Buffering and spillover of adult attachment insecurity in couple and family relationships

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Abstract | Close relationships are crucial to health and well-being. However, anxious expectations of rejection (attachment anxiety) and avoidant beliefs that romantic partners cannot be trusted (attachment avoidance) undermine long-term relationship functioning and well-being. In this Review, we outline how romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance create harmful cognitive, affective and behavioural responses in stressful couple contexts, and summarize partner buffering processes that can mitigate these harmful effects. Next, we expand the focus on within-couple processes by describing how romantic attachment insecurities and associated responses within stressful couple interactions spill over to shape functioning in non-stressful couple contexts as well as family contexts, such as parent–child and co-parenting interactions. We also consider how partners might contain spillover processes to mitigate the risk that romantic attachment insecurities create maladaptive outcomes for couples and their children. Finally, we propose new research directions that require expanding current methods and collaborations to identify and address the diverse ways in which romantic attachment impacts couple, family and child well-being.

Supportive, high-quality close relationships are the foundation of longer, healthier lives filled with greater meaning and well-being[1,2]. Yet close relationships also leave people vulnerable to unresponsive caregiving, rejection and conflict, which can undermine relationship quality and well-being[3–5]. A considerable portion of daily living involves managing these relationship challenges, including coping with stress, caregiving and dealing with inevitable conflicts. In couple and family relationships, successfully navigating relationship difficulties rests on how romantic partners work together to prevent challenging events from spilling over to impact couple, family and child well-being.

Attachment theory offers critical insights into how romantic partners can effectively manage relationship challenges to build and sustain high-quality couple and family relationships. A central premise is that rejection and unresponsive caregiving can create attachment insecurities that limit people's willingness and capability to endure and resolve relationship difficulties[6–8]. In adult romantic relationships, anxious expectations of rejection (attachment anxiety) or avoidant beliefs that partners cannot be trusted (attachment avoidance) generate destructive responses within couples' interactions that can damage relationships and each partner's well-being[9–11]. A wealth of research has established the distinct ways in which romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance impede constructive couple interactions and, in turn, undermine long-term couple functioning.

Advances in the past 10 years have identified partner buffering processes that mitigate the damaging effects of attachment insecurity in couple relationships. By counteracting anxious expectations of rejection, partner behaviour that conveys commitment can neutralize the destructive responses and poor outcomes typically arising from attachment anxiety[12–14]. Similarly, partner behaviour that demonstrates trustworthiness can neutralize avoidant distrust, defensive responses and associated damage to couple wellbeing[12–14]. However, the damaging effects of romantic attachment insecurity are not limited to couple relationships, but rather spill over to impact other family relationships, such as parent–child relationships[15]. Documenting these spillover effects is necessary to understand how partners can buffer the broader effects of attachment insecurity on couple, family and child well-being.

In this Review, we illustrate how addressing romantic attachment insecurities is essential for building secure and satisfying couple and family relationships. First, we outline how romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance often create harmful cognitive, affective and behavioural responses in stressful couple contexts, and summarize

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partner buffering processes that can mitigate these harmful effects. Next, we describe how responses associated with romantic attachment insecurities spill over to shape functioning across non-stressful interactions and family contexts, such as parent–child and co-parenting interactions. We also consider how partners might contain spillover processes to mitigate the risk that romantic attachment insecurities create maladaptive outcomes for couples and their children.

This Review includes both foundational work and contemporary empirical studies that examine behaviours and outcomes in couple or family interactions. We integrate findings that have been replicated across different methods, samples, research teams and countries with novel evidence for attachment spillover processes. Most studies to date that have examined the impact of romantic attachment insecurity on couple and family processes have focused on community samples of nuclear mother–father–child families rather than couples and families who have faced adversity (for example, violence, racism, divorce or marginalization). Accordingly, we conclude the Review by outlining the need for a broader, more integrative approach to understanding how romantic attachment shapes couple and family functioning across more diverse samples, and call for methodological innovations that capture spillover processes across a range of couple and family contexts.

Attachment and couple functioning

Romantic attachment insecurity is one of the most widely studied personal vulnerabilities, and strongly predicts lower-quality couple relationships and poorer psychological and physical health[2,4,5]. The reliable associations between romantic attachment insecurity and lower-quality couple relationships emerge primarily because of problematic affective and behavioural responses to stressful contexts[10–12]. Stressful contexts can threaten relationship bonds and amplify the need to depend on partners, which activates insecure beliefs and expectations (FIG. 1). Insecure beliefs and expectations generate destructive emotional and behavioural responses that undermine the quality of couple interactions. By producing poor interaction outcomes, such as impairing caregiving, exacerbating conflict and creating disconnection, these destructive responses risk damaging the well-being of both couple members and perpetuating insecurities[10–13].

Two adult attachment orientations — anxiety and avoidance — describe different forms of romantic attachment insecurity. The specific insecurities and needs associated with attachment anxiety and avoidance trigger distinct cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions during stressful contexts, but both produce poor outcomes for insecure individuals and their partners (TABLE 1). Identifying these processes, however, has provided insights into partner buffering processes that can mitigate the destructive responses and damage to relational and personal well-being created by attachment anxiety and avoidance[12–14].

