

# Revising Working Models Across Time: Relationship Situations That Enhance Attachment Security

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## Abstract

We propose the Attachment Security Enhancement Model (ASEM) to suggest how romantic relationships can promote chronic attachment security. One part of the ASEM examines partner responses that protect relationships from the erosive effects of immediate insecurity, but such responses may not necessarily address underlying insecurities in a person's mental models. Therefore, a second part of the ASEM examines relationship situations that foster more secure mental models. Both parts may work in tandem. We posit that attachment anxiety should decline most in situations that foster greater personal confidence and more secure mental models of the self. In contrast, attachment avoidance should decline most in situations that involve positive dependence and foster more secure models of close others. The ASEM integrates research and theory, suggests novel directions for future research, and has practical implications, all of which center on the idea that adult attachment orientations are an emergent property of close relationships.

## Keywords

attachment security, interdependence, working models

Attachment security in adulthood has been linked to many benefits, including the ability to develop healthy relationships, increase confidence and efforts to strive toward personal goals, and manage adversity effectively (e.g., Li & Chan, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Pietromonaco, Uchino, & Dunkel-Schetter, 2013). A sense of being securely attached to others, however, is not always attainable. Sooner or later, everyone experiences moments of interpersonal insecurity. Repeated or prolonged exposure to such moments can generate chronic feelings of insecurity and lead to insecure attachment orientations. Attachment insecurity in adulthood manifests as the tendency to fear being abandoned or rejected by others (attachment anxiety) and/or the tendency to feel discomfort with dependence and closeness (attachment avoidance). Although these adult attachment orientations often are studied and described as reflecting stable individual characteristics, these tendencies are not theorized to be immutable (Bowlby, 1973, 1969/1982, 1988). In fact, attachment orientations can and do change through naturally occurring processes (e.g., Arriaga, Kumashiro, Finkel, VanderDrift, & Luchies, 2014; Davila & Cobb, 2003; Fraley, Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Owen, & Holland, 2013; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, & Wilson, 2003).

At present, however, we know little about the specific processes that produce greater attachment security in adult relationships. To fill this important gap in our knowledge, we

integrate current theory and research, and propose the Attachment Security Enhancement Model (ASEM), which is depicted in Figure 1. The ASEM is a dual-process model positing that greater security across time occurs when (a) partners effectively manage insecure interactions that cause relational tension and potentially could erode relationship quality, which (b) provides a more likely context for situations that can then revise insecure mental representations.

This article is organized to accomplish three major goals. One goal is to provide greater clarity on attachment-enhancing processes. Existing research has examined ways of mitigating insecurity (see Overall & Simpson, 2015; Simpson & Overall, 2014), but the process of *enhancing* security has not been fully addressed. Some research suggests how individuals can thrive in their relationships (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2015), but the specific processes of reducing levels of attachment anxiety or avoidance remain elusive. Attachment theory provides a rich theoretical account of the processes by which

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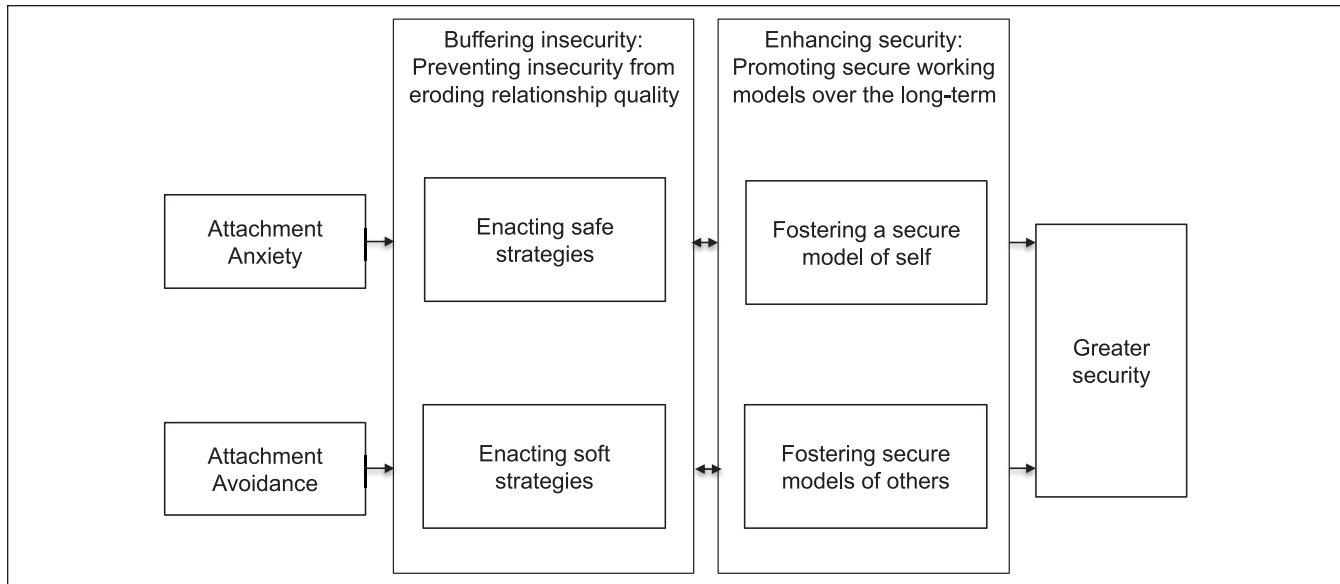
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**Figure 1.** The Attachment Security Enhancement Model (ASEM).

insecure tendencies develop and the underlying mental (or “working”) models that sustain insecurity (e.g., N. L. Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). We propose new ways of thinking about these attachment processes. Our dual-process model (the ASEM) expands attachment theory and incorporates concepts from interdependence theory (e.g., attributions during diagnostic situations, situation structure, relationship motives, transformation of motivation; Kelley et al., 2003) and other theories (e.g., the intimacy process model, Reis & Shaver, 1988; motivation-management theory and the risk regulation model, S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009; S. L. Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006; relationship motivation theory, Deci & Ryan, 2014). Most of the research on adult attachment processes has focused on situations that activate feelings of insecurity in people. We, however, concentrate on situations that are diagnostic of feeling worthy or valued by others, and being ready to benefit from close connections, all of which should promote attachment security.

A second goal is to provide theoretical propositions that will generate new research. Our model can be used to guide research on the relational bases of personality traits, providing a departure from the prevailing paradigm of studying personality traits that shape relationship processes (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995; McNulty, 2013). Relationship contexts meaningfully shape key beliefs and expectations about both one’s self and significant others (N. L. Collins & Read, 1990; cf. Holmes, 2002). Because relationships satisfy key needs, interactions with *close others* should be more consequential than interactions with nonclose others. We integrate theory and research to suggest that individuals will exhibit chronic security in how they relate to their partners when they obtain clear evidence of being loved and appreciated, derive benefits from dependence, and feel secure in a relationship.

Our analysis reframes research on individual differences in the way people react to attachment-relevant situations. Current “Person × Situation” paradigms, for example, suggest that specific contexts (e.g., a conflict) elicit specific patterns of behavior (e.g., easily triggered or exaggerated negative affect), and such context-based behavior yields patterns indicative of stable traits (e.g., neuroticism; Cooper, 2002; Holmes, 2002, 2004; Kelley, 1983; Kelley et al., 2003; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009). With greater specificity, this general framework can be adapted to understand emergent attachment patterns. We reexamine research on adult attachment in close relationships through a “Working Model × Diagnostic Situation” framework: People have working models that influence how they react to insecure situations, and patterned reactions indicate attachment orientations. How do such orientations change? Individuals exhibit stable orientations until they encounter new situations that are sufficiently powerful to cause new reactions and to revise working models (cf. Reis & Holmes, 2012).

A third goal of this article is to advance a model with potential broader applications for normative and typical relationships. Neither do we claim to solve marital problems, nor is our goal focused on couple interventions, which have left many marriages unprotected, particularly among individuals in distressing circumstances (e.g., chronic mental health problems, life stressors, low income, or other contextual factors that exacerbate relationship well-being; Williamson, Karney, & Bradbury, 2013). Indeed, the ASEM was not developed to address deep-seated or entrenched insecurities, which have been the focus of clinical interventions based on emotion-focused therapy (EFT) and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Existing therapies provide extended and

guided interventions to help individuals and couples whose daily lives are disrupted because of insecurity (e.g., Greenberg, 2002; Johnson, 1996/2004). In contrast, we examine changes that can and do occur as couples navigate normative challenges and typical, “daily-life” situations. Even under optimal conditions (e.g., no major life stressors), relationship partners often struggle to manage insecurity. The processes by which couples enhance security under normative conditions are not well documented. The ASEM fills this gap.

We begin with an overview of the ASEM as a way of orienting the reader to the key ideas that define the model (section “Model Overview and Major Propositions”). The section on “Relational Bases of Adult Attachment Orientations” argues for a basic process: Key situations shape working models of self and others. Certain situations may shape *insecurity*, which has been the primary focus of existing theory and research. The ASEM, instead, advances an account of situations that bolster attachment *security* (section “Enhancing Attachment Security Across Time and Situations”). We then discuss issues of balancing personal versus relational needs (section “Striving for Well-Being: Enhancing Security Creates More Balanced Needs”), and conclude by outlining the broader theoretical and practical implications of our model.

