved for

$$\partial y / \partial x = 0,$$

$$\partial y / \partial x = B_1 + (2 * B_2x) + B_4z + (2 * B_5xz).$$

Finally, we solved x by substituting values for z (i.e., –1 SD and +1 SD values for z or recipients' attachment avoidance) and centered the x values (partners' practical support) against the true mean value. Further information and step-by-step examples of calculating inflection points are contained in the online supplemental materials (see link on the first page of the article).

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics Across Measures (Studies 1–4)

	Study 1		Study 2		Study 3		Study 4	
	Mean (SD)	Range						
Recipients' attachment avoidance	2.95 (0.96)	1.00–5.38	2.86 (1.02)	1.00–6.00	2.92 (1.23)	1.00–6.63	2.90 (0.92)	1.00–5.75
Recipients' attachment anxiety	2.98 (1.10)	1.00–5.67	3.07 (1.05)	1.00–7.00	3.11 (1.12)	1.00–5.67	3.04 (1.12)	1.00–5.89
Partners' practical support	3.75 (1.13)	1.00–6.50	4.31 (1.13)	2.00–7.00	5.23 (1.47)	1.50–7.00	3.05 (2.02)	1.00–7.00
Partners' emotional support	1.80 (1.03)	1.00–7.00	3.05 (1.14)	1.00–7.00	5.41 (1.41)	1.50–7.00	3.96 (2.08)	1.00–7.00
Recipients' distress	2.52 (1.29)	1.00–7.00	1.99 (1.49)	1.00–7.00	3.59 (1.38)	1.00–6.00	1.84 (1.30)	1.00–7.00
Recipients' efficacy			5.15 (1.09)	1.50–7.00	4.45 (1.35)	1.00–7.00		
Perceived partner control and criticism			2.07 (1.37)	1.00–7.00			1.50 (0.98)	1.00–7.00
Recipients' distancing							1.72 (1.12)	1.00–7.00
Alternative explanations								
Recipients' support need	5.93 (0.92)	3.00–7.00	5.76 (1.22)	1.00–7.00	6.03 (0.97)	3.00–7.00	2.48 (1.73)	1.00–7.00
Recipients' support-seeking	3.59 (0.99)	1.00–7.00	4.14 (1.09)	1.00–7.00				
Recipients' desired practical support			5.30 (1.37)	1.00–7.00			2.84 (1.99)	1.00–7.00
Recipients' desired emotional support			5.98 (1.00)	1.00–7.00			3.00 (2.05)	1.00–7.00
Recipients' emotional suppression			2.24 (1.45)	1.00–7.00	3.10 (1.50)	1.00–7.00	2.21 (1.46)	1.00–7.00

Note. Alternative explanation measures for each study are described in Table 1.

predicted, highly avoidant individuals experienced increasing distress as partner support moved from low to moderate levels (see left side of Figure 1). However, at around average levels of support (inflection point = 3.65, .09 SD below the mean), the effect reversed and increasing levels of practical support were associated with a reduction in avoidant individuals' distress (see right side of Figure 1). The simple effects confirmed that this represented a significant simple curvilinear effect (see first row, right side of Table 4).⁴ In contrast, the simple effects for recipients low in avoidance (-1 SD; see dashed line in Figure 1) revealed that the upswing in distress at very high levels of support was not statistically significant.

Alternative explanations. We wanted to rule out the possibility that these effects were due to differences in the support needs or support seeking behavior of recipients high versus low in avoidance (see Table 1). Level of desired change (or support need) was not associated with recipients' attachment security, recipients' distress, or the degree to which partners provided support ($r_s = -.09$ to $.01$, $p_s > .31$), and statistically controlling for desired change did not alter the significant curvilinear interactions reported in Figure 1 ($B = -.14$, $t = -2.01$, $p < .05$). Similarly, although support-seeking was associated with lower distress, $r = -.22$, $p < .02$, statistically controlling for the level of recipients' support-seeking did not substantially alter the curvilinear interaction reported in Figure 1 ($B = -.13$, $t = -1.78$, $p < .08$).

Emotional support. The results for models testing the associations between emotional support and recipients' distress are presented in the lower section of Table 3. Greater emotional support provided by the partner was associated with lower levels of recipients' distress, but a significant curvilinear effect of emotional support indicated that once emotional support reached very high levels (inflection point = 3.04, 1.2 SD above the mean), the beneficial effect of emotional support halted and began to have the

reverse effect. However, this pattern did not differ according to recipients' level of attachment avoidance.

Attachment anxiety and curvilinear effects of partners' support. Unexpectedly, two significant interactions between the curvilinear effect of partners' support and recipients' attachment anxiety emerged. Given the number of studies, incidental findings beyond our primary predictions are described in text, and we examine the robustness of these additional effects in a meta-analysis across studies presented at the end of Study 4. Associated figures are available in the online supplemental materials (see link on the first page of the article).

A significant interaction between the curvilinear effect of partners' practical support and recipients' attachment anxiety on recipients' distress (see top section of Table 3) revealed that recipients *lower* in attachment anxiety showed the same pattern as recipients *higher* in avoidance (as in the solid line in Figure 1). That is, practical support had an increasingly deleterious effect on distress until reaching close to mean levels of support (inflection

⁴ A concern with curvilinear associations and moderated curvilinear effects is that curves could be pulled by outliers. However, the predicted curvilinear effect was directly and conceptually replicated across the four studies reported here (see Figures 1–8) and, thus, it is extremely unlikely that this pattern was produced by outliers in each study. Nonetheless, we carefully inspected all scatterplots for the effects presented in Figures 1–8 across the studies. There was no evidence of outliers influencing any of the results across all four studies. Relevant output is contained in the online supplemental materials (see link on the first page of the article).

Another potential concern is whether the distribution of partner support is skewed. For example, perhaps high levels of partner support (i.e., when it becomes beneficial for highly avoidant recipients) occurs relatively infrequently, indicating that the down-turn in negative responses might be a rare occurrence. Skew indices and histograms across all four studies are provided in the online supplemental materials. Practical support was normally distributed, and the distributions were similar across low versus high attachment avoidance groups.

Table 3
The Effects of Practical and Emotional Support Provided by the Partner and Recipients' Attachment Avoidance and Anxiety on Recipients' Distress (Study 1)

	B	SE	t
Practical support			
Partners' practical support	.04	.09	.47
Partners' practical support ²	-.08	.07	-1.17
Recipients' attachment avoidance	.45	.15	3.02**
Partners' practical support × Attachment avoidance	-.09	.10	-.94
Partners' practical support ² × Attachment avoidance	-.15	.07	-2.05*
Recipients' attachment anxiety	.11	.13	.86
Partners' practical support × Attachment anxiety	.12	.10	1.19
Partners' practical support ² × Attachment anxiety	.19	.08	2.55*
Emotional support			
Partners' emotional support	-.55	.17	-3.27**
Partners' emotional support ²	.22	.08	2.79**
Recipients' attachment avoidance	.40	.15	2.74**
Partners' emotional support × Attachment avoidance	.27	.18	1.48
Partners' emotional support ² × Attachment avoidance	-.11	.07	-1.58
Recipients' attachment anxiety	.27	.12	2.32*
Partners' emotional support × Attachment anxiety	-.19	.17	-1.10
Partners' emotional support ² × Attachment anxiety	.19	.09	2.03*

Note. The variables marked with superscript 2s are curvilinear variables.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

point = 3.60, .13 SD below the mean), at which point increasing levels of practical support were associated with reductions in distress (simple linear effect: $B = -.09$, $SE = .13$, $t = -.65$, $p = .52$; simple curvilinear effect: $B = -.29$, $SE = .11$, $t = -2.65$, $p = .01$). The simple effects of practical support for recipients high in anxiety were nonsignificant (linear: $B = .17$, $SE = .15$, $t = 1.13$, $p = .26$; curvilinear: $B = .13$, $SE = .10$, $t = 1.29$, $p = .20$).

A second interaction between the curvilinear effect of partners' emotional support and recipients' attachment anxiety on recipi-

ents' distress (see lower section of Table 3) revealed that recipients lower in attachment anxiety experienced a linear, but nonsignificant, decrease in distress as partners provided more emotional support (simple linear effect: $B = -.34$, $SE = .25$, $t = -1.39$, $p = .17$; simple curvilinear effect: $B = .02$, $SE = .12$, $t = .15$, $p = .88$). In contrast, significant simple linear ($B = -.76$, $SE = .26$, $t = -2.94$, $p < .01$) and curvilinear ($B = .43$, $SE = .14$, $t = 3.12$, $p < .01$) effects for recipients high in attachment anxiety revealed that low-to-moderate levels of partner emotional support had an alleviating effect on anxious individuals' greater distress until reaching just above average levels of support (inflection point = 2.68, .84 SD above the mean), after which highly anxious recipients started to become increasingly distressed by higher levels of emotional support. Thus, particularly high levels of emotional support may exacerbate anxious individuals' heightened distress.

Discussion

In Study 1, individuals (support recipients) discussed a personal goal with their partner (support provider) while being video-recorded. As predicted, attachment avoidance moderated the curvilinear association between the amount of practical support exhibited by the partner (rated by independent coders) and recipients' level of distress experienced during the discussion. Consistent with the documented resistance to support associated with attachment avoidance, the more partners provided low-to-moderate levels of practical support, the more highly avoidant recipients experienced distress. However, consistent with research suggesting that high levels of practical support might yield benefits and actually soothe highly avoidant recipients, once partner support reached average levels, increasing levels of practical support were associated with reductions in highly avoidant recipients' distress. In contrast, increasing levels of practical support had nonsignificant linear and curvilinear associations with the distress experienced by less avoidant recipients.

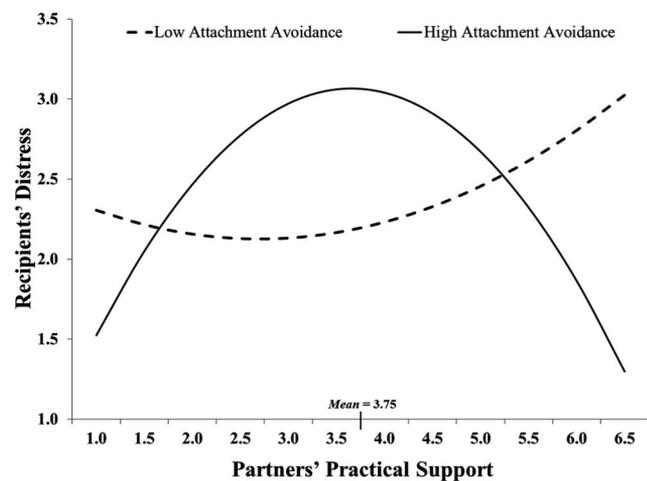


Figure 1. The moderating effect of recipients' attachment avoidance on the curvilinear association between practical support exhibited by the partner during discussions of recipients' personal goals and recipients' distress (Study 1). Note. The values on the x-axis represent the range of practical support provided by partners in Study 1 (1 = no practical support, 6.5 = highest levels of practical support). Low and high attachment avoidance are indexed by 1 SD below and above the mean.