Attachment anxiety. Romantic attachment anxiety is theorized to arise from past relationship experiences in which partners provided inconsistent care, sometimes responding to bids for support with love, and sometimes responding with anger or rejection[6–8] (BOX 1). These experiences create fears of rejection and a strong yearning for love and acceptance from romantic partners, which motivate persistent bids for reassurance and closeness[9–11].

Fear of rejection and need for reassurance arising from romantic attachment anxiety tend to be activated when current events threaten couple bonds, raise the risk of rejection or leave cravings for love unfulfilled[10,11]. When people high in attachment anxiety encounter conflict or their partners fail to provide desired support, they experience distress and feelings of threat and insecurity[16–22]. These disproportionate affective reactions trigger destructive behavioural strategies intended to obtain reassurance, such as attempts to induce guilt in partners, which disrupt problem-solving and responsive caregiving[17,23–25]. When partners are not sufficiently reassuring or responsive, individuals high in attachment anxiety often become angry and act in punishing ways towards their partner, which impedes the closeness and caregiving they desire[5,16,18,22,26,27]. These destructive responses and poor interaction outcomes damage couples' relationship quality (FIG. 1).

Romantic attachment anxiety in one person also creates problems and dissatisfaction for their partner. The partners of individuals high in attachment anxiety must manage intense negative emotions, excessive reassurance-seeking and punishing responses in challenging situations[17,24,26,27]. Accordingly, partners frequently experience physiological stress during challenging interactions, making responsiveness difficult[19,20,28–30]. Moreover, because they need to focus on soothing and reassuring individuals high in attachment anxiety, partners themselves are less able to improve relationship problems and fulfil their own needs for responsive support[17,24,26]. Consequently, the partners of people high in attachment anxiety also report lower satisfaction and commitment[5,17,31,32]. The greater conflict and reduced partner commitment arising from the destructive responses of people high in attachment anxiety, in turn, perpetuate fears of abandonment and therefore sustain attachment anxiety[25,33,34].

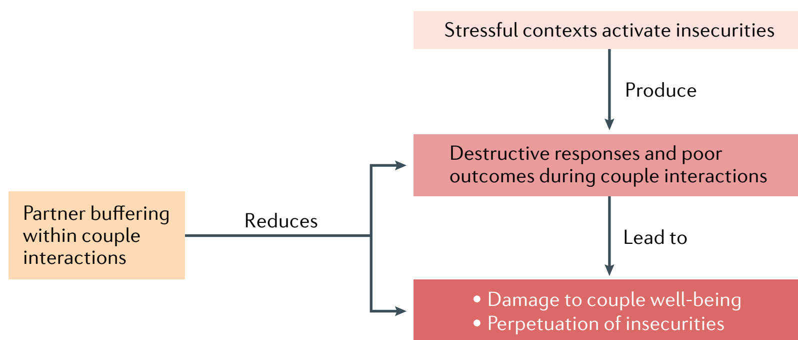

Fig. 1 | **Spillover of romantic attachment insecurity in couple contexts.** Current stressful contexts activate attachment insecurities that produce destructive responses and poor outcomes in couple interactions. Destructive responses and poor interaction outcomes, in turn, undermine well-being for both partners and perpetuate insecurities. Destructive responses and the potential damage to well-being can be reduced via partner buffering within couple interactions.

Table 1 | **The insecurities, destructive responses and outcomes in couple interactions associated with romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance**

Key attachment insecurity features	Attachment anxiety	Attachment avoidance
Insecurities and needs during stressful contexts	Fear of rejection generates need for reassurance[9–11]	Distrust of partners generates need for autonomy[9–11]
Destructive responses in couple interactions	Feelings of distress, threat, hurt and insecurity[16–22]	Distrust and anger[37,38,43], and emotional suppression[35,36,39]
	Guilt induction[17,24], reassurance-seeking[23] and punishing the partner[5,16,18,22,26,27]	Withdrawal[37,39,41,43], hostility[42] and poor responsiveness[20,42,43]
Poor interaction outcomes that damage well-being	Poor conflict resolution and caregiving[5,16–18,22,24,26,27]	Reduced closeness and poor caregiving[28,44,45], and low conflict resolution[5,42,43]

Representative studies provide evidence for the destructive responses and poor interaction outcomes associated with attachment anxiety and avoidance.

Attachment avoidance. Romantic attachment avoidance is theorized to arise from consistently experiencing unresponsive caregiving[6–8], which generates distrust and entrenched beliefs that partners cannot be relied on to be supportive and responsive when needed[9–11] (BOX 1). Individuals high in attachment avoidance distrust romantic partners and are uncomfortable relying on them for love and support. Accordingly, they avoid being dependent, often try to suppress their attachment needs and limit closeness in their relationships[35–39].