## Model Overview and Major Propositions

Attachment orientations have origins in early childhood experiences and evolve over a lifetime of interactions in meaningful close relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Romantic relationships are precisely the type of close relationship that can shape attachment orientations (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Romantic involvements affect individual health and well-being (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010), and satisfy relatedness and affiliation needs that are essential to wellness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2014; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988). Many of these needs are addressed through attachment processes (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Simpson & Rholes, 2012), such as when relationship partners provide a “safe haven” during moments of fear or impending loss/separation, or when they provide a “secure base” and instill confidence as a person takes on challenges (Feeney, 2004). In doing so, partners fulfill attachment functions that caregivers, peers, and friends have often fulfilled earlier in life (N. L. Collins & Feeney, 2000; Fraley et al., 2013; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004; Shaver et al., 1988; Sroufe & Waters, 1977). As relationship partners pursue and provide needs, their impact often occurs beyond awareness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009). As we describe “efforts” or “strategies,” we are referring to behavior patterns that may occur through automated or habitual processes (W. Wood & Neal, 2007).

## What Is Attachment Security in Adult Relationships?

The ASEM underscores the importance of experiences with close others that shape both attachment-related responses and working models that underlie such responses (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). Individuals exhibit attachment security in their adult romantic involvements when their experiences with close others generally have resulted in secure thoughts and feelings. Based on these experiences, such individuals are comfortable with closeness and intimacy, feel valued and loved by their partners, trust that their partners will respond with support when it is needed, and approach challenging or stressful situations with confidence and positive expectations about their ability to manage such situations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). For example, secure individuals are more likely to seek intimacy and support when they are upset (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992); respond to relationship conflicts in a more constructive, benevolent, and relationship-promotive manner (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996); and recover from conflict without lingering negative emotions (Salvatore, Kuo, Steele, Simpson, & Collins, 2011).

Every adult, however, eventually experiences momentary insecure states, and they may feel chronic insecurity with certain partners. These experiences are consequential and shape responses that may or may not occur within conscious awareness. Repeatedly experiencing insecurity reinforces insecure expectations (working models) and signature hyperactivated or deactivated responses during interactions that are represented by two continuous dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). Attachment anxiety in adulthood is manifested in (a) ambivalent expectations about others, including hyperactivated needs for connection, vigilance in monitoring others’ commitment, and chronic fears of being abandoned, combined with (b) negative expectations about the self, including low self-worth, doubts about one’s ability to navigate challenges, and persistent concerns about being accepted and valued by others. Attachment avoidance in adulthood is manifested in (1) self-perceptions that may be positively inflated as a defensive strategy for being self-reliant (often occurring beyond awareness), combined with (b) negative expectations of others’ dependability, including mistrust of their motives, deactivated tendencies in emotionally intimate interactions, and sustained efforts to maintain independence and personal control to avoid feeling let down by others.

Each person can experience varying levels of security as measured continuously on each dimension (anxiety and avoidance). However, individuals also differ from each other in their generalized, chronic attachment orientations. Such orientations reflect predictable tendencies and signature responses that are easily activated (e.g., secure, preoccupied, fearful-avoidant, dismissive; Bartholomew & Horowitz,

1991). These orientations in adulthood also strongly affect couple functioning, as detailed by Mikulincer and Shaver (2016).

### Overview of the ASEM

We introduce the major principles and premises of the ASEM in this section and provide a more detailed description in a later section. One premise is that *relationships vary in the extent to which they afford a sense of security* (Feeney, 2004; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Overall & Simpson, 2015; Simpson & Overall, 2014). Most people enter relationships with the goal of having them function effectively. However, some partners may not be willing or able to providing a secure context. Secure contexts are more likely to exist in committed relationships, among partners who are motivated to maintain their relationship (Arriaga et al., 2014; Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2012; Tran & Simpson, 2009). Beyond their motivation, couple members vary in their skills and readiness to be effectively responsive to each other's needs (Reis & Shaver, 1988). For some individuals, conveying strong commitment, providing effective support, and creating a secure context occur naturally and outside of awareness (S. L. Murray et al., 2011). However, those who struggle with their own insecurities may be less effective at providing support (N. L. Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Thrush, 2010; Jayamaha, Girme, & Overall, 2016) and less motivated to help their partners thrive (Feeney, Collins, Van Vleet, & Tomlinson, 2013). Both partners may also be motivated to create a secure dyadic context, but experience major life stressors that cause relational strain (e.g., disagreements over financial issues, tension with family members). Variation in whether partners are willing and able to provide a secure dyadic context is likely to moderate whether partners can effectively buffer or enhance one another's insecurities (Overall & Simpson, 2015).

A second premise is that *in-the-moment insecurity is mitigated when partners effectively tailor their responses to address anxious or avoidant thoughts and feelings*. As detailed later, there is evidence that when individuals are in situations that trigger their *anxious* thoughts or feelings, their partners can mitigate such insecurity by conveying strong commitment and enacting behavior to soothe and calm the person who feels anxious (e.g., Kim, Feeney, & Jakubiak, 2017). In the ASEM, these are labeled "safe" strategies, even though partners may not necessarily be "strategic" or aware that they are enacting these responses. There is also evidence (detailed later) that when individuals are in situations that trigger their *avoidant* thoughts or feelings, their partners can mitigate such insecurity by permitting a partner to withdraw or disconnect without negative repercussions, or by framing issues of dependence (e.g., asking for a favor, needing support) in a "matter-of-fact" or uneventful tone while accepting that an avoidant partner may balk at such requests (Farrell, Simpson, Overall, & Shallcross, 2016; Overall, Simpson, &

Struthers, 2013); these partner responses are labeled "soft" strategies.<sup>1</sup>

Most couples eventually confront distressing interactions or communication problems (e.g., Gottman, 1994). Although safe and soft partner strategies may protect relationships when momentary insecurities cause tension or erode relationship quality, these strategies alone may not be sufficient to create more lasting and chronic security. For example, when anxious individuals feel distress and seek excessive assurance of their partner's commitment, responsive partners may indulge in grand displays of affection and caring. However, this may not prevent anxious individuals from still wanting or needing excessive reassurance in the future. Similarly, individuals who are chronically avoidant withdraw from closeness or disengage from emotional interactions. Partners may respond to such individuals by being sensitive to their need for distance, but doing so will not reduce their chronic avoidance in the future. Partner responses, therefore, may address in-the-moment symptoms of insecurity in ways that may or may not necessarily address the underlying causes of insecurity. And, eventually, partners grow weary of the perpetual need to strategically manage an individual's persistent insecurities (E. P. Lemay & Dudley, 2011).

The third major premise of the ASEM, therefore, is that greater security is generated when protective processes occur in coordination with *longer term processes that instill greater security in a person's mental models of self and others*. Ultimately, working models of self and others tend to sustain insecure orientations over the longer term and must change for individuals to exhibit greater chronic attachment security (Bowlby, 1973; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). When framed in terms of working models, the left side of the ASEM (Figure 1: "Buffering insecurity") involves efforts to prevent interactions from reinforcing a person's insecure working models by acting in ways that minimize relational damage. In contrast, the right side of the ASEM ("Enhancing security") suggests ways to enhance security in working models during moments that are not characterized by relationship tension.

We posit that individuals who have anxious orientations may become more secure when they experience boosts to their working model of self, whereas individuals who have avoidant orientations may become more secure when they experience boosts to their mental model of others (cf. Arriaga et al., 2014), which we detail in a later section. We are not suggesting that anxious individuals have secure models of others or that avoidant individuals have a secure model of the self; chronically insecure individuals exhibit insecurity in working models of both self and others, given that these models tend to reinforce each other (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). The ASEM proposes processes that target specific dimensions of insecurity: (a) Experiences that foster greater self-confidence should reduce dependence on others, increase an intrinsically

derived sense of worth, and dissipate anxious thoughts, feelings, and expectations; and (b) experiences that forge a positive and (eventually) intimate connection with partners should reduce the need for interpersonal defenses, lower mistrust, and diffuse avoidant thoughts, feelings, and expectations.

The two major processes shown in Figure 1—preventing immediate insecurity from eroding relationship quality and promoting secure working models over the longer term—are likely to operate in unison. If a relationship bond deteriorates, efforts to foster secure working models are likely to be unsuccessful (Johnson, 1996/2004; Overall & Simpson, 2015). In contrast, couples who effectively manage and neutralize insecurity-triggering situations may create a foundation from which to promote more secure working models, which, in turn, may reduce the frequency or severity of insecurity-triggering situations in the future. Eventually when new sources of relational tension arise (e.g., when a secure partner wants greater intimacy), partners may reinstate efforts to manage new or persistent insecurities. Couples may vary in whether protecting the relationship or promoting security is more important from the outset, but the ASEM suggests that both are likely to be necessary to enhance security over time.

In sum, examining attachment security as an outcome of key interpersonal processes is a relatively new enterprise. The ASEM integrates several relatively novel propositions within a single model: (a) Romantic involvements affect adult attachment tendencies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016); (b) different processes ought to buffer individuals who have anxious versus avoidant thoughts and feelings (Overall & Simpson, 2015; Simpson & Overall, 2014); (c) partner efforts to buffer a person's momentary insecurity can mitigate relational tension and negativity, but may not be sufficient to induce longer term increases in chronic attachment security (Arriaga et al., 2014); (d) the process of reducing attachment anxiety should involve strategies that strengthen the model of self as well as those that calm momentary (perceived) threats to the relationship; and (e) the process of reducing attachment avoidance should entail strategies that strengthen models of others along with those that soften momentary (perceived) threats to independence.