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Table 4
Simple Linear and Curvilinear Effects of Partners' Practical Support for Recipients Low and High in Attachment Avoidance (Studies 1–4)

Figure	Low attachment avoidance (–1 SD)								High attachment avoidance (+1 SD)								
	Linear effect				Curvilinear effect				Linear effect				Curvilinear effect				
	B	SE	t	r	B	SE	t	r	B	SE	t	r	B	SE	t	r	
Distress																	
Study 1	1	.13	.14	.97	.09	.06	.08	.74	.07	–.04	.13	–.34	–.03	–.22	.11	–2.06*	–.20
Study 2		.03	.15	.17	.01	–.15	.10	–1.61	–.13	.20	.15	1.36	.11	–.11	.10	–1.05	–.09
Study 3		.02	.18	.12	.02	–.08	.10	–.79	–.10	–.14	.25	–.56	–.07	–.18	.11	–1.60	–.20
Study 4 (men only)	6	–.05	.03	–1.41	–.16	.07	.02	4.12*	.43	.07	.03	2.46*	.27	–.04	.01	–2.79*	–.31
Efficacy																	
Study 2	2	.01	.11	.13	.01	–.10	.07	–1.46	–.11	–.22	.10	–2.30*	–.02	.15	.07	2.19*	.17
Study 3	4	.02	.17	.10	.01	–.10	.10	–1.00	–.13	.52	.24	2.20*	.27	.20	.11	1.82†	.22
Perceived partner control and criticism																	
Study 2 (men only)	3	–.12	.20	–.60	–.06	.17	.12	1.50	.16	.18	.19	.96	.10	–.18	.13	–1.39	–.15
Study 4 (men only)	7	.03	.04	.95	.11	.05	.02	2.91*	.31	.04	.03	1.23	.13	–.03	.01	–2.27*	–.24
Distancing																	
Study 4	8	–.01	.02	–.26	–.02	.01	.01	1.15	.10	–.01	.02	–.47	–.04	–.02	.01	–2.13*	–.19

Note. Effect sizes (r) were computed using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula: $r = \sqrt{(t^2/df + df)}$.

† $p < .08$. * $p < .05$.

Partners' emotional support did not show the same pattern. Instead, emotional support had a positive effect on recipients' distress up to moderate levels, after which emotional support started to become costly, consistent with prior research showing that support can have costs (Bolger et al., 2000; Shrout Herman, & Bolger, 2006). This pattern, however, was significant only for recipients high in attachment anxiety, suggesting that anxious individuals who already hold chronic negative self-views may be most susceptible to such threats. Unexpectedly, recipients low in anxiety also exhibited the same pattern of response to partners' practical support as recipients high in avoidance. We investigate the replicability of these effects in Studies 2–4.

Study 2

In Study 2, we broadened our assessment of recipient outcomes by examining a central outcome that prior research has used to assess the effectiveness of support—recipients' self-efficacy (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Howland & Simpson, 2010)—and by assessing the negative evaluations of partner support that often accompany attachment avoidance—perceptions of the partner being controlling and critical (Collins & Feeney, 2004). Similar to Study 1, heterosexual couples involved in long-term relationships engaged in two video-recorded discussions in which each individual (the support recipient) discussed a personal goal with his or her partner (the support provider). Immediately following each discussion, support recipients rated how distressed they felt during the discussion, their feelings of goal-related competence and efficacy, and the extent to which they felt their partner was controlling and critical. Independent coders then rated the degree to which partners provided practical and emotional support. We expected that highly avoidant recipients would react to low-to-moderate levels of partner support with greater distress, reduced goal-related efficacy, and more negative perceptions of the partner as controlling and critical, but we predicted that these negative responses would

reverse as partners provided moderate-to-high levels of support that offer unequivocal evidence of their availability.

Method

Participants. One-hundred heterosexual couples responded to campus-wide advertisements at a New Zealand University and were paid NZ\$80 for participating. Couples were involved in serious (13% married, 36% cohabiting, 47% serious dating relationships), long-term ($M = 3.28$ years, $SD = 4.16$) relationships, and were a mean age of 22.64 ($SD = 6.51$) years.

Procedure. After completing measures of attachment avoidance and anxiety, participants identified and ranked (in order of importance) three current personal goals they had been trying to achieve, which they were told they might discuss with their romantic partners. The top-ranked personal goal was selected for discussion, and participants then rated how much they desired change with regard to the targeted goal. After a short warm-up discussion, each couple was video-recorded engaging in two 7-min discussions about each partner's personal goal. Half of the couples discussed the woman's goal first, and half discussed the man's goal first. As in Study 1, both partners were instructed to discuss the issue as they normally would. We refer to the partner whose goal was discussed as the "support recipient," and their partner who could be supportive as the "support provider."

Materials

Prediscussion measures.

Attachment orientations. Participants completed the AAQ (Simpson et al., 1996) to assess avoidance ($\alpha = .76$) and anxiety ($\alpha = .78$).

Support need. To assess support need (see Table 1), recipients rated how much they desired change with regard to their personal

goal (“To what extent do you desire change in yourself regarding this goal?” 1 = *no desire to change*, 7 = *strong desire to change*).

Postdiscussion measures.

Goal-related efficacy. Immediately after each discussion, support recipients rated how much they now felt competent and efficacious with regard to their goal, given the discussion they just had with their partner. Participants rated four items, which were averaged to index goal-related efficacy ($\alpha = .88$): *In regard to my goal, I feel . . .* “effective and capable,” “able to cope with the challenges of my goal,” “able to cope with setbacks associated with my goal,” and “like a competent person” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Distress. Support recipients completed the same items used in Study 1 to assess how stressful and upset they experienced the discussion to be, $r = .74$, $p < .001$.

Perceived partner control and criticism. Support recipients also rated the degree to which “My partner took over my goal” and “My partner was critical about how I pursued my goal” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*), which were averaged to index the extent to which recipients perceived their partner was being controlling and critical, $r = .32$, $p < .001$.

Desired support. To assess how much practical and emotional support recipients desired from their partner during the discussion (see Table 1), recipients rated four items tapping desired *practical support* (e.g., “I wanted my partner to offer suggestions and advice about how to achieve my goal,” “I wanted my partner to give me guidance and direction about how to pursue my goal”) and six items assessing desired *emotional support* during the discussion (e.g., I wanted my partner to . . . “reassure and comfort me,” “be warm and affectionate toward me,” 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Items were averaged to construct overall measures of desired practical ($\alpha = .88$) and emotional ($\alpha = .89$) support.

Emotional suppression. To assess the degree to which recipients tried to suppress their thoughts and feelings during the discussion (see Table 1), recipients rated 3 items derived from a validated self-report scale of emotional suppression (Gross & John, 2003): “I tried to control or suppress any negative emotions,” “I tried to hide my thoughts and feelings from my partner,” and “I kept my negative emotions to myself” during the discussion (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). The items were averaged to index emotional suppression ($\alpha = .88$).

Support provision and support seeking. The coding schedules and procedures from Study 1 were also used in Study 2. Two coders blind to the study aims and all participant data independently rated the videotaped discussions for the degree to which partners exhibited practical (ICC = .89) and emotional (ICC = .91) support. In a separate wave of coding, one trained coder also rated recipients’ direct support-seeking behaviors. For this wave, 25 couples were double coded by two other coders to check for reliability (ICC = .89).

Results

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 2 (see second column labeled Study 2). We ran dyadic multilevel models as in Study 1 (Kenny et al., 2006), first modeling recipients’ *distress* as a function of: (a) the linear effect of their partner’s practical

support, (b) the quadratic or curvilinear effect of their partner’s practical support, (c) recipients’ attachment avoidance, and the interactions between recipients’ avoidance and (d) the linear and (e) quadratic effect of the partner’s practical support. We also simultaneously modeled (f) recipients’ attachment anxiety, and the interactions between recipients’ anxiety and (g) the linear and (h) quadratic effect of the partner’s practical support. We ran equivalent models predicting recipients’ goal-related efficacy and perceived partner control/criticism, and for examining the effects of emotional support. All predictor variables were grand-mean centered, and the quadratic effects were calculated by modeling the squared grand-mean centered support scores. We also modeled the main and interaction effects of gender (coded -1 women, 1 men). Across the models, 4 of the 48 effects presented in Table 5 significantly differed across men and women (see coefficients in italics), including one of the predicted curvilinear interactions, which we describe below.⁵

Practical support. The top section of Table 5 presents the results for the effect of practical support on recipients’ ratings of distress, goal-related efficacy, and perceived partner control/criticism. Unlike Study 1, the interaction between the curvilinear effect of practical support and attachment avoidance on recipients’ distress was not significant. Instead, a main curvilinear effect of practical support emerged. Regardless of recipients’ avoidance, greater practical support was associated with increasing distress until practical support reached moderate levels (inflection point: 4.75, .39 *SD* above the mean), at which point greater partner practical support was associated with reductions in distress.

Consistent with predictions, however, there was a significant curvilinear interaction between practical support and attachment avoidance on recipients’ goal-related efficacy, which is plotted in Figure 2. The curvilinear effects of partner support for recipients high (+1 *SD*) in avoidance is shown by the solid line. As practical support from the partner moved from low to close-to-mean levels, highly avoidant recipients reported sharp drops in goal-related efficacy (see left side of Figure 2). However, at just over average levels of practical support (inflection point = 5.07, .68 *SD* above the mean), the effect reversed and increasing levels of practical support were associated with increases in highly avoidant individuals’ goal-related efficacy (see right side of Figure 2). The simple

⁵ We discuss the gender difference in the predicted curvilinear interaction in the main text, but briefly describe the other three differences highlighted in italics in Table 5 here. First, when modeling both practical support ($B = -.26$, $t = -2.08$, $p < .04$) and emotional support ($B = -.26$, $t = -2.06$, $p = .04$), significant gender differences revealed that avoidant women ($B = .49$ and $.47$, $t_s > 2.48$, $p_s < .02$), but not avoidant men ($B = -.04$ and $-.05$, $t_s < -.27$, $p > .78$), experienced greater distress during the discussions. In addition, the linear practical support \times attachment anxiety interaction on recipients’ efficacy was marginally significant for women ($B = .15$, $t = 1.77$, $p = .08$), but not for men ($B = -.12$, $t = -1.14$, $p = .26$; gender difference $B = -.13$, $t = -2.00$, $p < .05$). Compared to less anxious women, highly anxious women reported lower levels of efficacy when their partners provided higher levels of practical support (+1 *SD slope* = $-.39$, $t = -2.85$, $p < .01$), but there were no differences in goal-related efficacy when their partners provided lower levels of practical support (-1 *SD slope* = $-.06$, $t = -.38$, $p = .71$). This suggests that the costs of visible practical support on efficacy that can occur are more marked for people high in attachment anxiety (also see Study 1).

Table 5

The Effects of Practical and Emotional Support Provided by the Partner and Recipients' Attachment Avoidance and Anxiety on Recipients' Distress, Efficacy and Perceived Control and Criticism by Partner (Study 2)

	Distress			Efficacy			Perceived partner control/criticism		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Practical support									
Partners' practical support	.11	.10	1.16	-.10	.07	-1.50	.05	.09	.56
Partners' practical support ²	-.13	.06	-2.08*	.02	.05	.54	-.01	.06	-.09
Recipients' attachment avoidance	.22	.13	1.77	-.22	.09	-2.45*	.08	.12	.67
Partners' practical support × Attachment avoidance	.09	.11	.78	-.12	.07	-1.58	.02	.10	.22
Partners' practical support ² × Attachment avoidance	.02	.08	.31	.12	.05	2.49*	-.04	.06	-.71
Recipients' attachment anxiety	.41	.12	3.28**	-.11	.09	-1.23	-.02	.12	-.13
Partners' practical support × Attachment anxiety	.04	.09	.46	.01	.07	.20	.09	.09	1.03
Partners' practical support ² × Attachment anxiety	-.08	.06	-1.28	-.06	.05	-1.31	.03	.06	.50
Emotional support									
Partners' emotional support	-.08	.11	-.73	-.06	.08	-.70	-.15	.10	-1.50
Partners' emotional support ²	-.01	.07	-.22	.06	.05	1.23	.06	.06	.88
Recipients' attachment avoidance	.21	.12	1.71	-.14	.09	-1.54	-.08	.11	-.75
Partners' emotional support × Attachment avoidance	.17	.11	1.54	-.05	.08	-.61	-.02	.10	-.17
Partners' emotional support ² × Attachment avoidance	.03	.06	.52	.02	.04	.46	.11	.06	1.92
Recipients' attachment anxiety	.35	.12	2.94**	-.18	.09	-2.00*	.15	.11	1.37
Partners' emotional support × Attachment anxiety	.02	.10	.22	.07	.08	.87	.13	.10	1.30
Partners' emotional support ² × Attachment anxiety	-.12	.08	-1.40	.02	.07	.38	-.10	.08	-1.20

Note. The variables marked with superscript 2s are curvilinear variables. Coefficients that significantly differed between men and women are shown in italics.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

linear and curvilinear effects confirmed that this was a significant curvilinear pattern (see first row under Efficacy, right side of Table 4). In contrast, the simple effects indicated that the slight reverse pattern for less avoidant recipients ($-1 SD$; see the dashed line) was not significant (see left side of Table 4).