Challenging situations that emphasize dependence, threaten autonomy or require high levels of responsiveness tend to activate avoidant individuals' distrust and need for independence[10,11]. When individuals who are high in attachment avoidance experience distress or need support, beliefs that partners cannot be trusted result in the suppression of negative emotions, withdrawal, and rejection of their partner's attempts to provide support[37,39–41]. Similarly, when couples encounter conflict or partners express negative emotions, highly avoidant people typically feel anger fuelled by attributions of partner malintent, which generates withdrawal or hostility[42,43]. This mix of withdrawal and hostility reduces closeness, limits the care avoidant individuals receive, derails constructive conflict resolution and ultimately damages relationship quality[5,38,42,43].

Distrust of partners and the need to maintain emotional distance also mean that people high in attachment avoidance have difficulty being responsive to their partner's needs[28,43–45]. When partners require support or closeness, individuals high in attachment avoidance feel angry and resentful, and their resulting withdrawal and hostility leave their partner's needs for support and intimacy unfulfilled[37,38,46]. Partners of individuals high in attachment avoidance must also contend with more hostile, dissatisfying and unsuccessful problem-solving interactions, which impede partners' abilities to improve the relationship[20,42,43]. Accordingly, partners of people high in attachment avoidance encounter a wider range of serious relationship problems and report lower satisfaction and commitment than partners of people low in attachment avoidance[5,31,32,36]. Growing conflict and partners' discontent likely sustain beliefs by avoidant individuals that partners cannot be trusted, thereby perpetuating attachment avoidance[33,34].

Buffering attachment insecurity. Prior research focused primarily on the ways in which attachment insecurity creates problems within couples' relationships. However, partners can help prevent insecure reactions from damaging romantic relationships[12–14]. Partner behaviours that help reduce romantic attachment insecurities directly address the specific insecurities, needs and responses associated with attachment anxiety or avoidance (TABLE 2).

Partner buffering of attachment anxiety must address the underlying fears of rejection and need for reassurance that create heightened feelings of threat and distress in stressful interactions. During threatening interactions, such as when couples experience conflict, individuals high in attachment anxiety evince less distress, less insecurity and fewer destructive behaviours if their partners are highly responsive and invested in their relationship[21,22,47], accentuate positive regard[48], express emotions that convey commitment[17] or soothe distress via physical touch[49,50] than when their partners do not exhibit these behaviours. During other challenging events, such as the transition to parenthood, high levels of partner support buffers the poorer personal and relationship well-being typically experienced by individuals high in attachment anxiety, and reduces attachment anxiety over time[51–54]. Finally, experiences that indicate partners truly value them, such as satisfying sex or partner's gratitude, also help individuals high in attachment anxiety feel more satisfied, and reduce attachment anxiety over time, compared with when these events are not experienced[55–58]. The central ingredient across these buffering factors involves counteracting concerns of rejection by providing reassurance of the partner's love and continued commitment. This reassurance effectively short-circuits the emotional reactivity and destructive behaviours commonly displayed by individuals high in attachment anxiety, which can promote security.

By contrast, partner buffering of attachment avoidance must target strong distrust of partners and the associated need for independence. When conflict or the need to make sacrifices arises, partner strategies that counteract negative expectations by demonstrating trustworthiness and respect for avoidant individuals' autonomy tend to reduce their anger, withdrawal and defensive resistance compared with when partners do not engage these strategies[43,59,60]. Effective strategies that

Box 1 | The origins of adult romantic attachment insecurity

A core premise of attachment theory is that attachment anxiety and avoidance in adults reflect how they have been treated by significant others — their attachment figures — throughout their life, starting with parent–child relationships[6–8,154]. A large prospective study found that less support from parents earlier in life and lower-quality friendships during adolescence predicted greater romantic attachment insecurity in young adulthood[155]. Other prospective studies have shown that receiving poor caregiving during childhood and having low-quality interactions with parents during adolescence predict higher levels of romantic attachment insecurity in adulthood compared with receiving more responsive caregiving and having high-quality interactions with parents[156–159]. However, these prospective effects are small (average $r = 0.15$)[154]. The associations between attachment to caregivers during infancy and childhood and romantic attachment insecurities in adulthood are similarly small[153].

Small effects are unsurprising because these studies did not examine the quality of caregiving from romantic partners experienced after childhood or adolescence. According to attachment theory[7,8], the beliefs and expectations that underlie attachment insecurity should be reasonably accurate reflections of treatment by attachment figures, who may be family, friends, or romantic partners[160]. Another central premise of attachment theory is that attachment orientations are adaptive cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses to how one has been treated in both past and current interpersonal contexts[8]. As a result, attachment insecurity can change across the lifespan as children, adolescents, and adults encounter different caregiving experiences that are informative about others' rejection and responsiveness[33,154]. Processes within adult romantic relationships that confirm or contradict insecure expectations and beliefs also can generate changes in attachment insecurity[12–14] (FIG. 1). In sum, early caregiving experiences provide a foundation for adult romantic attachment insecurity, and then caregiving experiences across the lifespan, including more recent experiences with romantic partners, accumulate to determine current attachment insecurity.

buffer attachment avoidance include indirect or soft forms of influence that involve downplaying problem severity, validating avoidant individuals' point of view or giving credit for avoidant individuals' sacrifices and cooperation[43,59]. Similarly, when avoidant individuals are dependent and require support, forms of partner caregiving that clearly demonstrate responsiveness and respect for avoidant individuals' personal autonomy typically reduce anger and disengagement[39,61]. High levels of instrumental caregiving (for example, providing concrete advice or helpful information) or frequent sex also buffers avoidant distancing and dissatisfaction, probably because these experiences are less threatening than emotional support or intimate sex for highly avoidant individuals[39,55,62,63]. The central ingredient across these buffering factors involves partners demonstrating trustworthiness and respecting autonomy, which helps avoidant people lower their defences and be more satisfied and committed, and leads to reductions in attachment avoidance over time[54,59,61,64–67].