## Relational Bases of Adult Attachment Orientations

How might relationship partners shape the working models that underlie chronic attachment orientations? In this section, we propose a basic process that underlies much of the existing work on attachment insecurity, namely, that certain types of situations tend to shape working models of self and others. In a later section, we examine how revising working models can enhance security. Throughout this section, we apply an interdependence “lens” to understanding emergent adult attachment orientations, and suggest three propositions

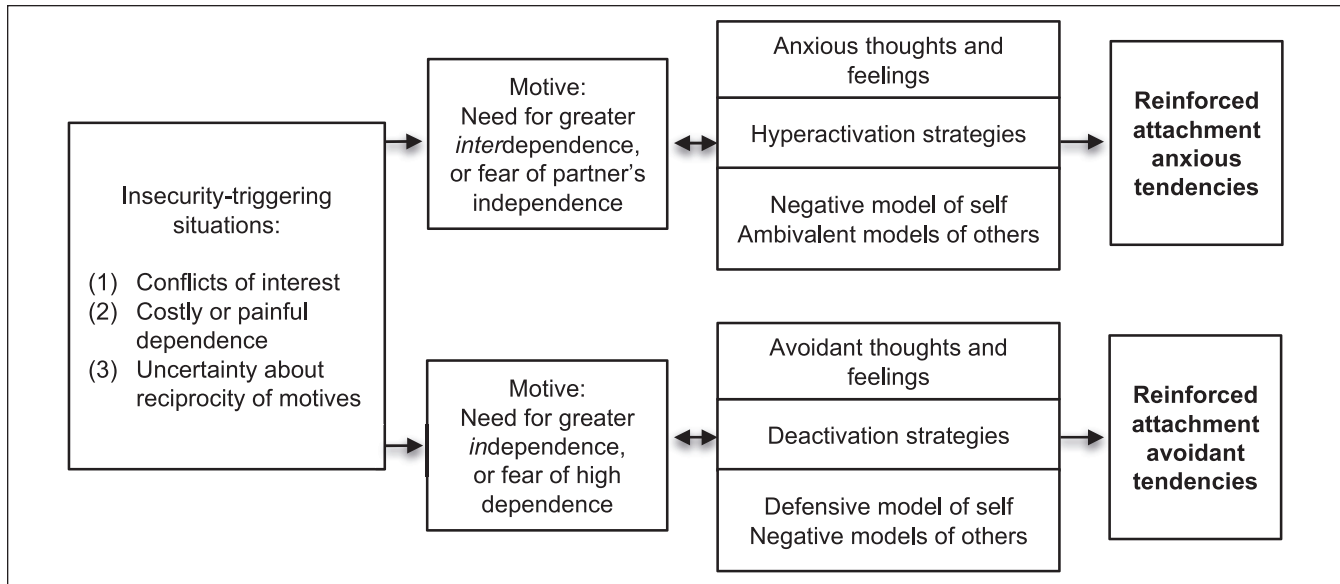
based on an integration of attachment theory, interdependence theory, and other frameworks (e.g., the motivation-management theory, S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009; the intimacy process model, Reis & Shaver, 1988). First, interpersonal tendencies develop and evolve in “diagnostic” situations that convey information about what partners desire in a relationship and are willing to do for each other. Second, the thoughts and emotions that linger from these consequential situations are encoded into elaborated mental representations of the self and close others. Third, certain relationship situations are likely to trigger anxious or avoidant thoughts or feelings. With prolonged exposure to such insecurity-triggering situations, individuals develop coping strategies that provide an immediate “solution” to feeling insecure, which may further reinforce insecure working models and tendencies. This process by which situations shape insecurity is depicted in Figure 2 and detailed below.

### Diagnostic Situations and Interpersonal Tendencies

How are people affected by their close relationships? Interdependence theorists have suggested that when couple members (partners) interact, they experience (a) the immediate impact of each other's behavior, as captured by “outcomes” (i.e., the affective consequences of an interaction, often described as rewards, benefits, or gains vs. costs or losses; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959); and (b) the lingering impact of each other's behavior via the attributions and inferences each partner forms about the interaction. People, therefore, not only derive direct outcomes but also “symbolic outcomes” as they try to make sense of, and find broader meaning in, their interaction experiences (“meaning analysis”; Kelley, 1979; Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997).

Consider a hypothetical couple, Dina and Sid, who have a new baby. When Sid comforts their colicky infant early in the morning, Dina experiences immediate relief, but she may also feel gratitude, particularly if Sid was raised with traditional norms and his involvement in taking care of the baby was unexpected. Both partners may infer meaning that further shapes their self- and partner representations (Arriaga, 2013; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004; E. J. Lemay & Neal, 2014; Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997). Sid may come to perceive himself as a more capable and engaged caregiver than he previously considered himself to be (see Simpson et al., 2003). As Dina reflects on Sid's behavior, she may also feel that he was helpful, infer cooperative motives on his part, and be more inclined to rely on him for caregiving in the future. If, in contrast, Sid had not helped, Dina might have inferred more selfish tendencies and avoided depending on him in the future (see S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009).

Many daily interactions are mundane and uneventful, such as when couples discuss the routine events of the day. Certain situations, however, can be “diagnostic,” such as the one involving Dina and Sid. Diagnostic situations convey



**Figure 2.** Relational origins and manifestations of chronic adult attachment tendencies.

information about one's own and/or a partner's willingness to do significant things for each other and their relationship (Beck & Clark, 2009; Holmes & Rempel, 1989; S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009; Simpson, 2007). Consciously or unconsciously, partners scan each other's behavior for what it reveals about each other's true underlying motives and goals (Balliet, Tybur, & Van Lange, 2016; cf. Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; Kelley, 1983; Kelley et al., 2003).

Diagnostic situations indeed provide information that is "diagnostic" because partners have freely behaved in ways that reveal their key motives and goals, such as what they want in the relationship and what they reasonably can deliver (Reis & Arriaga, 2015; Reis & Holmes, 2012). In the previous example, the initial or "given" situation was that Sid and Dina both wanted to sleep, but their infant needed consoling. Initially, this situation was costly because one of them would have to forego sleep and the comfort of a cozy bed. When Sid opted to take care of the baby, he conveyed that his motive to sleep was outweighed by his motive to help (i.e., "transformation of motivation"; Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997). Importantly, these moments convey self and partner traits, and they affect what people expect from each other in the future (Holmes, 2002).

Diagnostic situations have identifiable features. From an attachment theory perspective, a situation becomes diagnostic when it activates insecurity, threat, or distress; the manner in which these situations are resolved is consequential for (a) a person's sense of self and (b) generalized perceptions of others, who may be called upon (or not) for support (N. L. Collins & Read, 1994). From an interdependence theory perspective, diagnostic situations provide information but need not necessarily involve distress or threat. In our example, Dina could hire a babysitter and plan a fun evening with Sid,

which might reinvigorate his appreciation of her and make him become a more involved parent, even at the expense of a goodnight's rest.

Interdependence theory examines abstract features of situations based on dyadic patterns of dependence, which are defined in terms of the extent, transparency, immediacy, and correspondence of mutual influence (i.e., level and mutuality of dependence, joint vs. independent control, correspondence of outcomes, outcome certainty, and temporal immediacy/latency of outcomes; Kelley et al., 2003). Relationships are defined as the occurrence of ongoing and mutual influence between partners, across many situations and over an extended time; relationships, thus, reflect a state of *interdependence*.

Because of the high frequency and impact of their interactions, relationship partners develop habitual responses to situations that form the basis of their relational tendencies (Kelley, 1983). Initially deliberate responses develop into habitual tendencies that become mediated through automated cognition (W. Wood & Neal, 2007). The responses people develop in one context (e.g., their current relationship) may be applied to other contexts (e.g., their friendships, work relationships; Cavallo, Fitzsimons, & Holmes, 2010). Thus, interpersonal and personality tendencies emerge through patterned behavior with others (Kelley, 1983; Neyer & Lehnart, 2007). This basic idea is present in several theories. Interdependence theorists, for example, describe mental scripts and expectations that guide behavior in specific relationships (Holmes, 2002; S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009; S. L. Murray et al., 2006), and attachment theorists describe working models that serve similar functions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), as we discuss in the next section.

### Working Models as Attachment “Scaffolding”

Bowlby (1973) proposed the construct of “internal working models” to explain the mechanism through which new experiences become encoded, and either fortify or revise existing attachment orientations. When early experiences in stressful or challenging situations result in positive expectations about others and feeling valued by them, these early mental representations coalesce into positive models of others and self. In contrast, those who do not develop positive expectations based on early experiences in such situations use coping strategies, which eventually turn into relatively stable, chronic insecure orientations. Although working models begin to develop in infancy (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973, 1969/1982; Johnson, Dweck, & Chen, 2007; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985), they are continually updated and revised throughout the life span in response to ongoing attachment-relevant experiences (N. L. Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson & Belsky, 2008). Adult working models of self and others organize episodic memories associated with close others (including relationship partners), emotional content from these experiences, and generalized beliefs about relationships (N. L. Collins & Read, 1990; Pietromonaco & Carnelley, 1994), all of which guide expectations, emotions, and behavioral strategies in future situations within the same or similar relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

All individuals have secure and insecure experiences that leave footprints on their working models and guide expectations in future situations:

. . . everyone possesses models of security attainment, hyperactivation, and deactivation and so can sometimes think about relationships in secure terms and at other times think about them in less secure, more hyperactivating or deactivating, terms. Due to differences in relationship histories, dominant working models will differ across individuals. (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, p. 22)

Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) theorized that past experiences guide expectations for relationships with close others (“relationship histories”), whereas S. L. Murray and Holmes (2009) focused on how such past experiences become channeled into relationship-specific tendencies (cf. “relationship personality”; S. L. Murray and Holmes, 2009). The main idea to be derived is that diagnostic situations activate specific goals, which can include forging a stronger connection with a partner, hyperactivated efforts to assess a partner’s real commitment, or withdrawing from heightened intimacy or closeness with a partner.