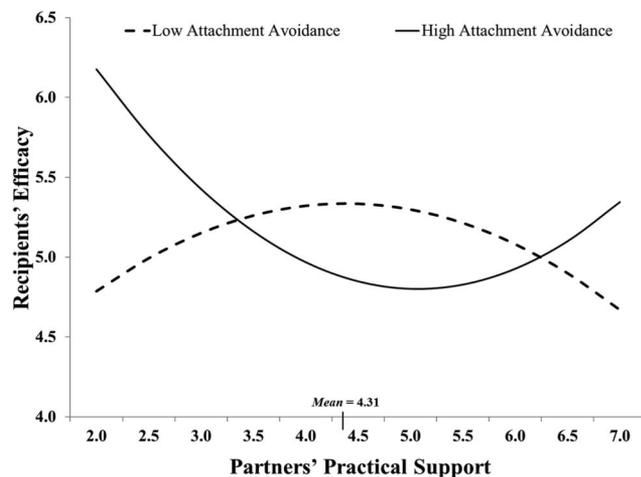


Figure 2. The moderating effect of recipients' attachment avoidance on the curvilinear association between practical support exhibited by the partner during discussions of recipients' personal goals and recipients' efficacy (Study 2). Note. The values on the x-axis represent the range of practical support provided by partners in Study 2 (2 = lowest levels of practical support, 7 = highest levels of practical support). Low and high attachment avoidance are indexed by 1 SD below and above the mean.

With regard to perceived partner control/criticism, a significant gender interaction ($B = -.13$, $SE = .06$, $t = -2.12$, $p < .04$) revealed that the curvilinear effect of practical support was moderated by recipients' avoidance for male ($B = -.17$, $SE = .08$, $t = -2.15$, $p < .04$), but not female ($B = .08$, $SE = .09$, $t = .90$, $p = .37$), recipients. The significant interaction for men is plotted in Figure 3. Similar to the pattern shown for recipients' efficacy, as partners provided low-to-moderate levels of practical support, highly avoidant men experienced sharp increases in perceived partner control/criticism (see solid line, left side of Figure 3) until support reached average levels (inflection point = 4.83, .46 SD above the mean), at which point increasing levels of practical support were associated with declines in perceived partner control/criticism (see solid line, right side of Figure 3). The simple effects revealed this was a significant curvilinear pattern (see first row under "Perceived control criticism," right side of Table 4). In contrast, the simple effects indicated that the reverse pattern for men low in avoidance (see dashed line) was not significant (see Table 4).

Alternative explanations. Recipients' desired change in their goal was not associated with attachment security or recipients' distress, goal-related efficacy, or perceived partner control/criticism ($r_s = .05$ to $.12$, $p_s > .39$). However, the more recipients desired change in their goal, the less their partners provided practical support, $r = -.16$, $p < .03$. Statistically controlling for desired change did not alter the significant curvilinear interactions displayed in Figure 2 ($B = .13$, $SE = .05$, $t = 2.71$, $p < .01$) and Figure 3 (men: $B = -.18$, $SE = .08$, $t = -2.20$, $p = .03$). The degree to which recipients directly sought support was not associated with greater distress, $r = -.12$, $p = .09$ or goal-related

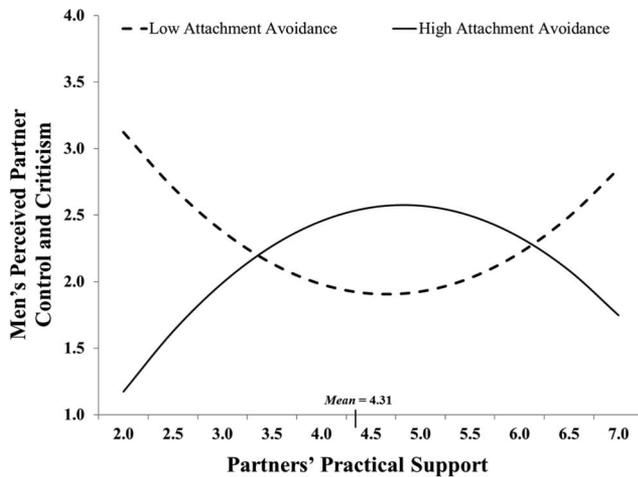


Figure 3. The moderating effect of recipients' attachment avoidance on the curvilinear association between practical support exhibited by the partner during discussions of recipients' personal goals and recipients' perceptions of partner control and criticism (Study 2). Note. The values on the x-axis represent the range of practical support provided by partners in Study 2 (2 = lowest levels of practical support, 7 = highest levels of practical support). Low and high attachment avoidance are indexed by 1 SD below and above the mean.

efficacy, $r = .07$, $p = .32$, but it was associated with lower perceived control/criticism, $r = -.18$, $p < .05$. Statistically controlling for support seeking did not alter the significant curvilinear interactions shown in Figure 2 ($B = .12$, $SE = .05$, $t = 2.54$, $p < .02$) and Figure 3 (men: $B = -.17$, $SE = .08$, $t = -2.14$, $p < .04$). Finally, the degree to which recipients reported desiring practical support, the more their partners provided practical support, $r = .15$, $p = .03$, but controlling for desired practical and emotional support did not alter the significant curvilinear interactions reported in Figure 2 ($B = .12$, $SE = .05$, $t = 2.52$, $p < .02$) and Figure 3 (men: $B = -.16$, $SE = .08$, $t = -2.03$, $p < .05$).

In Study 2, we also wanted to discount the potential alternative explanation that the benefits of high levels of partners' practical support in highly avoidant individuals occur because of an *activation* of, rather than pushing through, avoidance defenses. Highly avoidant recipients, for example, could experience more positive outcomes at high levels of partner support because the associated threat produces defensive suppression. However, the links between higher levels of partner support and *reductions* in perceived partner control/criticism offers evidence against this explanation. Moreover, although recipients higher in avoidance reported more attempts at suppressing their thoughts and emotions during the discussion, $r = .20$, $p < .01$, and greater suppression was associated with greater distress, $r = .49$, $p < .01$, lower feelings of goal-related efficacy, $r = -.37$, $p < .01$, and greater perceived partner control/criticism, $r = .29$, $p < .01$, emotional suppression did not occur as a function of the curvilinear effect of Practical support \times Avoidance ($B = .02$, $SE = .07$, $t = .32$, $p = .75$). This suggests that the effects shown in Figures 2 and 3 were *not* because higher levels of practical support activate the suppression-based threat-management strategies associated with attachment avoidance. Moreover, statistically controlling for recipients' reported

emotional suppression did not alter the curvilinear interactions shown in Figure 2 ($B = .12$, $SE = .05$, $t = 2.69$, $p < .01$) and Figure 3 (men: $B = -.15$, $SE = .08$, $t = -1.95$, $p = .054$).

Emotional support. Analogous analyses testing the effects of emotional support provision are presented in the lower section of Table 5. No linear or curvilinear effects of partners' emotional support on any of the recipients' outcomes emerged.

Discussion

Study 2 examined the effects of partner support on recipients' distress, goal-related efficacy, and perceived partner control/criticism. Unexpectedly, when examining the effects of practical support on recipients' distress, the inverted U-shape found for highly avoidant recipients in Study 1 emerged across all recipients. However, as predicted, the curvilinear effects of practical support were moderated by attachment avoidance when examining recipients' goal-related efficacy and (for men) perceived partner control/criticism. When highly avoidant individuals received low-to-average levels of practical support, they experienced reductions in goal-related efficacy and increases in perceived partner control/criticism. Once partners' practical support reached close-to-average levels, however, increasing levels of practical support were associated with highly avoidant recipients reporting increases in goal-related efficacy and reductions in perceived partner control/criticism. The opposite linear and curvilinear simple effects were nonsignificant for recipients low in attachment avoidance. Partners' emotional support did not show any linear or curvilinear effects, and attachment anxiety did not moderate the effects of partner support.

Study 3

In Study 3, we tested whether the predicted curvilinear effects emerged in the context of more stressful life events by asking individuals (support recipients) to discuss their most significant ongoing stressor with their partner (support providers) rather than the personal goals discussed in Studies 1 and 2. Stressful contexts are particularly important in activating attachment needs and strategies (Mikulincer et al., 2003; Simpson & Rholes, 1994, 2012), and the effects of support may be more threatening or soothing in stressful contexts (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger et al., 2000; Mikulincer & Florian, 1997; Simpson et al., 1992). In Study 3, we expanded our assessment of partner support by asking recipients to rate the extent to which their partners provided practical and emotional support during the discussions. Replicating the effects with perceptions of support is important because the costs of support occur when support is visible and perceived by recipients, but these costs can be mitigated when support is invisible to recipients (i.e., support that is reported by providers or observed by coders, but is not perceived by recipients; Bolger et al., 2000; Gleason et al., 2008; Howland & Simpson, 2010; Shrout et al., 2006). Thus, the reactance to low-to-moderate support should only occur if avoidant recipients perceive their partner's support is low (consistent with their negative caregiving expectations). Similarly, if high levels of partner support down-regulate the defenses of avoidant recipients because it provides clear evidence that the partner is available (contradicting their expectations), the benefits of high support should emerge when avoidant recipients perceive

high levels of support. To assess the effects of perceived support, support recipients rated their level of distress during the discussion along with their feelings of stressor-related efficacy and self-worth.

Method

Participants. Sixty-four couples were recruited from advertisements posted in community newspapers and across a university campus in a large New Zealand city. Couples were married (38%), cohabiting (36%), or in serious dating relationships (26%). Mean relationship length was 6.33 years ($SD = 9.68$), and participants were a mean age of 31.11 ($SD = 13.22$) years. Couples were paid NZ\$80 for participating in the session described below.

Procedure. After completing scales assessing their attachment orientations, participants identified and ranked (in order of importance) three current and ongoing stressors they were experiencing, which they were told they might discuss with their romantic partners. The purpose of the study was to examine the effect of support when recipients were facing significant stressors, and so the partner who reported the most significant and stressful issue was selected (as the support recipient) to discuss his or her most significant and ongoing source of stress with the partner (as the support provider). When both partners reported equal stress levels (53.1%), the role of support recipient or provider was randomly assigned. After a short warm-up discussion, each couple engaged in a 7-min discussion about the support recipients' most significant source of stress. Both partners were told to discuss the issue as they normally would. Support recipients then reported their distress during the discussion, their feelings of stressor-related efficacy after discussing the issue with their partner, and the degree to which the partner provided practical and emotional support during the discussion.

Materials

Attachment orientations. Participants completed the AAQ (Simpson et al., 1996) to assess avoidance ($\alpha = .82$) and anxiety ($\alpha = .82$).

Support need. To assess recipients' support need (see Table 1), prior to the discussion, recipients reported how much their stressor was a significant and ongoing source of stress by answering two questions: "To what extent is this issue a current and significant source of stress?", and "To what extent is this issue ongoing and still needs to be dealt with?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *a lot*). The two ratings were averaged to index overall stress severity, $r = .64$, $p < .01$. As shown in Table 2, stress severity was very high on average.

Stressor-related efficacy. To assess efficacy, immediately after the discussion, support recipients rated how "confident/capable," "happy/hopeful," and "worthwhile/good about yourself" they felt now about the stressful issue discussed (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). These three items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .91$) and averaged to index positive assessments that recipients could now deal with the stressor.

Distress. Recipients also completed the same items used in Studies 1 and 2 to assess how much stress and upset they experienced during the discussion, $r = .58$, $p < .01$.