Spillover of romantic attachment

The detrimental effects of attachment insecurity, and the ways that partners can buffer these effects within couples' interactions, have been the focus of most adult romantic attachment research. This within-couple focus ignores potential broader effects of attachment insecurity across different contexts and relationships. Other contextual models of close relationships emphasize that stress from one domain (for example, work or finances) can spill over to impact couple functioning in other domains (for example, conflict or intimacy)[3,5,68,69]. Moreover, people are embedded within multiple relationship contexts that reciprocally influence each other across time[70,71]. Accordingly, family systems frameworks highlight that problems in a couple's romantic relationships can spill over to generate problems in other non-romantic family relationships, such as parent–child relationships, which can then create problems across the entire family system[72,73].

We apply these contextual and systems perspectives to romantic attachment to propose an expanded framework that specifies three ways in which the cognitive, affective and behavioural responses associated with romantic attachment insecurities might spill over to impact functioning in different couple and family (non-romantic) contexts (FIG. 2). First, couple spillover might occur, involving destructive responses and outcomes in a couple's stressful interactions spilling over to the couple's non-stressful interactions. Second, family spillover might occur, involving romantic attachment insecurities impacting emotions, thoughts and behaviours within non-romantic family interactions, such as between a parent and a child. Finally, couple–family spillover might occur, involving destructive responses and outcomes in a couple's stressful interactions disrupting subsequent family interactions. We also consider the role partners might play in reducing couple and family spillover to buffer the broader effects of romantic attachment insecurity on couple, family and child well-being.

Couple spillover. Couple spillover occurs when attachment-related thoughts, feelings and behaviours in stressful couple interactions impair subsequent non-stressful couple interactions (FIG. 2). The affective and behavioural responses arising from attachment insecurity are usually examined within stressful interactions because insecurities are typically most strongly elicited in these situations[6,10,11,32]. However, the insecure and defensive reactions displayed by individuals high in attachment anxiety or attachment avoidance during stressful interactions may also impede the development of closeness in later, non-stressful contexts. For example, recovering from conflict by rebounding emotionally and re-establishing intimacy is important to mitigate the potential damage of heated relationship conflicts[74–76]. However, the destructive responses and poor interaction outcomes associated with attachment insecurity are likely to carry forward to impact subsequent non-conflictual interactions and thus interfere with couples' ability to share positive experiences (TABLE 3). This type of conflict spillover is typically examined by assessing how the experiences and responses within couples' conflict interactions transfer to responses within subsequent non-conflict interactions[74,76–79].

For attachment anxiety, ineffective emotion regulation and poor problem-solving during conflict can create negativity in subsequent couple interactions that could offer the opportunity to rebuild or repair positive connections, such as discussing relationship strengths or areas of agreement. Rather than attempting to repair closeness, individuals high in attachment anxiety often perseverate on the conflict and display heightened feelings of threat and hostility[76,80]. Partners of individuals high in attachment anxiety also report that conflicts worsen over time and show larger drops in satisfaction

Table 2 | **Partner buffering of romantic attachment insecurity in couple interactions**

Adult attachment orientation	Central ingredients of partner buffering	Examples of partner buffering behaviours
Attachment anxiety	Partners' reassurance of commitment Partners' soothing of feelings of threat and distress	Expressions of commitment[17,21,22], positive regard[48] and gratitude[57]; accommodating negativity[22]; affectionate touch[49,50]; responsive support[51–54]; satisfying sex[55,56]
Attachment avoidance	Partners' demonstration of trustworthiness Partners' respect for autonomy	Soft/indirect forms of influence[43,59]; recognition of and gratitude for sacrifices[43,59,65]; indirect support that respects autonomy[61]; clear, instrumental caregiving[39,62,63]; frequent sex[55]

Representative studies provide evidence for example partner buffering behaviours.

on days following relationship conflict compared with partners of individuals low in attachment anxiety[16,77].

In contrast, highly avoidant individuals' responses to conflict involve disengagement[80]. Thus, rather than displaying hostility, avoidant individuals are less likely to engage in repair efforts or be responsive to their partner's repair efforts following conflict[79]. Disengagement and lack of effort to maintain relationships frequently trigger adverse reactions from partners, as evidenced by partners of individuals high in avoidance exhibiting greater negativity and perseveration on conflict in subsequent couple interactions than partners of individuals low in avoidance[76,78,79].