When relationships provide a secure context, individuals are more likely to be effective in managing the insecurity-triggering situations that inevitably occur. Even though they experience and acknowledge momentary insecure thoughts and feelings, they also feel adequately supported and are, thus, able to manage the challenging or stressful situation,

which should cause insecure feelings and responses to dissipate (cf. Kim et al., 2017; S. L. Murray et al., 2011; Overall, Girme, Lemay, & Hammond, 2014; Overall, Simpson, & Struthers, 2013). Indeed, chronically secure individuals tend to recover more quickly from moments of emotional distress (Salvatore et al., 2011), which allows them to move beyond these moments and reengage in positive interactions with their partners (Feeney & Collins, 2015). These experiences increase the odds of successfully resolving problems and gradually become assimilated into more secure models of (a) one’s own desirability and efficacy and (b) others’ reliability, dependability, and goodwill (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Mikulincer, Shaver, Sapir-Lavid, & Avihou-Kanza, 2009; Waters & Waters, 2006). A different set of experiences shapes chronically insecure working models and insecure attachment orientations, as described in the next section.

### Insecurity-Triggering Situations → Insecure Working Models

Certain types of situations are likely to activate attachment insecurity, experienced as feeling neglected, rejected, unappreciated, or not valued by someone who is expected to be available, loving, and accepting, or feeling overly burdened by someone who seems too demanding or needy. Attachment concerns commonly are activated in situations that require a couple to manage their close connection, such as synchronizing/coordinating each other’s desires and motives, or managing the manner and extent of relying on each other. Certain features of interdependence are likely to trigger insecurity: (a) conflicts of interest between partners, as when a course of action that is highly desirable to one partner is less desirable to the other partner (McClure, Bartz, & Lydon, 2013; S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009); (b) costly, negative, or painful dependence, in that a partner exerts too much control or power to pursue his or her own desires and motives without taking into account one’s own desires (e.g., “fate control”; Kelley et al., 2003); and/or (c) one or both partners are uncertain about the other’s desires and motives (Arriaga, 2013; Holmes, 2002; S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009; Overall, Girme, & Simpson, 2016). Some situations, such as having an overly dependent partner, may cause stronger reactions among chronically avoidant individuals than among chronically anxiously attached individuals, but most of these situations will cause attachment-relevant reactions among most people.

The response—relatively anxious versus avoidant thoughts and feelings—depends on a person’s motives in the particular relationship. People who desire a stronger connection and greater interdependence than the partner is willing or able to provide are likely to exhibit signature response patterns associated with attachment anxiety when they confront insecurity-triggering situations (e.g., McClure et al., 2013). In contrast, people who feel uncomfortable or even apprehensive about a stronger connection are likely to exhibit

signature response patterns associated with attachment avoidance (e.g., Farrell et al., 2016; Overall et al., 2013).

Why would some people desire or need greater closeness, and others greater distance, than their current relationship affords? Connection needs are mediated through specific close relationships. Some individuals may generally feel secure but increasingly feel insecure with a specific partner as their relationship develops (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009; Reis & Shaver, 1988; Simpson, 2007). Others exhibit chronic insecurity across relationships because of their developmental or relationship history of having to depend on individuals who were not sufficiently responsive to their needs (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Although chronically anxious versus chronically avoidant individuals have distinct coping histories, they may be reactive to similar situations in their adult relationships. For example, a chronically avoidant individual may be detached because being detached was a coping mechanism with a chronically distant or cold caregiver (Simpson & Belsky, 2008); the individual's demands for a closer connection with the caregiver ("protests") eventually gave way to detachment (Bowlby, 1973). These individuals may exhibit detached tendencies in their adult relationships; but if they feel sufficiently bold to "let down their guard" and seek greater closeness with a specific partner who, unfortunately, does not reciprocate, they will likely experience anxiety first, then suppress such anxiety, and finally resort once again to avoidant responses (Diamond & Hicks, 2005; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Motivation-management theory discusses how individuals respond to situations that require managing closeness and connection needs, and suggests that responses are influenced by feelings of trust (S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009). When high-trust individuals encounter risky situations, they seek greater closeness with their partners by invoking a "connection goal" (S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009). They also may escalate their reliance on the partner and/or reaffirm their commitment because previous experiences have led them to expect that the partner will respond with benevolence and a prorelationship orientation (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). In contrast, less trusting individuals often feel compelled to protect themselves against the prospect of being hurt, and so, they adopt a "self-protection goal" (S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009). These individuals frequently experience insecurity and respond either by trying to increase their partner's level of commitment or reducing their own dependence on the partner. We suggest that these responses—increasing commitment or reducing dependence—align with anxious versus avoidant responses, as described in the sections that follow.

*Anxious responses and working models.* People experience a sense of attachment anxiety when they perceive mixed messages regarding their partner's commitment, dependability, or willingness to be relationship focused (cf. Beckes, Simons,

Lewis, Le, & Edwards, 2017; Feeney, 2004; S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009; S. L. Murray et al., 2006). When individuals encounter the insecurity-triggering situations in Figure 2, those who repeatedly desire greater interdependence and closeness, yet feel uncertain or even apprehensive as to whether the partner shares their goal to increase interdependence, are likely to exhibit anxious responses. They may feel acute anxious thoughts and feelings in conflict of interest situations because these situations often cause conflict, which may trigger fear that a partner will desire greater independence (rather than one's desire for *interdependence*). Furthermore, individuals who avert conflict by always being the one to incur costs so that a partner can incur benefits, eventually may feel resentment, particularly if a partner does not acknowledge and appreciate such sacrifices. Situations in which a person is highly dependent on a partner also may trigger anxiety if the partner does not seem equally dependent or other focused.

These situations are likely to trigger anxious thoughts and feelings, activate strategies that aim to attain more reassurance by keeping a partner closely connected (e.g., by closely monitoring the partner, being vigilant to signs of commitment), and increase the insecurity of working models (e.g., by feeling that one is not "worthy enough"), as indicated in Figure 2. For some people, these responses may be chronically activated and overutilized because of prior attachment relationships, whereas others may have a current partner who clearly displays wavering or declining commitment. Either way, the predictable pattern of response is an emergent property of how anxious people react to these specific triggering situations.

There is considerable research documenting escalated or "hyperactivated" efforts to affirm a partner's commitment when an individual desires strong commitment, but instead perceives strained or wavering commitment from the partner (e.g., E. P. Lemay & Dudley, 2011; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009; Overall et al., 2014). In general, people who perceive that they are more committed than is their partner will feel underpowered; they may expend a lot of effort in trying to understand their partner's perspective (Gordon & Chen, 2013). In attachment contexts, individuals who are experiencing anxious thoughts and feelings carefully monitor situations for signs of their partner's commitment readily perceive relationship threats, overreact to daily interactions by reevaluating their relationship, desire more security when they think of trust, and exhibit more negative affect and behavior relative to less anxious individuals (Bartz & Lydon, 2006; Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; N. L. Collins, 1996; N. L. Collins, Ford, Guichard, & Allard, 2006; Gere, MacDonald, Joel, Spielmann, & Impett, 2013; Mikulincer, 1998; Pierce & Lydon, 1998; Simpson et al., 1996; Snapp, Lento, Ryu, & Rosen, 2014). Although virtually all individuals prioritize trust in relationships, chronically anxious individuals prioritize intimacy to a much greater extent than do others (Ren,



Arriaga, & Mahan, 2016). Even small signs of possible rejection by a partner generate considerable distress and reactivity in highly anxious individuals (McClure et al., 2013; Simpson et al., 1996).

Anxiety-triggering situations are consequential for working models of both self and others. Individuals feel unworthy and inadequate when they perceive unreciprocated commitment from their partners (S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009; S. L. Murray et al., 2006). Eventually, they become vulnerable, dependent, and/or “clingy” if their efforts to increase their partner’s commitment and regard do not work (Beckes et al., 2017), which further compounds a sense of unworthiness, shame, and weakness. As a result, individuals develop a chronically more negative model of self. Extensive research has documented a strong association between attachment anxiety and low self-esteem (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). The unsatiated desire for greater interdependence also may reinforce ambivalent models of others that combine the desire for greater closeness and inevitable disappointment (N. L. Collins & Read, 1994). Chronically anxiously attached individuals typically have tentative and hopeful, but ultimately negative, models of close others and relationship partners, as indicated by unstable evaluations of their romantic relationships (Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006; Bartz & Lydon, 2006; Campbell et al., 2005).