Perceptions of partner support. To assess perceived support, recipients rated items measuring the partner's practical and

emotional support as assessed in Studies 1 and 2. Based on prior self-report assessments of support behaviors (Cutrona, Hessling, & Suhr, 1997; Gleason et al., 2008; Overall et al., 2010; Shrout et al., 2006), two items tapped recipients' perceptions of their partner's *practical* support during the discussion ("My partner offered me help or advice," "My partner offered suggestions") and two items assessed perceptions of their partner's *emotional* support ("My partner gave me reassurance or comfort," "My partner was understanding and caring"; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). To index recipients' perceptions of the practical and emotional support they received from their partner during the discussion, practical and emotional support items were averaged, $r_s = .57$ and $.79$, $p < .01$, respectively.

Emotional suppression. Recipients also rated the same three items used in Study 2 to assess the degree to which they tried to suppress their thoughts and feelings during the discussion. The three items were averaged to index emotional suppression ($\alpha = .88$).

Results

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 2 (third column marked Study 3). We first regressed recipients' *distress* following the discussion on: (a) the linear effect of perceived practical support by the partner, (b) the quadratic or curvilinear effect of perceived practical support, (c) recipients' attachment avoidance, and the interactions between recipients' avoidance and (d) the linear and (e) quadratic effect of perceived practical support. We also simultaneously modeled (f) recipients' attachment anxiety, and the interactions between recipients' anxiety and (g) the linear and (h) quadratic effect of perceived practical support. We ran equivalent models predicting recipients' stressor-related efficacy and to examine the effects of emotional support. All predictor variables were grand-mean centered, and the quadratic effects were calculated by modeling the squared grand-mean centered support scores. We also modeled the main and interaction effects of recipients' gender (39 women; coded -1 women, 1 men). No gender differences ($t_s = -.00$ to -1.64 , $p_s > .11$) emerged across analyses, so these additional parameters were dropped from the models.

Attachment avoidance and curvilinear effects of partners' support.

Practical support. The top section of Table 6 presents the results for the effects of perceived practical support on recipients' ratings of distress and stressor-related efficacy. Attachment avoidance did not moderate the curvilinear effect of practical support on recipients' distress, but this interaction was significant when predicting recipients' stressor-related efficacy (see Partners' practical support² \times Attachment avoidance interaction). The significant interaction for recipients' efficacy is plotted in Figure 4. The curvilinear effect of partners' practical support for recipients high ($+1 SD$) in avoidance is shown by the solid line. As practical support from the partner moved from low to close-to-moderate levels, highly avoidant recipients reported sharp drops in stressor-related efficacy. However, at .90 SDs below average levels of practical support (inflection point = 3.90), the effect reversed and increasing levels of practical support were associated with highly avoidant recipients reporting increasing stressor-related efficacy. The simple

Table 6

The Effects of Practical and Emotional Support Provided by the Partner and Recipients' Attachment Avoidance and Anxiety on Recipients' Distress and Efficacy (Study 3)

	Distress			Efficacy		
	B	SE	t	B	SE	t
Practical support						
Partners' practical support	-.06	.15	-.40	.27	.14	1.92
Partners' practical support ²	-.13	.08	-1.61	.05	.08	.66
Recipients' attachment avoidance	.16	.21	.74	-.14	.20	-.72
Partners' practical support × Attachment avoidance	-.07	.13	-.51	.21	.12	1.69
Partners' practical support ² × Attachment avoidance	-.04	.06	-.72	.12	.05	2.18*
Recipients' attachment anxiety	.51	.23	2.23*	-.02	.22	-.11
Partners' practical support × Attachment anxiety	-.06	.12	-.48	-.27	.12	-2.32*
Partners' practical support ² × Attachment anxiety	-.02	.09	-.18	-.20	.09	-2.35*
Emotional support						
Partners' emotional support	-.10	.16	-.60	.30	.16	1.95
Partners' emotional support ²	-.02	.08	-.19	-.02	.07	-.32
Recipients' attachment avoidance	.36	.20	1.83	.03	.09	.15
Partners' emotional support × Attachment avoidance	-.24	.13	-1.83	.11	.13	.88
Partners' emotional support ² × Attachment avoidance	-.17	.08	-2.26*	.02	.07	.26
Recipients' attachment anxiety	.24	.22	1.12	-.15	.21	-.74
Partners' emotional support × Attachment anxiety	.13	.14	.91	-.39	.14	-2.82**
Partners' emotional support ² × Attachment anxiety	.14	.09	1.59	-.06	.08	-.66

Note. The variables marked with superscript 2s are curvilinear variables. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

effects for recipients high in avoidance confirmed that this curvilinear pattern was significant (see Table 4, second row for Efficacy). In contrast, the reverse linear and curvilinear trend for recipients low in avoidance (see dashed line in Figure 4) was not significant (see Table 4).

Emotional support. The results for the effects of perceived emotional support are presented in the lower section of Table 6. Interestingly, the curvilinear effect of emotional support on

recipients' distress was moderated by recipients' attachment avoidance (see Partners' emotional support² × Attachment avoidance interaction). This interaction is plotted in Figure 5. Consistent with the effect of practical support on distress in Study 1, recipients high in avoidance (+1 SD; see solid line) reported sharp increases in distress as emotional support from the partner moved from low to close-to-mean levels (see left

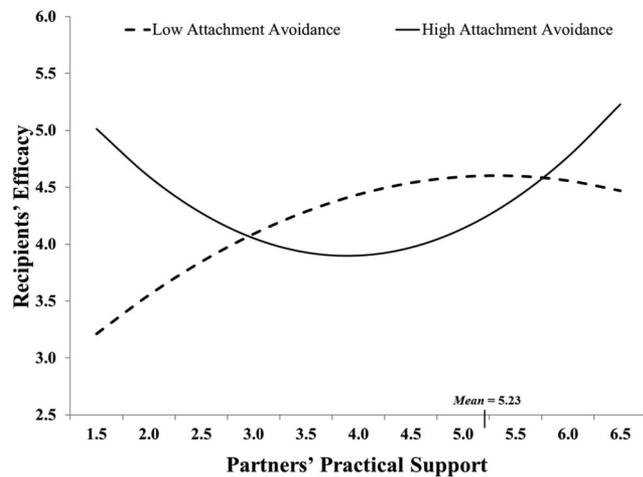


Figure 4. The moderating effect of recipients' attachment avoidance on the curvilinear association between perceived practical support by the partner during discussions of recipients' significant stressors and recipients' efficacy (Study 3). Note. The values on the x-axis represent the range of practical support perceived by recipients in Study 3 (1.5 = lowest levels of practical support, 7 = highest levels of practical support). Low and high attachment avoidance are indexed by 1 SD below and above the mean.

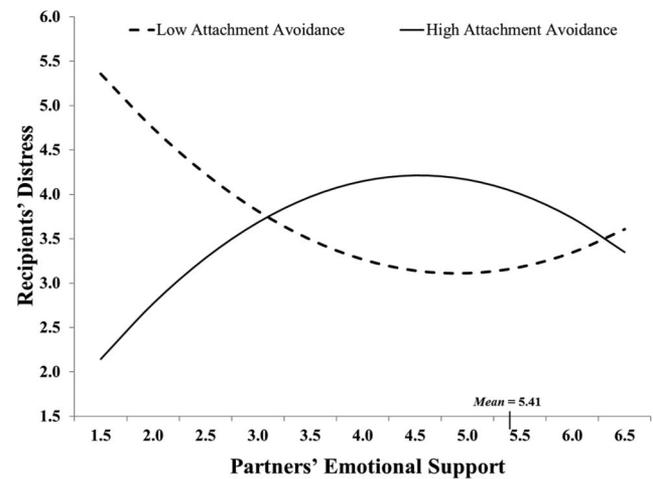


Figure 5. The moderating effect of recipients' attachment avoidance on the curvilinear association between perceived emotional support by the partner during discussions of recipients' significant stressors and recipients' distress (Study 3). Note. The values on the x-axis represent the range of emotional support perceived by recipients in Study 3 (1.5 = lowest levels of emotional support, 7 = highest levels of emotional support). Low and high attachment avoidance are indexed by 1 SD below and above the mean.

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side of Figure 5). However, at just below average levels of emotional support (inflection point = 4.54, .62 *SD* below the mean), the effect reversed and increasing levels of emotional support were associated with decreases in highly avoidant individuals' distress (see right side of Figure 5). The simple linear ($B = -.39, SE = .22, t = -1.76, p = .09$) and curvilinear ($B = -.22, SE = .11, t = -2.03, p < .05$) effects for recipients high in avoidance revealed that this pattern was significant. In contrast, for recipients low in avoidance ($-1 SD$; see dashed line in Figure 5), perceived emotional support was associated with reductions in distress, but high levels of support (inflection point = 4.90, .36 *SD* below the mean) ceased having these positive effects. However, as before, the simple linear ($B = .20, SE = .24, t = .85, p = .40$) and curvilinear ($B = .19, SE = .13, t = 1.49, p = .14$) effects for recipients low in avoidance were nonsignificant.

Alternative explanations. Higher prediscussion stress regarding the discussed issue (i.e., recipients' level of support need) predicted greater distress during the discussions, $r = .41, p < .01$, but was not related to stressor-related efficacy, $r = -.14, p = .26$. Statistically controlling for support need did not alter the significant curvilinear effect of practical support reported in Figure 4 ($B = .12, SE = .05, t = 2.30, p < .03$), but it did reduce the interaction associated with emotional support (see Figure 5) to nonsignificance ($B = -.12, SE = .07, t = -1.68, p = .10$). This might indicate that emotional support was soothing for avoidant individuals when they were experiencing high levels of stress and, therefore, really needed it.

Analyses examining emotional suppression revealed that recipients' suppression of their thoughts and feelings did not occur as a function of the curvilinear effect of either Practical support \times Avoidance ($B = .01, SE = .07, t = .19, p = .85$) or Emotional support \times Avoidance ($B = -.08, SE = .09, t = -.89, p = .38$). Thus, the greater efficacy and reduced distress exhibited by highly avoidant recipients when receiving high levels of partner support was *not* because highly avoidant individuals were engaging in defensive threat-management strategies, such as suppressing negative emotions and evaluations. Statistically controlling for recipients' reported emotional suppression also did not alter the curvilinear interactions shown in Figures 4 ($B = .12, SE = .06, t = 2.18, p < .04$) and 5 ($B = -.15, SE = .07, t = -2.06, p < .05$).

Attachment anxiety and curvilinear effects of partners' support. Similar to the effect that emerged for recipients' distress in Study 1, attachment anxiety moderated the curvilinear effects of practical support on recipients' efficacy (see significant and curvilinear interactions in Table 6, top right). Plotting the higher-order curvilinear effect revealed that recipients *lower* in attachment anxiety showed the same pattern as recipients *higher* in avoidance (shown by the solid line in Figure 4). Thus, practical support had an increasingly deleterious effect on efficacy until reaching just above mean levels of support (inflection point = 4.20, .71 *SD* above the mean), after which increasing levels of practical support were associated with greater efficacy. The simple linear ($B = .57, SE = .20, t = 2.83, p < .01$) and curvilinear ($B = .28, SE = .10, t = 2.74, p < .01$) effects for low attachment anxiety were significant. In contrast, the simple linear and curvilinear effects of practical support were not significant for high anxiety (simple linear effect: $B = -.03,$

$SE = .18, t = -.17, p = .86$; simple curvilinear effect: $B = -.18, SE = .14, t = -1.24, p = .22$).

In addition, a significant interaction between the linear effect of partners' emotional support and recipients' attachment anxiety on recipients' distress (see bottom right section of Table 6) revealed that recipients *lower* in attachment anxiety experienced greater efficacy the more their partners provided emotional support ($slope = .73, SE = .20, t = 3.62, p = .001$). However, perceiving emotional support did nothing to boost highly anxious recipients' self-efficacy ($slope = -.13, SE = .23, t = -.56, p = .58$), suggesting that highly anxious recipients were less positively affected by the emotional support provided by their partners.

Discussion

Study 3 examined the effects of perceived partner support during couples' discussions of significant personal stressors. Unlike Study 1, it was partners' emotional rather than practical support that had a curvilinear effect on the distress of highly avoidant recipients. The more partners provided low-to-average levels of emotional support, the more highly avoidant recipients experienced greater distress, but once partner support reached close-to-average levels, increasing levels of emotional support were associated with declines in distress. This curvilinear effect became nonsignificant when controlling for the severity of the stressful issue (and, therefore, the level of support need), which may indicate that very high levels of emotional forms of comfort can calm highly avoidant individuals when they are in very stressful situations and really need support.