Beyond responses to conflict, insecure and destructive responses in other challenging contexts — such as when partners need or offer support, are required to make sacrifices or face relationship threat — similarly spill over to influence subsequent interactions between anxious and avoidant individuals and their partners. Critically, couple spillover is likely to be central to how attachment insecurity produces long-term damage because destructive responses and poor interaction outcomes are likely to spread beyond specific challenging contexts to impede relationship-promoting processes in other, potentially more positive couple contexts. Accordingly, poor recovery and continued distancing during postconflict interactions are likely to undermine long-term relationship satisfaction and stability, independently of the behaviours enacted during prior conflicts[74–76,79].

Additionally, spillover processes might partly account for why attachment insecurity also hinders couple functioning in non-stressful couple contexts. Relationship-promoting contexts that involve intimate self-disclosures, sharing positive personal or relationship events, or the expression of intimacy also help explain how attachment insecurity undermines relationship functioning and well-being[36,55,63,65,66,81]. Attachment insecurity may disrupt positive outcomes in these contexts because these situations also elicit attachment concerns, such as fear of rejection and distrust of partners. However, the destructive aftermath of the responses arising from attachment insecurity in prior stressful contexts is likely to impact interactions during these more positive, less conflict oriented contexts[76,79,82].

Containing couple spillover might be essential for partners to effectively buffer the damaging effects of attachment insecurity because many partners might be unable to downregulate the destructive reactions of insecure individuals in stressful couple contexts. Moreover, even if partner buffering alleviates destructive responses within stressful couple interactions, it could still fail to equip insecure individuals with the capacity to subsequently restore closeness and security. However, during later, 'cooler' contexts, partners might be better able to demonstrate the commitment and trustworthiness needed to enhance attachment security. Preliminary evidence demonstrates that the greater risk of relationship dissolution associated with attachment insecurity is reduced when partners exhibit high levels of recovery and responsiveness during interactions immediately following conflict[79]. Partner buffering in contexts that follow stressful couple interactions might demonstrate that partners will continue to be invested and the relationship will remain resilient even when hurtful or challenging events occur. Thus, more than simply buffering spillover of negativity, partners' conflict recovery could create positive spillover processes that increase relationship competence and security over time.

Family spillover. Family spillover occurs when romantic attachment insecurities shape emotions, thoughts and behaviours in non-romantic family relationships, such as parent–child relationships (FIG. 2). Traditional applications of attachment theory to family relationships suggest that adults' attachment representations of their own childhood caregivers impact the way they parent their own children[83]. Beyond these intergenerational effects of early parent–child attachment experiences, romantic attachment insecurity — which captures insecure expectations and beliefs within adult romantic relationships — also independently predicts how adults think, feel and behave in parent–child relationships[15,84].

Research documenting this type of family spillover has examined how one person's romantic attachment insecurity predicts responses within parent–child relationships. A review of these studies indicates that romantic attachment insecurity can impact parent–child relationships directly rather than indirectly through poor couple functioning[15]. That is, family spillover occurs independently of the parents' couple relationship quality, most likely because adult attachment needs interfere with the ability or motivation to be a responsive parent[15]. Accordingly, the pattern of spillover of romantic attachment to parent–child interactions relates to the distinct needs and regulation strategies specific to romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance (TABLE 3).