In addition, insecure models of self and others often are self-reinforcing (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), much in the way that other social schemas and scripts can be self-perpetuating (e.g., Baldwin, 1992; N. L. Collins & Read, 1994; Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975). As individuals with chronically anxious working models enter new relationships, their insecure thoughts and feelings become easily activated, they perceive new situations through an insecure “lens,” and they infer greater threat than may be warranted (N. L. Collins, 1996; N. L. Collins et al., 2006; Pierce & Lydon, 1998; Simpson et al., 1996). Anxious individuals also have more negative interactions with others, which, in turn, further perpetuate their insecurities. They more readily revise their perceptions of themselves and their relationships after negative interactions than after positive ones (Hepper & Carnelley, 2012; cf. Brown & Mankowski, 1993).

*Avoidant responses and working models.* People experience a sense of attachment avoidance when a partner is unreliable or unresponsive in times of need, acts in cold or rejecting ways, evokes shame or disapproval, instills fear, or does other things that signal a high risk of social pain or that undermine the desirability of a relationship; avoidant thoughts and feelings are reinforced when a partner is *chronically* aversive or unresponsive (rather *intermittently* or unpredictably unresponsiveness, which “keeps hope alive” and has been linked to attachment anxiety; Beckes et al., 2017). When individuals encounter the insecurity-triggering situations in Figure 2, those who repeatedly feel burdened by a current partner or relationship, or feel apprehensive about

dependence because of their relationship history, are likely to exhibit avoidant responses.

Chronically avoidant individuals feel encumbered by conflict of interest situations; they may not want to sacrifice their own independent goals or activities for the sake of their partner or relationship. They also may experience “red flags” when a partner wants to increase interdependence or closeness; these moments hark back to a history in which dependence was painful or costly. Others may not have a history of chronic avoidance and yet still may experience avoidant thoughts and feelings (a) if their partner expects greater interdependence and closeness than they themselves desire or (b) if they previously desired high interdependence and closeness but have lost hope that their partner shares this desire, and cope by reducing their own emotional connection so they are beyond the partner’s sphere of influence (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Simpson & Rholes, 2012).

Gradually and with repeated exposure to situations that trigger the need to protect oneself from dependence, such individuals should develop automatic tendencies to deploy the deactivation strategies that characterize chronic avoidant attachment (Cavallo et al., 2010). These situations harbor avoidant thoughts and feelings that activate distancing behavior (e.g., withdrawing from close emotional ties) and produce more insecurity in their working models (e.g., others cannot be trusted), as indicated in the bottom half of Figure 2.

A considerable amount of research has documented “deactivated” and detached responses that accompany avoidant thoughts and feelings. Chronically avoidant individuals eschew social interaction (Mikulincer, 1997), remove themselves from evaluative situations (Beck & Clark, 2009), minimize their dependence on others (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988), and respond to the mental activation of trust situations by seeking greater control (Mikulincer, 1998). In relationships, they often are emotionally detached. Relative to others, they place a high priority on independence in relationships and a lower priority on intimacy (Ren et al., 2016). Moreover, they withdraw emotionally from partners when they feel stressed (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997) and provide less emotional support when their partners experience stress (Feeney & Collins, 2001; Simpson et al., 1992). When their partners attempt to provide rewarding experiences, such attempts are often misconstrued as overstepping their influence (N. L. Collins & Feeney, 2004; Tan, Overall, & Taylor, 2012).

Avoidant responses are also consequential for working models of both self and others, but the precise consequences differ from those occurring with anxious responses to insecurity-triggering situations. Individuals adopt avoidant responses when they believe that others cannot be counted on for approval or validation; instead, one must be self-reliant, which reinforces a relatively defensive model of self (Mikulincer, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Research has documented this defensiveness, such as when chronically avoidant individuals inflate or exaggerate their positive self-views, yet actually want to be valued by others (Beck &

Clark, 2009; Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006). Avoidance also is associated with negative expectations about future interactions with close others and negative emotions regarding closeness and intimacy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Over time, these perceptions and expectations become encoded as negative models of others in general and relationship partners in particular (see N. L. Collins & Read, 1994). This partially explains why attachment avoidance is associated with more negative relationship evaluations (Li & Chan, 2012) and perceiving that their partners do not value their personal goals (Arriaga et al., 2014).

In sum, the insecure models associated with attachment avoidance, as with attachment anxiety, are self-reinforcing. As chronically avoidant individuals distance themselves from close others, they forego opportunities to experience the benefits of closeness and intimacy, such as being cared for, supported, and validated by others (Reis et al., 2004). Thus, their interpersonal experiences reinforce the “attachment scaffolding” that sustains insecure tendencies (N. L. Collins & Read, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

### ***New Situations → Revising Working Models → Redirecting Attachment Orientations: Generalizing to Enhanced Security***

Just as there are relational processes that cause attachment insecurity, there may be relational processes that enhance security. New experiences—especially those that provide a departure from past insecure experiences—can revise working models to become more secure. As Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) stated (see also Bowlby, 1988), even chronic tendencies can be revised:

Even though people are likely to assimilate new information to existing working models if possible, they are also able to update these models to accommodate new information when attachment-relevant experiences (e.g., losing an attachment figure, learning of a trusted partner’s secret infidelity, or forming a new attachment bond with an unusually caring partner) challenge the validity of their self-and social schemas. This openness to reality . . . makes it possible to change attachment patterns during any phase of life . . . (p. 110)

Attachment security, thus, can be an emergent property of a current romantic involvement. Gradually, relationship-specific models that are secure may generalize to secure working models with respect to other partners and relationships more generally.

Individuals with chronic attachment insecurities are likely to have elaborated insecure working models that may be resistant to change. Nonetheless, even these individuals might be able to change, if they have a partner who fosters greater security. Indeed, each new relationship may provide new opportunities for change in attachment security to occur, depending on the interaction patterns that relationship partners establish. A

person who felt rejected in a previous relationship and became increasingly detached may not need to use that strategy in a new relationship with a partner who provides a good match in the desired level of closeness (cf. La Guardia et al., 2000).

Our focus has been on insecurity-triggering situations, which convey information about how each partner will manage situations that could reinforce insecure working models. However, many diagnostic situations do not involve the need to manage insecurity and mitigate relationship damage. We discuss various “security-triggering situations,” which convey key information and also infuse greater security into chronic working models. Indeed, relationship partners can and often do help each other thrive through experiences that encourage or boost self-confidence (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Consider another hypothetical couple, Annie and Alan. Annie works at a local mall. Although she is content, her position is not as challenging as her “dream career” in marketing. When Alan learns of an entry-level marketing position, he may encourage Annie to apply to boost her confidence. If she is not offered the position, however, he may also be pivotal in deflecting any negative self-attributions that she might make. Such diagnostic situations can be consequential for a person’s model of self, whereas other situations are likely to be consequential in revising models of others.

We next focus more closely on how relationship partners manage insecurity-triggering situations and create security-triggering situations. Insecurity-triggering situations pose a high risk of negative relationship outcomes. They create an immediate need to protect a relationship. One key process in enhancing security, therefore, is to *minimize the negative outcomes* that could be experienced. As we describe below, these typically are moments in which there is an issue causing relational tension, and partners must manage the high potential for damage to their relationship. Security-triggering situations, in contrast, present immediate opportunities for gains through positively valenced interactions, rather than a need to manage loss in negatively valenced interactions. Rather than navigating relationship problems, partners may broker opportunities to infuse security into the other’s chronic working models, such as when Alan encourages Annie to apply for a new job, which could boost her model of self (via greater self-efficacy) and her models of others (by realizing that she can trust Alan). Both types of triggering situations may involve similar dyadic patterns, such as unequal dependence; their features differ, however, in the immediate outcomes they afford (negative vs. positive outcomes).

### **Enhancing Attachment Security Across Time and Situations**

What kinds of relationship contexts should promote greater attachment security? In general, individuals should feel enhanced security when they feel valued and validated by a partner who is responsive to their most important needs (N. L. Collins, Ford, Guichard, Kane, &

**Table 1.** Partner Strategies That Buffer a Person's Immediate Insecurity as Revealed in the Person's Hyperactivated or Deactivated Responses.

Recipient insecurity	Effective partner buffering
Hyperactivated responses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efforts to attain reassurance</li> <li>• Negative attributions and affect, emotional intensity and increased drama</li> </ul>	Sample safe strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conveying a strong and intimate emotional bond</li> <li>• Deescalating heightened negative emotions</li> </ul>
Deactivated responses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disengaged or withdrawn during emotionally charged situations</li> <li>• Discomfort negotiating others' relationship needs (others relying on them or trying to change them)</li> </ul>	Sample soft strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing others' desire to avoid emotionally charged interactions</li> <li>• Conveying how and why certain requests and needs in relationships are reasonable</li> </ul>

Feeney, 2006; S. L. Murray et al., 2006). This notion is consistent with the literature on "perceived partner responsiveness to the self" (Reis et al., 2004), whereby individuals perceive that their partner understands and values core aspects of who they are; perceived partner responsiveness underlies many important relational processes (Reis et al., 2004; Knee, Hadden, Porter, & Rodriguez, 2013). Drawing from recent research with married couples, we suggest specific partner behaviors that may mitigate feelings of attachment anxiety or avoidance in a targeted manner. Individuals who have a history of chronic insecurity are likely to require more pervasive and powerful demonstrations of being loved, accepted, and valued for who they are. Thus, diagnostic situations ought to vary in their impact based on the nature of a person's mental models, implying specific "Diagnostic Situation  $\times$  Working Model" interactions.