Nonetheless, practical support continued to play a role in this more stressful context with regard to recipients' stressor-related efficacy. Similar to Study 2, when highly avoidant individuals received low-to-average levels of practical support, they experienced reductions in stressor-related efficacy, but once partner support reached close-to-average levels, increasing levels of practical support were associated with increases in highly avoidant recipients' stressor-related efficacy. The opposite linear and curvilinear simple effects were nonsignificant for less avoidant recipients. As in Study 1, recipients low in anxiety also exhibited the same pattern of response to partners' practical support as recipients high in avoidance did. We investigate the replicability of these effects once again in Study 4.

Study 4

Study 4 extended Studies 1–3 by assessing the daily perceived receipt of practical and emotional support from partners reported each day over a 3-week period. To assess the effects of partner support, we once again used a measure of distress consistent with prior research (daily depressed mood; e.g., Bolger et al., 2000). We also extended our examination of the defensive responses of highly avoidant individuals by assessing their perceptions of their partners as being controlling and critical (as in Study 2) as well as how much they engaged in psychological and behavioral distancing from their partners. Assessing partner support and recipient outcomes repeatedly across days allowed us to: (a) test the links between partner support and recipient outcomes across daily interactions, rather than during laboratory discussions, and (b) test for within-person changes in recipient outcomes as individuals

experienced varying levels of support each day. The resulting within-person analyses tested whether recipients' depressed mood, perceived partner control/criticism, and distancing differed on days when they received lower versus higher levels of support (compared to the typical support they received from their partners), and whether a curvilinear pattern described this within-person variation.

Method

Participants. Seventy-three heterosexual couples who replied to campus-wide advertisements at a New Zealand university were reimbursed \$70NZD for completing the procedures described below. Participants were on average 23.61 years old ($SD = 6.87$) and involved in serious relationships (47% married or cohabiting) that were 3.20 years in length on average ($SD = 3.56$).

Procedure and materials. During an initial testing session, participants completed the AAQ (Simpson et al., 1996) to assess attachment avoidance ($\alpha = .72$) and anxiety ($\alpha = .84$). They then received instructions regarding a daily online record they were asked to complete every day for the next 21 days. On average, participants completed 19.82 diary entries (94.4%).

Daily Diary Measures

Support need. Participants rated the extent to which they "had a stressful day today" or "had a personal problem, worry, or difficulty today" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). These items were averaged, $r = .68$, $p < .001$ to index overall support need (see Table 1).

Support desired. Two items assessed the degree to which participants desired *practical* support ("I wanted my partner's advice or help") and *emotional* support ("I wanted my partner to listen to and comfort me") that day (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Depressed mood. Participants also reported how much they felt "hopeless," "sad," and "discouraged" that day (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). These items were averaged to index daily levels of depressed mood ($\alpha = .87$; see Cranford et al., 2006).

Perceived partner control and criticism. Two items ("I felt controlled by my partner" and "My partner was critical or unpleasant toward me," 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) were averaged, $r = .49$, $p < .001$ to index perceived partner control/criticism each day.

Distancing. Participants reported on how much they felt distant and cold toward their partner ("I felt distant and cold toward my partner") and withdrew from their partner ("I withdrew from my partner and did my own thing") that day (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). These items were averaged, $r = .40$, $p < .001$ to index the degree to which recipients psychologically and behaviorally distanced themselves from their partner each day.

Perceptions of partner support. Based on prior assessments of daily support (e.g., Gleason et al., 2008; Shrout et al., 2006), and similar to the items used in Study 3, participants rated how much they received *practical* support ("My partner helped me or gave me advice") and *emotional* support ("My partner listened to and comforted me") from their partner that day (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Emotional suppression. Recipients also rated the same three items used in Studies 2 and 3 to assess the degree to which they attempted to suppress their thoughts and emotions each day, which

were averaged to index emotional suppression ($\alpha = .83$). This measure is similar to prior assessments of daily emotional suppression (Impett et al., 2012).

Results

Descriptive statistics for all measures are shown in Table 2 (see last column labeled Study 4). Our data had a nested structure, with multiple daily reports (level 1) nested within each dyad (level 2). Thus, we tested our predictions following the recommendations for analyzing repeated measures dyadic data by Kenny et al. (2006) using the MIXED procedure in SPSS 20. We modeled recipients' *depressed mood* as a function of: (a) the linear effect of the partner's practical support, (b) the quadratic or curvilinear effect of the partner's practical support, (c) recipients' attachment avoidance, and the interactions between recipients' avoidance and (d) the linear and (e) quadratic effect of the partner's practical support, (f) recipients' attachment anxiety, and the interactions between recipients' anxiety, and (g) the linear and (h) quadratic effect of the partner's practical support. We ran equivalent models predicting perceived partner control/criticism and recipients' distancing from the partner and to examine the effects of emotional support. The daily level variables were person-centered, and the quadratic support variables were created by squaring the person-centered support scores for each individual for each day. To isolate within-person effects, averages of practical support were included as additional predictors (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). We also included the prior day dependent variables to remove the possibility that any effects were due to distress or defensive responses the prior day (Gleason, Iida, Bolger, & Shrout, 2003; Maisel & Gable, 2009). As in Studies 1–3, we also modeled the main effect of gender (coded -1 women, 1 men) and associated interaction terms to test for differences across men and women. Five of the 48 effects shown in Table 7 differed across men and women (see italicized coefficients), including two of the predicted curvilinear interactions, which we discuss further below.⁶ We first focus on the effects for attachment avoidance and then turn to attachment anxiety.

Attachment avoidance and curvilinear effects of partners' support.

Practical support. The results for practical support are shown in the top half of Table 7. Significant linear and curvilinear effects of practical support emerged when predicting recipients' depressed mood. The higher order curvilinear effect revealed that practical support was associated with decreases in recipients' depressed mood until support reached just below average levels (inflection point = 2.01, .51 SD below the mean), at which point increasing partner support was associated with increasing depressed mood.

As predicted, the curvilinear association between partners' practical support and all three recipient outcomes—recipients' de-

⁶ We discuss the gender differences in the predicted curvilinear interactions in the main text, but briefly describe the other three differences highlighted in italics in Table 7 here. First, partners' practical support was associated with greater depressed mood for women ($B = .06$, $SE = .02$, $t = 3.06$, $p = .002$), but not for men ($B = .00$, $SE = .02$, $t = .14$, $p = .89$; gender difference $B = -.03$, $SE = .01$, $t = -1.93$, $p = .054$). Second, in both the practical and emotional support models, attachment anxiety was associated with greater distancing for women ($B = .25$, $SE = .07$, $t = 3.59$, $p = .001$; $B = .23$, $SE = .07$, $t = 3.33$, $p = .001$, respectively), but not for men ($B = .04$, $SE = .08$, $t = .49$, $p = .62$; gender difference $B = -.11$, $SE = .05$, $t = -2.15$, $p = .033$; $B = -.02$, $SE = .08$, $t = -.21$, $p = .84$; gender difference $B = -.12$, $SE = .05$, $t = -2.47$, $p = .015$).

Table 7

The Effects of Partners' Practical and Emotional Support and Recipients' Attachment Avoidance and Anxiety on Recipients' Depressed Mood, Perceived Control and Criticism by Partner and Distancing From Partner (Study 4)

	Depressed mood			Perceived partner control/criticism			Distancing from partner		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Practical support									
Partners' practical support	.03	.014	2.10*	.01	.012	.94	-.01	.013	-.53
Partners' practical support ²	.01	.007	2.14*	-.00	.006	-.51	-.00	.006	-.67
Recipients' attachment avoidance	.04	.080	.48	.08	.054	1.46	.14	.063	2.26*
Partners' practical support × Attachment avoidance	.05	.017	3.22**	.00	.014	.19	-.00	.015	-.12
Partners' practical support ² × Attachment avoidance	-.02	.008	-2.79**	-.02	.007	-2.94**	-.02	.007	-2.25*
Recipients' attachment anxiety	.20	.067	2.98**	.08	.046	1.70	.14	.054	2.67**
Partners' practical support × Attachment anxiety	-.02	.014	-1.74	.01	.012	.85	.00	.012	.12
Partners' practical support ² × Attachment anxiety	.01	.007	1.80	-.00	.006	-.27	-.01	.006	-1.25
Emotional support									
Partners' emotional support	.03	.013	2.54*	-.03	.011	-2.46*	-.04	.011	-3.30**
Partners' emotional support ²	.00	.006	.71	-.00	.005	-.87	-.00	.005	-.32
Recipients' attachment avoidance	.07	.082	.89	.07	.055	1.20	.14	.063	2.14*
Partners' emotional support × Attachment avoidance	.06	.014	4.09*	-.01	.012	-.47	.02	.013	1.79
Partners' emotional support ² × Attachment avoidance	-.01	.006	-1.19	.00	.005	.52	.01	.006	1.19
Recipients' attachment anxiety	.22	.070	3.23*	.09	.047	1.81	.11	.055	1.96*
Partners' emotional support × Attachment anxiety	-.04	.012	-3.29**	-.00	.010	-.01	-.04	.010	-4.26**
Partners' emotional support ² × Attachment anxiety	.00	.006	.58	-.00	.005	-.57	.01	.005	2.05*

Note. The variables with superscript 2s are curvilinear variables. Coefficients that significantly differed between men and women are shown in italics. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

pressed mood, perceived partner control and criticism, and distancing from the partner—was significantly moderated by attachment avoidance. However, two significant gender interactions suggested that the curvilinear interactions between practical support and recipients' depressed mood ($B = -.03$, $SE = .01$, $t = -4.49$, $p < .001$) and perceived partner control/criticism ($B = -.02$, $SE = .01$, $t = -2.47$, $p = .01$) occurred for men ($B = -.06$, $SE = .01$, $t = -4.33$, $p < .001$; $B = -.04$, $SE = .01$, $t = -3.01$, $p = .003$, respectively), but not for women ($B = .01$, $SE = .01$, $t = 1.57$, $p = .12$; $B = -.00$, $SE = .01$, $t = -.54$, $p = .59$, respectively). Thus, we present the significant interactions predicting depressed mood and perceived partner control/criticism for men in Figures 6 and 7, and the significant interaction for distancing pooled across men and women in Figure 8. For recipients high (+1 SD) in avoidance (see the solid lines in Figures 6–8), when partners provided low-to-moderate levels of practical support, highly avoidant men reported increasing levels of depressed mood (see Figure 6) and perceived partner control/criticism (see Figure 7), and highly avoidant men and women reported increases in distancing (see Figure 8). However, when partner support reached close to average levels (inflection points = 4.17, 3.62, and 2.82, respectively), greater practical support was associated with reductions in distress, perceived partner control/criticism, and distancing. Furthermore, the simple effects indicated these were significant curvilinear patterns (see right side of Table 4, Study 4).

In contrast, for men low (–1 SD) in avoidance (see the dashed lines in Figures 6–8), low-to-moderate levels of partner practical support were associated with declines in depressed mood (see Figure 6) and very small decreases in perceiving the partner as controlling and critical (see Figure 7). However, when practical support reached close to average levels (inflection points = 3.58 and 2.99), less avoidant men reported sharp increases in depressed

mood and perceived partner control/criticism that day, and these simple effects were significant (see left side of Table 4, Study 4). The relatively flat curve for low avoidant recipients predicting distancing was nonsignificant (see Table 4).