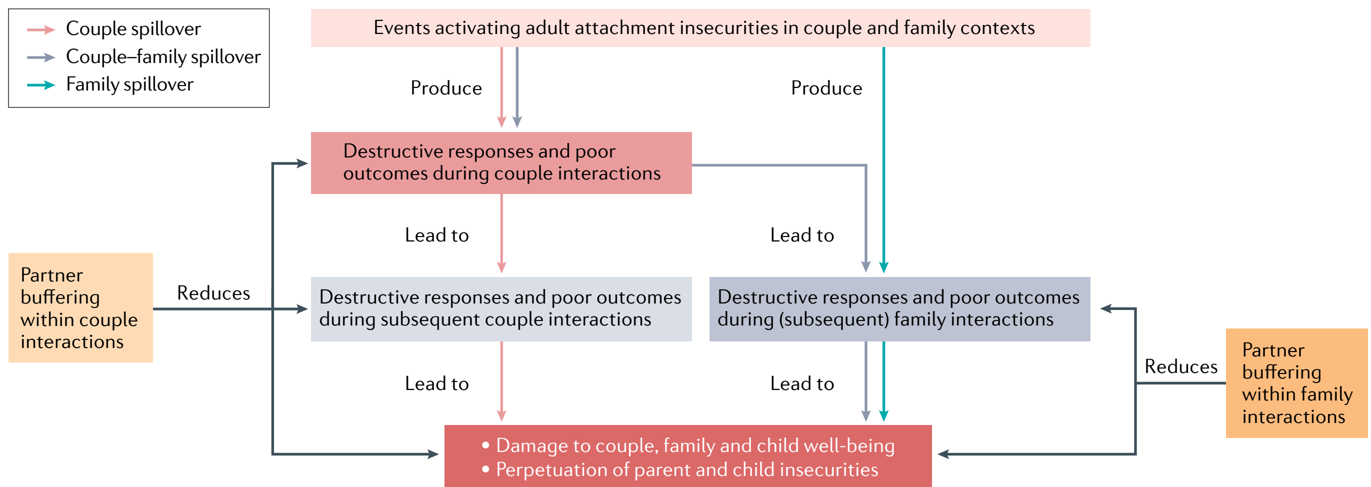

Fig. 2 | **Spillover of romantic attachment insecurities across couple and family contexts.** Three spillover processes are added to the effects of romantic attachment insecurity on couple functioning shown in FIG. 1. Couple spillover occurs when destructive responses and poor outcomes within stressful couple interactions carry over to impair subsequent couple interactions. Family spillover occurs when romantic attachment insecurities generate destructive responses within non-romantic family relationships, such as parent–child interactions. Couple–family spillover occurs when destructive responses within couple interactions arising from romantic attachment insecurities spill over to harm subsequent family interactions. Partner buffering within couple interactions and within family interactions might prevent these spillover processes from perpetuating insecurity and damaging couple, family and child well-being.

For attachment anxiety, preoccupation with one's own needs for reassurance due to fears of rejection interferes with the ability to manage the challenges of parenting. For example, preoccupation with receiving sufficient love from a partner can lead individuals high in attachment anxiety to feel jealous of their child, which can in turn impair parent–child relationship quality[54,85]. Compared with individuals low in anxiety, individuals high in anxiety have more difficulties managing both couple and parenting demands, which increases parenting stress and depression[54,86–89] and, in turn, responsive caregiving[89–91]. The heightened distress and poor emotion regulation experienced by parents high in romantic attachment anxiety can also generate destructive behaviour during parent–child conflicts[92–95]. Similarly, compared with parents lower in attachment anxiety, parents high in romantic attachment anxiety exhibit greater difficulty understanding children's mental states and more negative coping appraisals when children face challenging situations, which also impede caregiving[96–98]. All of these disturbances contribute to why parents high in romantic attachment anxiety report low parenting efficacy[15,99,100] and experience family responsibilities as overwhelming[15,52,101].

For attachment avoidance, avoidant individuals' motivation to minimize closeness and sustain autonomy within romantic relationships spills over to produce less investment and poorer caregiving in parent–child relationships. Compared with individuals low in avoidance, individuals high in romantic attachment avoidance report less desire to have children[102,103] and less satisfaction and closeness within parent–child relationships[85,101,103]. Parents high in romantic attachment avoidance, compared with those low in avoidance, also exhibit routine disengagement and therefore less positive and meaningful daily interactions with children[103–105]. Low desire and low ability to serve as a responsive caregiver are likely why parents high in romantic attachment avoidance are less understanding, empathic, affectionate and praising of their children, as well as less responsive and supportive, relative to parents low in romantic attachment avoidance[94,95,106–112]. These detrimental patterns likely contribute to and reinforce the low parenting efficacy, high parenting stress and feelings of disconnection in family relationships that are experienced by parents high in romantic attachment avoidance[15].

The evidence that romantic attachment insecurities spill over into parent–child relationships highlights that the potential damage from adult attachment insecurity is much broader than many attachment scholars have previously considered. Poor parental responsiveness and low parent–child relationship quality are known risk factors for poor child and adolescent outcomes, including low well-being and low socio-emotional competence[113,114]. Moreover, parents being high in romantic attachment insecurity and the associated low parental warmth can contribute to poor health and emotion dysregulation in their children[115–119]. These poor child outcomes are also likely to compound the parenting challenges and stress experienced by parents high in romantic attachment insecurity[113,120,121], creating reinforcing cycles of destructive responses within parent–child interactions that amplify the negative long-term effects on children.

These broader effects of romantic attachment insecurity emphasize the importance of containing family spillover. To the extent that family spillover occurs because the romantic attachment needs of insecure people interfere with their responsive parenting, buffering by romantic partners that dampens adult attachment insecurities is likely to be key in protecting child well-being. No research has yet examined whether partner buffering

processes established in couple contexts, such as partners' provision of reassurance or autonomy support (TABLE 2), improve parent–child functioning. However, compared with when at least one couple member is low in romantic attachment anxiety, some evidence indicates that when both couple members are high in romantic attachment insecurity and therefore less capable of meeting each other's attachment needs, parents experience low parenting efficacy and exhibit less responsive parenting behaviour[112,122]. By contrast, one partner's attachment security can both increase parenting efficacy and improve responsive parenting[112,122]. These protective effects of partners' attachment insecurity could be partly attributable to secure partners being able to buffer individuals' romantic insecurities, which facilitates better parenting. Furthermore, the presence of partners' attachment insecurity and potential buffering behaviour may increase parenting efficacy, which reduces anxious individuals' preoccupation with how much they are valued by their partner, providing another route to enhanced security[123]. Thus, in addition to buffering the disruptive effects of attachment insecurities on parent–child relationships, secure partners might create positive spillover across the family system by helping insecure individuals develop their own capacities to be more responsive parents, thereby improving family and child well-being.