### *Protecting a Relationship Bond From Immediate Insecurity*

Insecure reactions to relationship issues, if left unabated, can weaken relational bonds or even cause a relationship to end, which would negate opportunities to enhance security. Simpson and Overall (2014) have proposed a dyadic regulation model of insecurity buffering. They suggest that when stressful or threatening events activate an individual's insecure thoughts and feelings (or response tendencies), a partner may enact certain "buffering behaviors" to reduce (downregulate) the individual's in-the-moment insecurity. Almost all relationships inevitably experience conflict, ambivalence, and other conditions that can trigger insecurity (Braiker & Kelley, 1979), such as desiring significant changes in a partner, being mismatched in a desired level of closeness versus independence, or personal issues that frequently erode relationship quality (e.g., work stress, mental or physical health problems, issues with children; Arriaga, 2013; Holmes, 2002; Overall & Simpson, 2015; Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997).

Regardless of the specific triggering situation, certain well-tailored partner buffering behaviors can circumvent the potential spiral that begins with insecure responses and ends in relational strain (Farrell et al., 2016; Overall et al., 2014; Overall & Simpson, 2015; Salvatore et al., 2011; Simpson & Overall, 2014; Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, & Oriña, 2007). The ASEM highlights distinct partner buffering behaviors that mitigate anxious and avoidant reactions that often cause relational tension. Safe strategies are theorized to reduce anxiety because they provide reassurance while also deflecting spiraling drama. Soft strategies are theorized to mitigate avoidance because they acknowledge and respect the need for autonomy within the context of positive, supportive interpersonal experiences.

*Safe strategies by a partner.* As shown in the top half of Table 1, the signature response pattern that typically occurs when individuals have anxious thoughts or feelings suggests ways in which partners may effectively buffer anxiety. When individuals experience state anxiety, they exhibit increased (hyperactivated) efforts to attain reassurance that the partner will not leave, and want to know that they can trust their partner (Arriaga et al., 2014; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; S. L. Murray et al., 2006; Overall et al., 2014). As discussed above, individuals who are experiencing chronic attachment anxiety in a relationship also will have elevated negative affect and make negative attributions about the partner's behavior when their anxiety is activated (N. L. Collins et al., 2006; Simpson et al., 1996). They also have a lower threshold for experiencing social and physical pain compared with others, become frustrated when others do not acknowledge their needs, and are prone to feeling regret regarding previous relationships (Ben-Naim, Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, & Mikulincer, 2013; DeWall et al., 2012; Joel, MacDonald, & Plaks, 2012; MacDonald & Kingsbury, 2006; Mikulincer, Florian, & Weller, 1993; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997). These responses elevate their emotional intensity and sense of "drama," as revealed by their tendency to perceive relationship threats (Gere et al., 2013), to overinterpret the

significance of daily relationship events (Campbell et al., 2005), and to be more strongly affected by hurtful partner behaviors relative to others (Overall et al., 2014). Anxious individuals also struggle to contain stressful situations, convey more “doom” than may be warranted, and persevere on issues (Mikulincer, Hirschberger, Nachmias, & Gillath, 2001).

These anxious reactions may be mitigated when partners consciously or unconsciously adopt behaviors that signal a safe and secure bond (Feeney, 2004; Overall et al., 2016). Although we refer to these as safe strategies (see Table 1, top right), we do not mean to imply that partners necessarily enact these strategies intentionally or proactively, just as chronically insecure individuals are not necessarily aware of the coping strategies they adopt when they feel distressed.

We propose two safe strategies, and other strategies are conceivable as partners adapt specific ways of mitigating the other person’s momentary (state) anxiety. First, when individuals feel anxious insecurity, partners may be effective at mitigating such insecurity when they convey a strong and intimate emotional bond, particularly if they do so automatically and unequivocally (S. L. Murray et al., 2011). The insecurity that individuals feel when they doubt their partner’s commitment or regard often dissipates once the partner conveys strong commitment (S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009; S. L. Murray et al., 2006). For example, in a study of married couples discussing a major conflict, anxiously attached individuals were more inclined to react to conflict with negative emotions and responses, except in couples in which an anxious person’s *partner* was highly committed (Tran & Simpson, 2009). This buffered the typical negative emotions and responses of highly anxious individuals, who otherwise tend to react more destructively and risk undermining relationship satisfaction (Overall et al., 2014). Anxiously attached individuals are more likely to perceive their partner’s high regard and care for them when their partners exaggerate expressions of affection and inhibit any negative feelings (E. P. Lemay & Dudley, 2011; cf. S. L. Murray et al., 2006; S. L. Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). These studies suggest that such uniformly positive expressions by a partner provide the momentary reassurance that anxiously attached individuals need to remain constructively focused.

Second, momentary anxiety also may be mitigated when partners deescalate heightened negative emotions. Anxiously attached individuals frequently feel hurt, yet still retain positive relationship evaluations as long as their partners atone for and diffuse their hurt feelings (Overall et al., 2014). Partners may attempt to do so by being soothing and calming, acknowledging an issue and discussing ways in which it might be solved or contained, or using physical contact to soothe anxious concerns. Indeed, simply imagining physical touch can attenuate negative emotions during stressful tasks (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016), and actual touch can buffer anxious concerns (Kim et al., 2017). Positive sexual experiences also enhance relationship quality among chronically anxious

individuals (Birnbau, Reis, Mikulincer, Gillath, & Orpaz, 2006; Little, McNulty, & Russell, 2010). Notably, such emotionally laden demonstrations of partner support specifically may mitigate state attachment anxiety but would likely backfire when a person is feeling momentary avoidance (Girme, Overall, Simpson, & Fletcher, 2015; Simpson et al., 2007).

In sum, couple members may buffer their current partner’s immediate anxious thoughts and feelings by enacting behaviors that convey care and high regard, a desire to allay their partner’s concerns, and unwavering relationship commitment. These buffering efforts should be most effective when partners willingly incur costs to be caring and benevolent (e.g., in conflict-of-interest situations). Partners may not always be effective support providers, particularly if they themselves feel chronic insecurity; for example, partners who themselves are chronically avoidant may be less supportive when the other person feels distressed (see N. L. Collins et al., 2006). However, when partners create situations that reveal genuine, strong commitment, they prevent interactions that might otherwise reinforce the other person’s insecure working models.

*Soft strategies by a partner.* The signature response pattern that occurs when individuals harbor avoidant thoughts or feelings suggests ways in which partners may effectively buffer avoidance (see the bottom half of Table 1). Chronically avoidant individuals typically enact deactivation strategies to disengage from negative, emotionally charged interactions (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Cassidy, Shaver, Mikulincer, & Lavy, 2009; T. J. Collins & Gillath, 2012; Diamond & Hicks, 2005; Dykas & Cassidy, 2011; Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Even individuals who are not chronically avoidant but are experiencing avoidant thoughts and feelings will divert their attention away from partner concerns, change the topic of discussion, or withdraw by becoming silent, distant, or reducing eye contact (e.g., Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). Related responses include minimizing emotional intimacy, concealing deeper thoughts and feelings about an issue, or preferring more instrumental communication patterns (Overall et al., 2013; Simpson et al., 2007). Moreover, avoidant individuals experience discomfort over having a partner rely on them or request that they change (Bowlby, 1973; Overall et al., 2013). Such requests often threaten their needs for independence, autonomy, and personal control in relationships, which chronically avoidant individuals value highly (see (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Simpson & Rholes, 2012).

Research on interactions that typically trigger avoidant tendencies has revealed that partner use of “softening” tactics predicts reduced avoidant responses (Simpson & Overall, 2014; see Table 1, the bottom right column). We discuss two soft strategies; partners may develop other soft strategies to mitigate their own partner’s avoidant responses. As with safe strategies, we do not assume that partners necessarily enact soft responses intentionally.

First, avoidant reactions may be mitigated when partners consciously or unconsciously adopt behaviors that are sensitive to an avoidant person's discomfort with emotional interactions; such discomfort and avoidance often occurs during interactions that involve conflict, distress, or a partner's influence attempts (Overall et al., 2016). Partners may be most effective at mitigating avoidance when they respect the avoidant person's need to disengage from an interaction, or use humor, fun distractions, sex, and other tactics that diffuse negative emotions in tense situations (Birbaum et al., 2006; Little et al., 2010). Partners who instead simply avoid or circumvent a difficult interaction cannot address important relationship issues or concerns. Overall and her colleagues (2013), for example, videotaped married couples as partners took turns discussing something they wanted to change in the other, a relational issue that should activate avoidant concerns about the partner infringing on their independence. In general, avoidant individuals responded with greater anger and unwillingness to change than did other people, but significantly less so when their partners made comments that were sensitive to their autonomy needs, acknowledged and appreciated their efforts, maintained an optimistic tone, and conveyed that they (partners) valued them. In another study with married couples, avoidantly attached individuals responded with less anger to a discussion of a personal problem when the partner used direct and practical messages (e.g., reframing an issue in a matter-of-fact, rational way) rather than emotional messages (e.g., expressing intimacy or encouraging emotional expression; Simpson et al., 2007).