Alternative explanations. The curvilinear effects were not due to differences in recipients': (a) daily stress and worries or (b) the

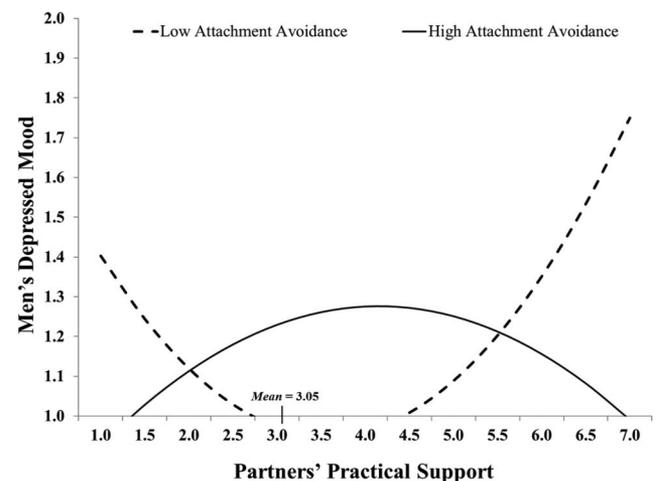


Figure 6. The moderating effect of men's attachment avoidance on the curvilinear association between daily levels of perceived practical support by the partner and men's daily depressed mood (Study 4). Note. The values on the x-axis represent the range of perceived practical support in Study 4 (1 = no partner support, 7 = very high levels of partner support). Only predicted values of depressed mood that fell within the range assessed and reported in Study 4 (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely) are shown (i.e., predicted values that fell below 1 were not plotted). Low and high attachment avoidance are indexed by 1 SD below and above the mean.

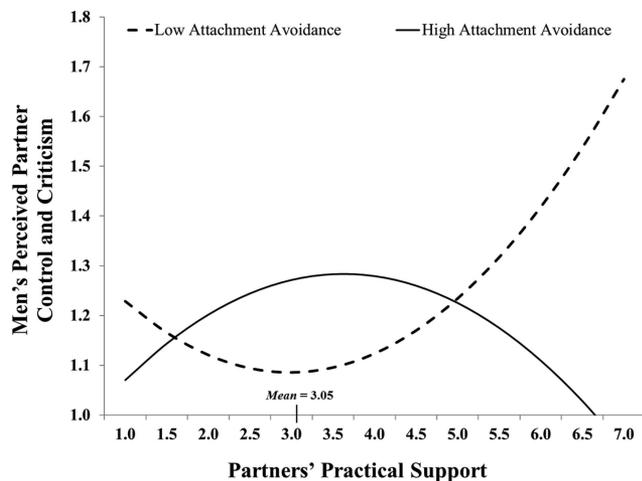


Figure 7. The moderating effect of men's attachment avoidance on the curvilinear association between daily levels of perceived practical support by the partner and men's daily perceptions of their partners' control and criticism (Study 4). *Note.* The values on the x-axis represent the range of perceived practical support in Study 4 (1 = no partner support, 7 = very high levels of partner support). Only predicted values of perceived partner control and criticism that fell within the range assessed and reported in Study 4 (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely) are shown (i.e., predicted values that fell below 1 were not plotted). Low and high attachment avoidance are indexed by 1 SD below and above the mean.

amount of practical and emotional support participants' desired, with the interactions in Figures 6–8 remaining significant when controlling for both support needed in response to daily stress ($B = -.05$, $SE = .01$, $t = -3.87$, $p < .001$; $B = -.03$, $SE = .01$, $t = -2.73$, $p = .006$; $B = -.01$, $SE = .01$, $t = -1.97$, $p = .048$, respectively) and desired amount of practical and emotional support ($B = -.05$, $SE = .01$, $t = -3.85$, $p < .001$; $B = -.03$, $SE = .01$, $t = -2.73$, $p = .006$; $B = -.02$, $SE = .01$, $t = -2.28$, $p = .023$, respectively).

The results also discounted the possibility that the positive effects of high levels of practical support for highly avoidant recipients were due to defensive suppression. If avoidant defenses were being activated at high levels of partner support, highly avoidant recipients should exhibit *increasing* levels of distancing from their partner. Instead, as shown in Figure 8, moderate-to-high levels of partner support were associated with *decreasing* distancing (along with decreasing distress and perceived control/criticism for men). In addition, although greater avoidance was associated with greater daily suppression ($B = .38$, $SE = .10$, $t = 3.91$, $p < .001$), suppression was *not* a function of the curvilinear interaction between practical support and recipients' avoidance ($B = -.00$, $SE = .01$, $t = -.25$, $p = .80$), and statistically controlling for recipients' reported suppression did not alter the interactions in Figures 6–8 ($B = -.06$, $SE = .01$, $t = -4.34$, $p < .001$; $B = -.04$, $SE = .01$, $t = -3.11$, $p = .002$; $B = -.02$, $SE = .01$, $t = -2.33$, $p = .02$, respectively).

Emotional support. Next, we ran analogous models examining the effects of emotional support (see bottom half of Table 7). Greater emotional support was associated with greater depressed mood, but also with lower levels of perceived control/criticism and distancing from the partner. The links between emotional support

and depressed mood are consistent with prior research (Bolger et al., 2000; Shrout et al., 2006). Furthermore, a significant interaction between partners' linear emotional support and recipients' avoidance revealed that avoidant individuals who received greater emotional support experienced greater depressed mood ($slope = .08$, $SE = .02$, $t = 4.65$, $p < .001$), whereas this cost of support did not emerge for low avoidant recipients ($slope = -.02$, $SE = .02$, $t = -1.15$, $p = .25$).

Attachment anxiety and curvilinear effects of partners' support. A significant linear interaction between attachment anxiety and emotional support on depressed mood revealed that highly anxious individuals experienced greater depressed mood regardless of their partner's emotional support ($slope = -.01$, $t = -.55$, $p = .58$), but individuals lower in anxiety experienced *greater* depressed mood the more they perceived emotional support from their partners ($slope = .07$, $t = 4.64$, $p < .001$).

A significant linear and curvilinear interaction also emerged between attachment anxiety and partners' emotional support on distancing. The significant linear interaction for distancing revealed that highly anxious individuals reported greater distancing than less anxious individuals when they perceived lower levels of emotional support from their partners ($slope = .20$, $t = 3.42$, $p = .001$), but not when they perceived higher levels of emotional support ($slope = .02$, $t = .25$, $p = .80$). The additional curvilinear effects confirmed that the negative reaction of highly anxious recipients was compounded at very low levels of support (although only the simple linear effect was significant [$B = -.09$, $SE = .02$, $t = -4.84$, $p < .001$] and the curvilinear effect was not [$B = .01$, $SE = .01$, $t = 1.26$, $p = .21$]). In contrast, for low anxious individuals, receiving emotional support was associated with slightly greater distancing, until support reached average levels (inflection point = 4.46, $.24$ SD above the mean), at which point greater emotional support was associated with lower distancing

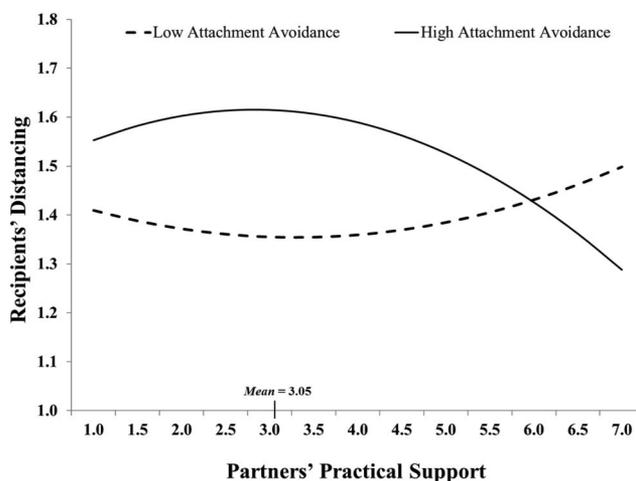


Figure 8. The moderating effect of recipients' attachment avoidance on the curvilinear association between daily levels of perceived practical support by the partner and recipients' daily levels of distancing (Study 4). *Note.* The values on the x-axis represent the range of perceived practical support in Study 4 (1 = no partner support, 7 = very high levels of partner support). Low and high attachment avoidance are indexed by 1 SD below and above the mean.

(although the simple linear [$B = .01, SE = .01, t = .89, p = .38$] and curvilinear [$B = -.01, SE = .01, t = -1.84, p < .07$] effects were only marginally significant for this curve). The overall pattern suggests that anxious individuals experience greater distress, regardless of their partner's emotional support provision, and a lack of emotional support is detrimental for highly anxious individuals, who typically require and desire considerable validation and comfort from their partners.

Discussion

In Study 4, we replicated the curvilinear effect of practical support by examining daily associations between partner support and recipients' distress and defensive responses. Low-to-moderate levels of practical support from the partner were associated with increasing depressed mood (for men), perceived partner control/criticism (for men), and greater distancing. However, once practical support reached above-average levels, increasingly higher levels of practical support were associated with sharp reductions in distress, perceived partner control and criticism, and distancing from the partner. In contrast to Studies 1–3, the reverse curvilinear effects for less avoidant men were significant (with the exception of distancing). Perceiving emotional support from the partner did not produce the same effects.

Meta-Analysis Across Studies 1–4

The interaction between the curvilinear effect of practical support and recipients' attachment avoidance was reasonably consistent across the four studies, particularly with regard to recipients' efficacy and defensive reactions that accompany attachment avoidance. However, the predicted moderated curvilinear effect of practical support on recipients' distress emerged only in Study 1 and in Study 4 (for men only), and this effect occurred for emotional support in Study 3. Two unexpected moderated curvilinear effects of practical support were also found for attachment anxiety when predicting distress in Study 1 and efficacy in Study 3, which suggested that low anxious recipients responded similarly to highly avoidant recipients. To determine whether these inconsistencies were meaningful, we conducted a series of meta-analyses across the four studies to estimate the size and significance of the linear and curvilinear associations between partner support and recipients' distress, self-efficacy, and perceived partner control/criticism (but not distancing because it was assessed only in Study 4).

Results

We conducted three different meta-analyses focusing on the three variables that were assessed repeatedly across studies: (a) *distress* (Studies 1–4),⁷ (b) *efficacy* (Studies 1 and 2), and (c) *perceived partner control/criticism* (Studies 2 and 4, men only). We first estimated the effect size of each effect within each sample using Rosenthal and Rosnow's (2007) formula: $r = \sqrt{(t^2/r^2 + df)}$. We then followed meta-analytic procedures for estimated weighted r values assuming random component models as outlined by Lipsey and Wilson (2001). The results are reported in Table 8, with significant coefficients in bold. We also conducted meta-analyses for the simple linear and curvilinear effects for partners'

practical support on distress, efficacy, and partner control/criticism for recipients low versus high in attachment avoidance. The results are displayed in Table 9.

Attachment avoidance and the curvilinear effects of partners' support. The predicted interaction between the curvilinear effect of practical support and recipients' avoidance was significant and robust across all three recipient outcomes: distress, efficacy, and perceived partner control/criticism. The meta-analysis of simple linear and curvilinear slopes revealed that the curvilinear slope was significant for high attachment avoidance across all outcomes (see Table 9, right column, significant effects in bold). The reverse curvilinear effects were not significant for recipients low in avoidance, except when predicting men's perceptions of partner control/criticism (see Table 9, left column).

The interaction between the curvilinear effect of emotional support and attachment avoidance was not significant for recipients' distress or efficacy, but was significant for (men's) partner control/criticism, despite this effect being nonsignificant in Studies 2 and 4. However, the simple effects were not significant for both recipients low (*linear*: mean $r = -.11, r$ 95% CI = $-.26, .05, z = -1.38, p = .17$; *curvilinear*: mean $r = -.10, r$ 95% CI = $-.24, .06, z = -1.22, p = .22$) and high (*linear*: mean $r = -.10, r$ 95% CI = $-.25, .06, z = -1.22, p = .22$; *curvilinear*: mean $r = .11, r$ 95% CI = $-.05, .25, z = 1.36, p = .17$) in avoidance.

Attachment anxiety and the curvilinear effects of partners' support. There were no reliable interaction effects between attachment anxiety and the linear or curvilinear effects of practical or emotional support, with one exception: the interaction between the curvilinear effect of practical support and attachment anxiety predicting efficacy. The simple effects suggested a pattern similar to that found in Studies 1 and 3. Recipients *lower in attachment anxiety* responded in a similar way as those *higher in avoidance* by showing declining efficacy when partners provide low-to-moderate levels of practical support, but increasing efficacy as partners provide higher levels of practical support.