Couple–family spillover. Distinct from family spillover, in which one person's romantic attachment insecurities directly affect how that person responds within non-romantic family relationships, couple–family spillover occurs when attachment-related thoughts, feelings and behaviours in stressful couple interactions spill over to disrupt subsequent family interactions (FIG. 2). For example, considerable evidence demonstrates that couples' conflict and poor marital quality negatively impact their children, partly because greater couple conflict and poorer marital quality generate poorer family interactions and less responsive parenting compared with when couples are not experiencing these difficulties[124–126]. Thus, just as destructive responses and outcomes within stressful couple interactions spill over to subsequent non-stressful couple interactions, they also can spill over to subsequent family and parent–child interactions.

Couples' conflict can also spill over to impact broader family interactions. Effective conflict recovery requires transitioning from conflictual dyadic exchanges to cooperative co-parenting with partners in subsequent family interactions[127,128]. People high in attachment anxiety and avoidance are likely to be less able to contain couple conflict and more likely to experience conflict–co-parenting spillover (TABLE 3) than individuals who are low in attachment anxiety and avoidance. Studies reveal that, compared with low levels of destructive responses during couple conflict, parents' hostility, disengagement and poor conflict resolution (all associated with attachment anxiety and avoidance) predict reductions in emotional availability and responsiveness towards their child during subsequent family interactions[129,130]. Furthermore, hostile conflict interferes with parents' ability to cooperatively co-parent, particularly when both parents are insecure. For example, when either parent is high in attachment anxiety, hostility during couple conflict spills over to elevate hostility in both parents when they subsequently play with their child, independently of general negativity and couple functioning[128]. Conflict–co-parenting hostility is also greater when partners are high versus low in attachment avoidance[128], most likely because of the adverse reactions generated when avoidant adults disengage and withdraw (TABLE 3).

Beyond specific examinations of conflict–co-parenting spillover across couple and family interactions, other findings support the likely existence of couple–family spillover. For example, greater attachment anxiety more strongly predicts parental depression and negative emotions during parent–child interactions when couples report experiencing greater marital conflict than when they are experiencing less conflict[54,131]. Other studies have shown that high romantic attachment insecurity predicts less self-reported cooperative co-parenting, at least in part because co-parents high in attachment insecurity report poor couple relationship

Table 3 | **Examples of couple and family spillover processes arising from romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance**

Type of spillover	Example	Attachment anxiety	Attachment avoidance
Couple spillover	Couple interactions following couple conflict	Hostility and perseveration of conflict[16,76,80] Partners' negative mood and dissatisfaction[16,77]	Low relationship repair attempts[79] Low responsiveness to partners and partners' repair attempts[79,80] Partners' hostility and dissatisfaction[76,78,79]
Family spillover	Parent–child interactions	Parenting stress[54,86–89] Destructive behaviour during conflict[92–95] Difficulty understanding children and negative coping appraisals[96–98] Unresponsive caregiving[89–91,98]	Low felt positivity, meaning and satisfaction as a parent[85,101,103–105] Low empathy, understanding and affection towards child[95,107,109] Low responsiveness and support[94,95,106,108,110–112]
Couple–family spillover	Co-parenting interactions following couple conflict	Co-parenting hostility[128] Partners' co-parenting hostility[128]	Low engagement and responsiveness[128,133] Partners' co-parenting hostility[128]

Representative studies provide evidence supporting example spillover processes.

quality and low trust[132,133]. Similar couple–family spillover processes likely explain why individuals high in romantic attachment anxiety or avoidance experience poor family functioning, including less family cohesion and greater family chaos[32,84,86,134,135]. The detrimental parenting and family outcomes that arise when one parent or both parents are high in romantic insecurity are all established risk factors for poor child security and adjustment, and they likely accumulate over time to amplify the risk of poor couple, family and child well-being[113,114,121,125,126,136,137].

The pivotal role of couple–family spillover processes is substantiated by growing evidence that improving couples' relationships, rather than just directly enhancing parenting skills, improves co-parenting and child adjustment[124,138–140]. Thus, partner buffering within family interactions to prevent insecure responses in couple contexts from spilling over to family contexts is likely to reduce the risk of attachment insecurity in damaging both couple and child well-being. No research has yet identified specific partner behaviours that might mitigate couple–family spillover. However, in the conflict–co-parenting study discussed above, low high attachment insecurity in mothers was associated with less conflict–co-parenting spillover, as shown by a lower likelihood that partners' conflict hostility generated hostility during subsequent co-parenting interactions[128]. Thus, secure partners who enact effective buffering strategies (TABLE 2) within family contexts might create positive couple and family spillover processes by building cohesive, responsive and cooperative family environments that buttress both parents' and children's security and well-being. Moreover, parents' shared investment in caring for their children might lead insecure people to be more willing to rely on and trust partner support within co-parenting or family contexts compared with couple contexts[141–143]. If so, family interactions could be a powerful context in which partners can counteract the impact of attachment insecurity and generate positive spillover that bolsters attachment security.