Second, partners are likely to retain a close connection with an avoidant individual when they communicate how and why certain requests and needs are reasonable. Relationships inevitably will involve situations in which partners ask things of each other, try to change each other, or must infringe on each other's independence. We speculate that partners may effectively manage avoidant reactions to these situations when they convey the normal and routine nature of "give and take" in relationships without becoming hostile, demanding, or manipulative; instead, they may infuse requests with notions of relationship norms and typical expectations. A recent study examined situations in which each couple member discussed a goal that required a major personal sacrifice by the partner, which should be poorly received by avoidant individuals. However, when the partner making that request acknowledged the size and scope of the sacrifice, highly avoidant individuals who were asked to make the sacrifice did not feel less trust or commitment than their less avoidant counterparts (Farrell et al., 2016). In another study in which couples engaged in a conflict interaction, trained coders rated each partner's ability to recover from the conflict in a subsequent discussion of a positive topic (Salvatore et al., 2011). Avoidant individuals struggled more than others to recover in the second discussion. However, when their partners moved past the conflict and reinstated a positive tone, their relationships were more

likely to persist. This suggests protecting relationships by limiting the degree of negativity during or after conflicts.

In sum, dependence need not evoke distancing, dread, or fear, and instead is a routine part of close relationships (Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Feeney, 2007). The partner buffering behavior we have described may be particularly effective when a partner can minimize an avoidant person's negative outcomes and keep them engaged in the interaction, all of which should prevent a deterioration of relationship quality (Braiker & Kelley, 1979; cf. S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009). Partners who themselves are chronically insecure, however, may be less effective in their responses; for example, highly anxious partners may be overly intrusive in their support provision (Feeney, 2004) and may be less effective than others in managing avoidant concerns (see N. L. Collins et al., 2006). In contrast, when partners convey how committed relationships need not be demanding or costly, they prevent interactions that might otherwise reinforce negative models of others and a need for self-reliance.

*Effectiveness of partner buffering strategies in the short term versus long term.* Partner buffering strategies protect relational bonds in part by preventing issues from spiraling into full-blown relationship tension (Overall & Simpson, 2015). They also provide immediate benefits to chronically insecure people, who should experience less intense or enduring distress and also derive broader benefits as they navigate issues and problems. Partner buffering strategies—providing reassurance and restoring calm, or acknowledging autonomy while encouraging a positive connection—are a crucial process and key component of the ASEM. However, partner strategies when relationship tension occurs may not be sufficient by themselves to enhance chronic attachment security over the long term.

Partners may not be willing or able to be the person leading efforts to protect a relationship over an extended period of time. Most problem-solving strategies tend to work initially, but are difficult to sustain indefinitely (Lavner & Bradbury, 2017). Even the most committed individuals eventually feel depleted or defeated if they must continually manage their partner's insecurity to maintain their relationship (cf. Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). At that point, partner buffering efforts often wane, become perfunctory, or lack authenticity.

Highly anxious individuals often detect inauthentic partner behavior, leading them to feel even more distressed and less satisfied (E. P. Lemay & Clark, 2008). When partners must constantly manage the other's anxieties, they eventually become dissatisfied with the relationship. For example, E. P. Lemay and Dudley (2011, Study 3) found that partners of anxiously attached individuals tended to exaggerate their affection and withhold criticism; these partners were effective in providing immediate reassurance but became less satisfied across time. Other research has shown that anxiously attached individuals may cause their partners to feel guilty,

which the anxious individuals interpret as a sign of their partner's commitment. However, their partners typically become less satisfied over time, perhaps because they resent being made to feel guilty (Overall et al., 2014, Study 2). Thus, even though partner efforts to convey strong commitment can provide anxious individuals with immediate reassurance, ironically these strategies eventually take a toll on the partner's commitment.

Partner efforts to buffer avoidant reactions also may have limitations. Partners of avoidant individuals may grow tired of having to perpetually reframe requests so as to not "impose" on their avoidant partners. Moreover, they may become uncomfortable with the detached state of their relationship and want a closer, more intimate connection. Mismatched closeness goals, therefore, also may strain relationships over time (Overall & Lemay, 2015).

Even if partners were willing and able to sustain repeated efforts to buffer insecurity, this might not necessarily promote chronic security. The paradox of partner strategies is that many well-intentioned efforts may be ineffective or even *backfire* if they address momentary insecurity without changing the underlying working models that sustain chronic insecurity. When distressed, chronically anxious individuals desire support from others, but they ultimately have not developed ways to thrive by relying on their own abilities. Anxiously attached individuals' constant craving for care combined with their chronic doubts about others' dependability creates an insatiable need, which keeps them in a dependent state (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Anxious individuals rely heavily on others to determine their self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Hepper & Carnelley, 2012) and are more vulnerable to negative evaluations (Carnelley, Israel, & Brennan, 2007). Even situations that prime closeness can cause anxious individuals to experience distress (Mikulincer, Shaver, Bar-On, & Ein-Dor, 2010), given their chronic expectations that partners will not provide *enough* closeness (cf. Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). Consequently, safe strategies may inadvertently reinforce being "other-focused," sustain dependence on partners for support and reassurance, and cause anxious individuals to forego opportunities to build and nurture their own strengths. Although safe strategies may temporarily boost anxious individuals' models of others (i.e., viewing someone as supportive, available, and committed), they do not address perceptions of low self-efficacy. As a result, anxious individuals may derive some immediate benefits from partner support, but any temporary gains in self-worth may be offset by a reduced sense of being independently competent and worthy.

In a similar manner, partner efforts to manage avoidance-triggering situations may temporarily benefit individuals who are feeling avoidant, but not create a lasting decrease in chronic avoidance. We suggest that avoidant individuals ultimately become less avoidant through experiences that instill positive working models of others, which may also boost

their model of self. This is unlikely to occur when partners place too much emphasis on valuing and accepting an avoidant individual's need for independence (e.g., by repeatedly accommodating an avoidant individual's distancing behavior), which may momentarily quell avoidant thoughts and feelings but inadvertently reinforce a chronic avoidant orientation.

Skilled partners, however, can and do give longer term benefits to avoidant individuals during situations that may cause relationship tension. When partners use soft strategies effectively, avoidant individuals become more trusting of their partners over time (Farrell et al., 2016). Moreover, avoidant individuals adopt more positive models of others when stressful relational situations turn out to be less distressing than expected (Simpson et al., 2003). These are examples of insecurity-triggering situations (having to sacrifice desired outcomes for the partner or relationship), which skillful partners transformed into security-enhancing situations. Even so, managing avoidant thoughts and feelings only during moments of potential relational tension falls short of strengthening secure mental associations with more positive (less tense) thoughts and feelings.

In sum, partner strategies that manage momentary symptoms of insecurity do provide immediate solutions to problems of interdependence. Although partner strategies may mitigate behavior that potentially erodes relationship quality, this may not be sufficient to change chronically insecure working models. The partner strategies we have described effectively buffer negative outcomes. Ultimately, however, attachment orientations may become more secure by also associating interpersonal experiences with positive outcomes. In the next section, we describe targeted processes that may foster greater security in working models. When combined with effective partner buffering, targeted positive experiences should reinforce secure working models and reduce the activation of insecure orientations in future situations.

### Promoting Secure Working Models

Recent methods have been developed to activate secure working models and create a momentary sense of security (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, for a review of priming techniques; see also Gillath, Hart, Nofle, & Stockdale, 2009). Priming security can have momentary salutary effects on a relationship, including strengthening intentions to seek help from a partner in a stressful situation and eliciting more positive expectations about a current relationship (Pierce & Lydon, 1998; Rowe & Carnelley, 2003). Existing research, however, has not yet identified the causal conditions that produce *lasting* security.

The ASEM proposes causal processes that are theorized to instill a sense of security in *specific* working models, rather than priming a generalized state of security. Indeed, many of the ways in which relationship partners help each

other thrive (Feeney & Collins, 2015) may foster security by revising specific working models. Our emphasis on enhancing working models of self and others aligns with other theories concerning fundamental interpersonal needs. For example, self-determination theory suggests that close relationships help individuals thrive when they not only offer being accepted and valued (relatedness) but also reinforce confidence in pursuing goals (competence) and a sense of personal choice and volition in what one does and desires (autonomy support; Deci & Ryan, 2014). We identify security-triggering situations that target specific aspects of working models.

*Pathway relevant to an attachment anxious orientation.* Chronically anxious individuals feel unworthy because they have been rebuffed by prior attachment figures (Bowlby, 1973; Simpson & Rholes, 2012). In romantic relationships, they have needed stronger evidence of a partner's commitment than they were able to attain (see Figure 2, top half). As discussed above, anxious individuals who feel distress may temporarily benefit from their partner's reassurance, but reassurance alone might "feed" insecurity. Attaining reassurance, as needed, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for greater security. We posit that lasting security must also combine confidence-building processes that direct anxious individuals' attention away from an excessive focus on their relationship bond and promote a more secure model of self, as indicated in the top right side of Figure 1.

*Security-triggering situations that target the model of self.* Specifically, security-triggering situations foster a secure model of self when they cause individuals to feel valued and capable in *personal domains*, and also to feel increasingly comfortable with autonomy and independence, as described on the top half of Table 2. Partners can facilitate this process by creating or amplifying moments that (a) affirm an anxious person's strengths, goals, interests, and positive qualities; or (2) result in an anxious person gaining confidence, self-efficacy, or autonomy in contexts outside of the relationship. Anxious individuals may benefit the most when (c) partners help them infer broader meaning into these situations that bolster their self-models. We review research that supports these ideas.

First, research has revealed several ways in which individuals can feel personally validated and appreciated by a partner. Feeling appreciated by a partner has many benefits, including helping people move toward their ideal selves. Several longitudinal studies, for example, have shown that relationship bonds become stronger when partners perceive and act upon a person's ideal characteristics, after which the person gradually adopts those ideal characteristics (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009).