Discussion

The meta-analyses across studies revealed a significant and robust moderated curvilinear pattern between partners' practical support and recipients' attachment avoidance on recipients' distress, efficacy, and perceived partner control/criticism (for men). The curve for high attachment avoidance was significant across all three outcomes, whereas the simple effects for low avoidance emerged only for one outcome—perceived partner control/criticism (for men). The results also indicated that partners' emotional support and recipients' attachment anxiety did not have the same robust effects.

⁷ Although the curvilinear interaction between partner support and avoidance on distress occurred for men (but not for women) in Study 4, no gender differences for distress outcomes emerged in the other studies. The meta-analyses also indicated there were no differences between men and women across the studies when predicting distress (gender \times attachment avoidance \times practical support² interaction mean $r = -.08, r$ 95% CI = $-.27, .13, z = -.73, p = .47$; gender \times attachment avoidance \times emotional support² interaction mean $r = .03, r$ 95% CI = $-.07, .12, z = .53, p = .60$). Thus, the meta-analysis for distress was conducted by calculating the effects of distress pooled across men and women for each study.

Table 8
Meta-Analysis of Effects Across Samples

	Distress (Studies 1–4)				Efficacy (Studies 2 and 3)				Perceived partner control/criticism (Men) (Studies 2 and 4)			
	<i>r</i>	95% CI	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	95% CI	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	95% CI	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Practical support												
Partners' practical support	.09	-.00, .18	1.88	.06	.04	-.24, .31	.27	.79	.07	-.09, .22	.85	.40
Partners' practical support ²	-.06	-.22, .10	-.78	.44	.05	-.08, .18	.79	.43	.01	-.14, .17	.17	.87
Recipients' attachment avoidance	.14	.04, .23	2.88	.00	-.16	-.29, -.03	-2.42	.02	.16	.01, .31	2.02	.04
Partners' practical support × Attachment avoidance	.06	-.09, .20	.78	.43	.02	-.23, .26	.14	.89	.10	-.06, .25	1.21	.23
Partners' practical support ² × Attachment avoidance	-.12	-.22, -.02	-2.37	.02	.21	.08, .33	3.19	.00	-.27	-.41, -.12	-3.50	.00
Recipients' attachment anxiety	.21	.13, .29	4.73	.00	-.07	-.20, .06	-1.10	.27	.03	-.12, .18	.36	.72
Partners' practical support × Attachment anxiety	-.01	-.10, .08	-.28	.78	-.10	-.30, .10	-.97	.33	.06	-.09, .21	.82	.41
Partners' practical support ² × Attachment anxiety	.07	-.08, .21	.93	.35	-.16	-.28, -.02	-2.30	.02	-.01	-.16, .14	-.12	.91
Emotional support												
Partners' emotional support	-.05	-.25, .15	-.51	.61	.06	-.14, .25	.58	.56	-.13	-.27, .03	-1.63	.10
Partners' emotional support ²	.07	-.04, .18	1.32	.19	.06	-.08, .20	.83	.41	.01	-.14, .17	.18	.86
Recipients' attachment avoidance	.15	.07, .24	3.39	.00	-.08	-.21, .05	-1.22	.22	-.01	-.16, .15	-.09	.93
Partners' emotional support × Attachment avoidance	.11	-.07, .29	1.19	.24	.00	-.14, .13	-.07	.95	.05	-.10, .20	.66	.51
Partners' emotional support ² × Attachment avoidance	-.09	-.19, .01	-1.77	.08	.04	-.11, .19	.51	.61	.16	.01, .30	2.04	.04
Recipients' attachment anxiety	.22	.13, .30	4.90	.00	-.14	-.27, -.01	-2.06	.04	.09	-.06, .24	1.16	.25
Partners' emotional support × Attachment anxiety	-.08	-.21, .07	-1.05	.29	-.12	-.44, .23	-.68	.50	.04	-.11, .19	.55	.58
Partners' emotional support ² × Attachment anxiety	.07	-.06, .19	1.00	.32	.00	-.13, .13	-.02	.99	-.12	-.27, .03	-1.60	.11

Note. The variables marked with ² are curvilinear variables. Significant effects are shown in bold.

General Discussion

The methods and results of the current research provide a new way of resolving the inconsistent effects of partner support by illustrating that the associations between practical support provided by intimate partners and important recipient outcomes depend on both the level of support provided and the recipient's degree of attachment avoidance. Focusing on those effects that our meta-analyses revealed were robust across all four studies, we now discuss the ways in which these novel results reconcile inconsistent findings, advance the existing literature, and have important theoretical, methodological, and practical implications.

Curvilinear Effects of Partner Support for Recipients High in Avoidance

The current studies and meta-analyses provide ground-breaking evidence that the effect of partner support on recipients high in avoidance is best represented by a curvilinear function. Increasing levels of low-to-moderate practical support by partners were associated with growing distress, declining self-efficacy, increasing perceived partner control/criticism, and greater interpersonal distancing by highly avoidant recipients. Once partner support reached average levels, however, increasing levels of practical

Table 9
Meta-Analyses of Simple Linear and Curvilinear Effects of Partners' Practical Support for Recipients' Low and High in Attachment Avoidance Across Samples

	Low attachment avoidance (-1 SD)								High attachment avoidance (+1 SD)							
	Linear effect				Curvilinear effect				Linear effect				Curvilinear effect			
	<i>r</i>	95% CI	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	95% CI	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	95% CI	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	95% CI	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Distress (Studies 1–4)	-.00	-.10, .10	-.03	.98	.07	-.17, .30	.56	.58	.01	-.12, .14	.17	.87	-.18	-.28, -.08	-3.49	.00
Efficacy (Studies 2 & 3)	.01	-.12, .14	.15	.88	-.12	-.24, .02	-1.74	.08	.09	-.10, .28	.93	.36	.18	.06, .31	2.79	.01
Perceived partner control/criticism (Studies 2 & 4, men)	.02	-.13, .17	.25	.80	.23	.08, .37	3.02	.00	.12	-.04, .26	1.48	.14	-.19	-.33, -.04	-2.48	.01

Note. Significant effects are shown in bold.

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support had the *reverse* effects for highly avoidant recipients, including reductions in distress, boosts in self-efficacy, and decreases in perceived partner control/criticism and distancing.

Each portion of this curve—the upswing of negative responses and the downswing of these responses—reconciles contradictory patterns in the existing support literature, advances our understanding of when partner support triggers defensive responding in avoidant recipients, and isolates the type of support that can effectively “break through” or overcome avoidant defenses. Prior research has established that highly avoidant individuals find support interactions particularly difficult because they believe they cannot rely on their partners to be responsive caregivers (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). The escalating negative responses shown by highly avoidant recipients when receiving low-to-moderate levels of practical support in the current studies is consistent with the negative emotions, evaluations, and distancing typically displayed by highly avoidant individuals when receiving low or poor levels of support (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Rholes et al., 1999; Rholes et al., 2011). These defensive responses most likely occur because partners’ low-to-moderate support increasingly triggers automatic self-protective strategies that help bypass the vulnerability of depending on (what avoidant people expect will be) unreliable caregivers.

The curvilinear effects of partner support, however, clarify that these defensive responses occur when levels of partner support are relatively low, but once practical support reaches average levels, highly avoidant recipients start responding more positively to partner support. If a central goal of avoidant individuals is to avoid dependence and remain self-reliant, why does high levels of support break through rather than exacerbate avoidant defenses? Maintaining independence and self-reliance is a defensive priority arising from deep-seated beliefs that partners cannot be trusted to be responsive caregivers (Bowlby, 1973). Thus, it is not the case that highly avoidant individuals do not want or need care and support; they do. But they also want to protect themselves from the neglect and hurt they expect will occur if they reach for or rely on their partners (Mikulincer et al., 2000, 2002; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). For these reasons, the presence of partner support needs to be especially clear and salient in order for avoidant recipients to let go of their fear of dependence and believe that their partners are truly there for them (Rholes et al., 2011; Simpson et al., 1992). The upswing of positive responses displayed by highly avoidant recipients as their partners provide increasing levels of moderate-to-high support confirm that very high levels of practical support provide enough evidence that their partners are available to lower avoidant recipients’ defenses and allow them to benefit from partner support.

The positive effects of high levels of practical support for highly avoidant recipients are consistent with recent demonstrations that partners can down-regulate avoidant defenses when they are sufficiently sensitive to the needs of highly avoidant individuals in specific contexts (Simpson & Overall, 2014). For example, avoidant individuals typically react with anger and withdrawal during conflicts when their partners try to influence them, but these defenses are ameliorated when partners soften their influence attempts by minimizing direct requests and conveying validation and positive regard (Overall et al., 2013). More positive postconflict partner responses also eliminate the higher risk of dissolution commonly associated with avoidance (Salvatore, Kuo, Steele,

Simpson, & Collins, 2011). There are key differences between this prior work and the current effects, however. The prior studies assessed influence strategies and accommodation central to conflict resolution rather than the (very different) behaviors people enact when attempting to support their partners. The different needs, threats, and associated responses in support versus conflict contexts produce divergent results. Whereas linear associations between conflict strategies, associated reactions, and avoidance tend to be consistent across a range of studies, the remarkable inconsistencies of support effectiveness are underpinned by a mix of benefits and costs that, as shown here, are best captured by a curvilinear function.

Identifying common ingredients across the different responses that appease avoidant defenses in different contexts help clarify why these effects occur. Both conflict and support contexts can confirm or challenge negative expectations of others. When partners are not too heavy-handed when trying to influence highly avoidant targets, they disconfirm expectations of mal-intent and manipulation (Overall et al., 2013; Mikulincer, 1998a). When partners clearly show that they are available to provide help and assistance, they also counteract expectations of unreliable caregiving. Not only should this help avoidant recipients receive the benefits of support (as the current results show), but consistent evidence that the partner can be trusted to provide support may help avoidant individuals generate more positive expectations and greater attachment security over time. Indeed, Arriaga, Kumashiro, Finkel, VanderDrift, and Luchies (2014) recently found that greater trust in the partner (i.e., perceiving that the partner is available and dependable) predicted decreases in attachment avoidance across time. They also documented that it was trust, rather than perceiving the partner as validating their personal goals and efficacy, that predicted reductions in avoidance. These findings are consistent with the notion that overcoming avoidant individuals’ defenses involves targeting their negative caregiving expectations (by providing high levels of support that clearly demonstrate availability) rather than reinforcing their defensive self-reliance.

However, not all types of partner support may overcome avoidant defenses. The curvilinear effects for highly avoidant recipients occurred for practical (rather than emotional) support. Research examining attachment and support dynamics has not uniformly assessed or compared both types of support, although prior findings indicate that practical support may be most beneficial for highly avoidant people (Mikulincer & Florian, 1997; Simpson et al., 2007). High levels of emotional and practical support should both provide evidence of the partner’s availability, but practical support does so without requiring the reciprocation of emotional disclosure and affection that highly avoidant individuals dislike. Indeed, practical support might give highly avoidant individuals the opportunity to accept and respond to support in more problem-focused and less intimacy-imbued ways, such as by discussing concrete solutions to problems. Emotional support, on the contrary, might require too much emotional vulnerability, disclosure, and intimacy from avoidant individuals.

That said, the relative absence of effects for emotional support also indicates that this type of support did not activate the defenses of highly avoidant recipients, which should be particularly salient if emotional support is threatening to them. It might be that the contexts we examined—discussions of personal goals (Studies 1

and 2) and daily interactions (Study 4)—typically contain less intense emotions and less salient forms of emotional support. In contrast, prior research documenting the costs of emotional support have involved contexts of high emotional vulnerability, such as when recipients are facing very stressful impending tasks (Bolger et al., 2000; Bolger & Amarel, 2007, Study 2; Gleason et al., 2008; Shrout et al., 2006). Avoidant recipients have also shown more negative reactions to partners' emotional support in the context of preparing for a stressful task (Mikulincer & Florian, 1997). Indeed, in Study 3 which involved couples discussing significant stressors (and thus greater relative distress than our other studies, see Table 2), the curvilinear effect of support arose with emotional rather than with practical forms of support, but controlling for the severity of the stressor (i.e., support need) weakened this effect. This pattern suggests that low-to-moderate emotional support can activate avoidant defenses, and high levels of emotional support can down-regulate those defenses, in stressful contexts where partners' emotional support is truly needed (also see Simpson et al., 1992).