Summary and future directions

Romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance damage relationships, perpetuate attachment insecurity and undermine health and well-being. However, partner buffering processes provide an opportunity to develop better, securer relationships and improve well-being. Romantic attachment insecurity not only shapes stressful couple interactions but also spills over to produce problematic responses and outcomes across non-stressful couple and family contexts, including parent–child and co-parenting interactions. The existence of multiple spillover processes underscores the need to recognize, identify, and address how romantic attachment insecurity and security reverberate across couple and family contexts.

We examined three types of spillover, but bidirectional influences across couple and family relationships may create a range of mutually reinforcing spillover processes[70–73]. For example, compared with cooperative co-parenting and positive partner evaluations, poor co-parenting and negative evaluations of partners' parenting can increase couple hostility and undermine parents' ability to work together to establish a stable family environment[144–146]. Accordingly, attachment insecurity spillover that creates poor-quality parenting and family interactions also may spill back to amplify couple hostility and dissatisfaction. Spillover and buffering of attachment insecurities is also likely to be more complex when families involve a range of different relationships (for example, multiple children, multiple generations, or blended families). The field has been relatively silent regarding how attachment and other dynamics might play out across multiple family relationships and across different cultural contexts[147]. Future research should investigate the diverse ways attachment insecurity may spill over within different types of family systems.

Spillover of attachment insecurity will likely be magnified when life circumstances create additional strain within the family system[5,32]. Similarly, buffering will likely be more difficult in contexts involving chronic stress (such as mental or physical illness, addiction, or children's behavioural difficulties) or external adversities (such as economic deprivation, job stress, or discrimination) relative to non-stressful contexts[68]. Moreover, even if effective partner buffering reduces short-term detrimental outcomes, challenging environments might restrict the degree to which partner buffering can build long-term security and well-being[70]. The research reviewed here primarily involves examination of non-marginalized families with two married parents. Thus, the findings are not necessarily representative of diverse economic, racial and/or cultural contexts. Work within these contexts is needed to provide insights into how attachment insecurity and spillover processes apply to families facing adversity such as financial pressure, stigma or discrimination. Future research must expand methods and samples to better represent the full range of couple and family experiences as well as systematically test how broader contextual factors might modify the operation of attachment, buffering, and spillover processes.

Person-level factors are also likely to alter the effectiveness of and need for partner buffering. The adult attachment field generally overlooks people as active agents in how they influence, and are influenced by, their relationships[71]. The principal focus on partner buffering as a key moderator of attachment insecurity stems from the fact that the needs and expectations underpinning attachment insecurity are fundamentally about and dependent on relationship partners[12,13]. However, partner buffering might prevent insecure people from developing their own ability to manage relationship challenges without immediate partner support[14]. Attachment-based therapies indicate that people's own understanding and efforts to address their insecurities can improve couple functioning[148]. Thus, insecure people who are more aware of their insecurities and have greater capacity to regulate their responses might reduce the detrimental effects and spillover of attachment insecurity[149–151]. However, at extremely high levels, attachment insecurity might be impervious to partner buffering or self-regulation attempts[152]. Identifying the factors that amplify or mitigate the

effects of attachment insecurity across contexts will require deeper consideration of the personal strengths that combat insecurity.

Expanded connections across different research traditions are important to understand buffering and spillover of attachment insecurity. For example, adults' romantic attachment insecurity and their attachment representations from their own childhood caregiving experiences are weakly correlated[153] (BOX 1) and independently predict couple and parent–child outcomes[38]. These distinctions raise questions about whether and how attachment insecurity across different domains (for example, parents or romantic partners) intersect to shape family functioning[15]. Spillover processes highlight that romantic attachment scholars should broaden their focus beyond couples to understand family-level processes. Similarly, attachment traditions that have focused on parenting and children will benefit from considering how couple-level processes can shape parent–child relationships[15]. Incorporating key principles from attachment-based therapies into social, personality and developmental research traditions also will enhance attachment science and practice.

Methodological innovations will be required to capture spillover processes across contexts and time. Emerging work on conflict spillover demonstrates the value of assessing how responses in couple interactions impact subsequent couple or co-parenting contexts[76,79,128–130]. However, testing the full range of spillover processes will require assessing sequential interactions across distinct contexts, including couples' stressful and non-stressful interactions as well as parent–child and co-parenting interactions. These expansions will need to include longitudinal assessments of key outcomes, such as couple, family and child well-being and security, to test the relative long-term impact of different types of spillover.

Moreover, testing the 'reverse' direction of spillover, such as spillover from positive to stressful contexts or from family to couple contexts, will be valuable. An understanding of reverse spillover will reveal the role of threat in triggering dysfunctional responses, additional spillover effects from family-to-couple domains, and how partners might generate positive spillover from non-stressful couple and family contexts to create more constructive responses within stressful interactions and enhance attachment security. Finally, future research should integrate parent-level (responsiveness and co-parenting), child-level (security and emotion regulation) and family-level (cohesion and chaos) assessments. These methodological advances will enable a more comprehensive understanding of when, how and why romantic attachment spills over across contexts to influence couple, family and child well-being and security.

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