Effects of Partner Support for Recipients Low in Avoidance

Low avoidant individuals experienced lower levels of distress, regardless of whether their partners provided low or high levels of support. Unlike highly avoidant individuals, less avoidant (more secure) individuals have confidence in their partner's love and enter support interactions unencumbered by attachment concerns (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). As a result, even when their partners provide relatively low levels of support, secure individuals do not experience greater distress or evaluate their partner's support more negatively (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Rholes et al., 2011; Simpson et al., 2007). Steadfast faith in their partner's love and the belief that their partners will be available, if and when needed, explains why low avoidant recipients are not as contingent on the level and type of their partner's supportive behavior (as the outcomes of highly avoidant recipients are).

Ironically, then, it is the myopic focus on the partner's reliability that allows high levels of support to benefit highly avoidant recipients, and it is the lack of such concerns that could potentially generate the costs of enacted support in less avoidant recipients. Although we expected secure recipients to respond more positively in general, based on prior research revealing that direct, visible support can exacerbate distress and undermine self-efficacy, we also thought that secure recipients might experience some coping and efficacy costs at very high levels of support. Low avoidant recipients showed trends consistent with this idea, but the simple effects and meta-analyses did not support a significant curvilinear pattern, with one exception: the effect of practical support on men's perceptions of their partners as being controlling and critical. This specific effect is consistent with a key theoretical explanation for why support can have costs; overt, direct support can be interpreted as intrusive and as the partner "taking over" (Bolger et al., 2000). This might be particularly true for men given masculine ideals of independence, agency and control, which often restrict men's help-seeking and result in more physiological threat in response to receiving partner support (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Crockett & Neff, 2013; Cross & Madson, 1997).

Partner Support and Attachment Anxiety

As suspected, attachment avoidance played a relatively stronger and more consistent role in determining recipients' reactions to partner support. Some effects suggested that anxious recipients responded more negatively when partners provided low levels of support, such as lower efficacy (Study 3) or greater distancing (Study 4), which is consistent with anxious individuals' heightened dependence and sensitivity to rejection. Other effects indicated that highly anxious individuals experienced greater distress (Studies 1, 2, and 4) or lower efficacy (Study 3), regardless of their partner's support. In fact, only three significant effects emerged in our meta-analyses. First, highly anxious recipients reported greater levels of distress and lower self-efficacy, regardless of their partner's emotional or practical support, highlighting that their relationship concerns and need for reassurance as well as chronic self doubt inhibit the degree to which their partners can soothe them. Second, anxiety moderated the curvilinear effects of practical support on recipients' efficacy, but the simple effects revealed that recipients low in anxiety demonstrated a similar pattern to those high in avoidance. This pattern may reflect that defensive reactions to low levels of support, and soothing of high levels of support, are more likely to arise in dismissing avoidant recipients who are high in avoidance (and thus deeply distrust their partner's caregiving) and low in anxiety (and are thus not continually trying to sustain greater closeness with their partner). Indeed, highly anxious individuals did not respond more positively to high levels of partner support in the way that avoidant recipients did. This pattern is consistent with prior research showing that, despite their longing for support, highly anxious recipients often fail to appreciate or be calmed by the support enacted by their partners (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Gallo & Smith, 2001; Moreira et al., 2003; Priel & Shamai, 1995; Simpson et al., 1992). In sum, there is strong evidence that, during support exchanges when anxious people are likely to desire high levels of attention, care, and reassurance from their partners, even very high levels of partner support may not alleviate their heightened distress or satiate their craving for love and intimacy.

Strengths, Caveats, and Future Research

The moderated curvilinear pattern replicated across four studies using methods adopted by prior research examining support provision (allowing direct comparisons). It also replicated across recipient outcomes that have been focused on in the prior support literature along with outcomes reflective of the defensive responses of highly avoidant people. The ecologically valid nature of our methods increases confidence that the results reveal the effects of support as it is spontaneously delivered during couples' support-relevant exchanges. Nonetheless, each study relied on correlational data, so we cannot make any causal conclusions. We did rule out several important alternative explanations (see Table 1). Not only did we provide good evidence that the results were *not* due to differences in recipients' need or desire for support or their support-seeking behavior, it is also less theoretically plausible that the results reflect avoidant recipients' responses eliciting different levels of support from their partners (rather than levels of partner support affecting recipients' responses). For example, it is difficult to think of a good reason why partners would respond with low-to-moderate levels of support when highly avoidant recipients experience greater distress and low efficacy (see the left side of the

curve for recipients high in avoidance), but then respond with high levels of support when they experience less distress and greater efficacy (see the right side of the high avoidance curve).

Our pattern of results also discounts the possibility that the benefits of high levels of practical support for highly avoidant recipients arise because they disengage and suppress their thoughts and feelings in threatening contexts. If the positive outcomes for highly avoidant recipients at high levels of practical support were due to suppression, these should be accompanied by more negative partner evaluations and distancing from the partner. Instead, moderate-to-high levels of practical support were associated with decreases in perceived partner critical/controlling and distancing from the partner, which verifies the explanation that higher levels of partner support overcome or bypass avoidant defenses. Furthermore, controlling for recipients' emotional suppression did not alter the results. Nonetheless, replicating these novel curvilinear effects by experimentally manipulating different levels of partner support is a valuable direction for future research.

Despite the meta-analyses providing evidence that the curvilinear effect occurred for all of the recipient outcomes we assessed, the results when predicting recipients' distress were the least consistent. The inconsistencies could be attributable to the nature and specific functions of practical versus emotional support (see Cutrona, 1996). Advice, guidance, and help tend to focus on the issue discussed, rather than the recipients' feelings, and thus practical support more directly targets recipients' feelings of issue-related efficacy and is probably more easily interpreted as controlling or critical. In addition, although recipients' distress has often been used to index the effectiveness of support, some theoretical models suggest that different types of support (e.g., visible vs. invisible) may exacerbate or enhance distress by challenging or bolstering recipients' efficacy (Bolger et al., 2000). Moreover, in contrast to practical support, emotional support more directly targets recipients' distress (Cutrona, 1996; Cutrona, Shaffer, Wesner, & Gardner, 2007; Girme et al., 2013) and, as discussed above, the dynamics between emotional support and distress should be more relevant in stressful contexts in which recipients' heightened distress increases their need for emotional support. The curvilinear interaction between emotional support and distress when couples discussed significant stressors in Study 3 provides evidence that these processes are most likely to emerge when the specific form of support and recipient outcomes match the specific contextual needs of the recipient.

Contextual factors are also likely to be a central reason that we found only weak evidence that high levels of support had detrimental outcomes for low avoidant recipients, despite prior research documenting the potential costs of direct visible support. The most consistent evidence for the costs of visible support has emerged in the context of impending stressors, such as upcoming exams or speeches (Bolger et al., 2000; Gleason et al., 2008; Shrout et al., 2006). In contrast, when couples are directly discussing support-related issues (as in Studies 1–3), some (or even very high) levels of partner support may be expected or desired (Girme et al., 2013). The expectation and benefits of support in these contexts may outweigh the potential costs of support, which may appear only when support is not desired or support reaches intrusive or threatening levels. If so, this would make it very difficult to detect significant upswings in negative responses. Nonetheless, the current studies demonstrate the utility of modeling curvilinear effects

to capture the mix of costs and benefits of support, which could be valuably applied to contexts in which the costs of support have the potential to outweigh the benefits.

Finally, our curvilinear results indicate that the underlying fear of dependence central to avoidance (a) produces self-protective defensive responses when low partner support confirms that caregivers are unresponsive, but (b) these fears and defenses can be overcome when very high levels of practical support sharply disconfirm negative expectations and provide irrefutable evidence that the partner *is* available. We did not, however, measure whether avoidant recipients were afraid of relying on their partners, whether these fears changed according to their partner's level of support, or whether they "knew" that their partners were truly available and "there for them" when they received very high levels of support. These constructs may not be easily assessed. For example, asking avoidant recipients to reflect on their fears of dependence or their partner's actual availability once a support transaction has taken place may be too confronting and retrigger efforts to suppress attachment needs. The recipient outcomes we focused on in this research are not very threatening with regard to these deep attachment themes. More implicit measures might better uncover avoidant individuals' underlying needs and fears (Mikulincer et al., 2000, 2002), or these mechanisms might be captured via physiological indices of threat during interactions when partner support is actually being delivered (Diamond, Hicks, & Otter-Henderson, 2006; Mikulincer, 1998b). These are promising directions for future research.

Methodological and Practical Implications

Using curvilinear methods, we attempted to reconcile conflicting findings in the existing support literature. With a few notable exceptions (e.g., the Yerkes–Dodson curvilinear relation between anxiety and performance; Yerkes & Dodson, 1908), most theories and models in psychology anticipate linear effects. However, as we have shown, the appropriate application of curvilinear techniques can clarify what appear to be confusing sets of linear effects whose real curvilinear pattern is masked by where participants (or their partners) fall on the x -axis. We suspect that there may be several other instances in which the prudent use of curvilinear models will clarify our understanding of seemingly contradictory linear effects. Positive relationship biases, for example, may have salutary effects (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996) until large discrepancies with reality produce negative outcomes (e.g., Tomlinson, Aron, Carmichael, Reis, & Holmes, 2014). This downturn may occur primarily when couples face relationship difficulties (McNulty, 2010), showing a moderated curvilinear pattern. Similarly, although jealousy is often viewed as uniformly "negative," low-to-moderate levels of a partner's jealousy and associated mate-guarding tactics may bolster relationship satisfaction by conveying the partner's commitment (Neal & Lemay, 2014). However, once a partner's jealous behaviors move from moderate to high, intrusive levels, this should undermine relationship quality (Guerrero, 1998). This downturn, however, may not occur as quickly for highly anxious people because greater partner jealousy provides them needed reassurance of their partner's commitment (Overall, Girme, Lemay, & Hammond, 2014). These are merely two examples among many potential cases in which the applica-

tion of curvilinear methods could sharpen our thinking about and testing of important psychological models and their outcomes.

These curvilinear patterns also have important practical implications. Therapeutic approaches designed to help people cope with significant stressors, such as chronic illnesses, are increasingly targeting dyadic dynamics, given the critical role partners play in facilitating health and well-being (Regan et al., 2012). Within couple therapy more generally, the degree to which partners foster one another's general thriving and goal attainment is also important. When recipients are more avoidant, facilitating clear and undeniable practical support should be paramount. Indeed, understanding the underlying fears that fuel the destructive responses of highly avoidant individuals is the foundation of emotionally focused couples therapy, which encourages partners to respond in ways that "override" their negative expectations (Johnson & Whiffen, 1999). Our results suggest how this might be achieved—by providing high levels of clear, practical support that offers irrefutable evidence that the partner is able and willing to be helpful. Determining whether these behaviors enhance beliefs that the partner is reliable and responsive, and therefore build more secure and successful relationships across time, is another valuable direction for future research.

Conclusions

By modeling curvilinear associations, the current studies provide a novel way of conceptualizing and reconciling the contradictory effects of partner support. Highly avoidant recipients exhibited more negative responses as their partners provided them with low-to-moderate levels of practical support, including increasing distress, drops in self-efficacy, and increasing perceived partner control/criticism and distancing. However, as partners' practical support shifted from moderate to high levels, highly avoidant recipients experienced more positive outcomes, including decreasing distress, increasing self-efficacy, and reduced perceived partner control/criticism and distancing. These results reconcile several inconsistencies in the support literature by demonstrating that practical support can promote both positive and negative outcomes for highly avoidant recipients, depending on the level of support delivered. The results also illustrate the importance of applying curvilinear methods to test the outcomes of significant social behaviors.

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