Feeling personally validated should be particularly important in reducing chronic attachment anxiety. In nonrelational

contexts, people benefit from having others affirm their values, which improves their self-confidence, performance on tasks, and self-esteem (Steele, 1988). In a similar vein, people feel affirmed when they share good news with a partner who responds with excitement and joy (Gable et al., 2004). Indeed, when partners convey that they care for and appreciate receiving such personal news, low-esteem individuals become emboldened to disclose even more information (Forest & Wood, 2011), which invites a cycle of feeling further validated (Reis et al., 2004). Individuals who have low self-esteem (which correlates highly with attachment anxiety; see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) may particularly benefit from sharing personal accomplishments. If it elicits a compliment from their partner, this is likely to boost their self-esteem (Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2007, 2010).

Second, while personally challenging situations may trigger anxious thoughts and feelings, they also provide opportunities for enhanced security if the situation affords deriving a greater sense of self-efficacy. People experience an immediate boost in both self-esteem and well-being when their personal goals and activities are encouraged by their partners (Drigotas, 2002; Feeney, 2004); when encouraged by a partner, they become more likely to pursue their own independent activities (Gore & Cross, 2006), which is a signature characteristic of attachment security (Green & Campbell, 2000). In situations that involve personal challenges or even failure, partners can provide support that buffers anxious individuals' negative reactions to failure (Caprariello & Reis, 2011), and such support may encourage seeking out negative but diagnostic information for self-improvement (Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005). These experiences, although negative, should strengthen anxious individuals' beliefs that they are capable of resolving major challenges.

Finally, whether confidence-building situations actually foster a more secure model of self will likely depend on anxious individuals' *broader perceptions*—their deriving diagnostic information from these situations and inferring positive abilities and self-worth (see the distinction between immediate vs. symbolic outcomes in the section "Diagnostic Situations and Interpersonal Tendencies"). Anxious individuals should benefit the most when they perceive their successes as being attributable to their own efforts. Relationship partners can assume pivotal roles, for example, by helping anxious individuals distance themselves from failures (Caprariello & Reis, 2011; Kross & Ayduk, 2011), and by encouraging anxious individuals to view themselves in new ways. Isolated events that deviate from existing expectations in only minor ways tend to be assimilated into existing working models (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). However, chronic working models may be revised to become more secure when relationship interactions provide ongoing messages that support more secure expectations over time (see Overall & Simpson, 2015). Returning to the Annie and Alan example, one reason why Annie had not pursued her desired career in marketing was because she devoted her time to her

**Table 2.** Processes That Promote a Recipient's Movement Toward Secure Working Models.

	General process	Specific processes
Confidence-building processes to foster a secure model of self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling increasingly valued and capable in <i>personal</i> domains, increased comfort with autonomy and independence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling personally validated and appreciated (e.g., partner lauds recipient for their independent pursuits and goals, emphasizes the recipient's enjoyment of these pursuits, helps recipient set achievable personal goals that gradually become more challenging)</li> <li>Deriving a sense of self-efficacy during challenging or distressing personal situations (e.g., partner provides praise or encouragement as recipient handles a problem/issue)</li> <li>Recipient perceives personal successes or gains as being attributable to his or her own efforts</li> </ul>
Positive dependence processes to foster secure models of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling increasingly valued and capable in <i>interpersonal</i> domains, increased comfort with dependence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pursuing rewarding interdependent activities, which reinforce positive associations with closeness (e.g., partner encourages fun activities together, provides opportunities for increasingly intimate disclosure)</li> <li>Attaining benefits from a partner during distressing personal situations, which weakens negative associations with dependence (e.g., providing practical and direct support without eliciting resistance)</li> <li>Recipient redefines expectations about interpersonal situations assumed to be aversive</li> </ul>

relationship with Alan. However, Annie might gain confidence and self-efficacy to pursue her dream job if Alan, over time, reiterates her strengths, encourages her to apply for marketing jobs that expand her abilities, and encourages positive but realistic expectations for success.

Research by Marigold and her colleagues (2007, 2010) reveals the importance of inferring broader meaning from moments when a partner validates and affirms one's positive qualities. Low self-esteem participants were asked to recall a time when a partner complimented them and were assigned to different experimental conditions that varied how the compliment was framed. Some participants reflected on the broader and more abstract meaning of the compliment, explaining *why* their partner admired them, what it meant to them, and its significance for their relationship; other participants described the concrete details of the compliment or indicated whether (not why) their partner complimented them, which often leads people to evaluate their partner's intentions. Low self-esteem individuals who reflected on the broader meaning of their partner's compliment reported increased self-confidence measured 2 weeks later, as compared with those who questioned the compliment or focused on specific details. This supports the idea that chronically anxious individuals may improve their model of self when they infer broader meaning in a partner's positive regard for them (cf. S. L. Murray et al., 2000).

*Reduced attachment anxiety through an enhanced model of self.* Several lines of research support our theoretical proposition that individuals should become less chronically anxious through a process that targets their model of self. Arriaga

and her colleagues (2014), for example, provided such evidence from a study conducted with committed couples over a 1-year period. They examined concurrent and longitudinal associations predicting attachment orientations. Notably, the longitudinal predictors of decline in attachment anxiety were distinct from the concurrent predictors. In the concurrent analyses, individuals who exhibited higher levels of attachment anxiety reported less trust toward their partners, which reflects typical anxious responses to insufficient partner reassurance. In the longitudinal analyses, however, individuals revealed declines in attachment anxiety when they had felt that their personal goals were validated and supported by their partner. Perceived validation for personal goals predicted declines in attachment anxiety, above and beyond the effect of trust, which became nonsignificant when pitted with goal validation. Long-term declines in attachment anxiety, thus, were more strongly related to a self-affirming process (e.g., feeling that personal goals are validated by the partner), even though momentary concerns were more focused on trust. These findings support the ASEM proposition that declines in attachment anxiety across time are more strongly related to gains in personal goals, even though attachment anxious individuals primarily are focused on trust and reassurance.

Other research also suggests that decreasing attachment anxiety centers on revising the model of self. Consistent with this premise, Carnelley and Rowe (2007) found that declines in attachment anxiety occur in response to boosts in the self-model. Over the course of 5 days, participants who engaged in security-priming tasks reported more positive self-views and larger declines in attachment anxiety than control participants,



who were not primed. Although this study did not examine long-term changes in working models, it did provide evidence that increasingly positive self-views were related to declines in attachment anxiety.

In sum, fostering a more secure working model of the self is likely to be a gradual, dyadic process that highlights an individual's value and competence in personal domains, and that instills greater confidence and a positive sense of self-worth. We have described several situations with a partner that may foster this process, as when a partner validates an anxiously attached individual's personal qualities, encourages his or her independent interests and goal pursuits, or praises his or her personal accomplishments. It also involves a complementary process in which anxiously attached individuals are guided toward inferring broader meaning in such moments. Moreover, the process that fortifies a model of self with more secure beliefs, emotions, scripts, and action tendencies should have positive rippling effects on models of others. As anxious individuals internalize beliefs that their partner truly perceives them as capable and worthy, such self-boosts should nullify their overdependence on others. Over time, as they gain self-confidence, they should grow increasingly comfortable with their own strength and independence, as chronically secure individuals typically do (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Fostering security in anxiously attached individuals' model of self should, therefore, generalize to greater attachment security in general.

*Pathway relevant to an attachment avoidant orientation.* Chronically avoidant individuals avoid relying on others and forging deep, intimate connections because these experiences have been personally costly or painful in the past. In romantic relationships, they strive to remain independent, guard against too much closeness, and do not perceive benefits of dependence to the same extent that others do (see Figure 2, bottom half). As discussed above, when attachment avoidance is activated, individuals may temporarily benefit from having a partner who avoids using emotional tactics or demanding too much dependence, but partners who rely on these strategies alone may inadvertently sustain insecurity. We posit that lasting security must also combine situations in which avoidant individuals gain an appreciation for the positive aspects of dependence that relationships can provide. Positive dependence processes should weaken avoidant defenses and foster more secure models of others, as indicated on the bottom right side of Figure 1.

*Security-triggering situations that target models of others.* Specifically, security-enhancing situations foster more secure models of others when they cause individuals to feel increasingly valued and capable in *interpersonal domains*, and also to develop comfort and positive associations with dependence, as described in the bottom half of Table 2. Partners can facilitate this process by creating or amplifying interactions that (a) are enjoyable and elicit positive affect or (b)

yield benefits in coping with nonrelational issues. Avoidant individuals are likely to benefit the most when they (c) reflect on the positive aspects of these situations (e.g., enjoyment, fulfillment, an authentic and comfortable feeling of belonging), which is more likely to occur when partners directly or indirectly guide such perceptions; we describe each in detail and draw from research that supports these propositions.

First, situations that involve pursuing rewarding interdependent activities (i.e., situations that feature mutual reliance and result in positive correspondent outcomes) ought to revise negative working models of others, as indicated in Table 2. For example, novel and engaging joint activities (e.g., sailing, playing games, planning travel, hosting a party) typically create positive emotions in relationships and nourish their vitality (Aron & Aron, 1986). Partners who generate enthusiasm about a joint activity elicit greater relationship closeness (Girme, Overall, & Faingataa, 2014). Research also indicates that chronically avoidant individuals desire moments of positive dependence, even if this desire is defensively suppressed. In a series of experiments, for example, avoidant individuals had more positive reactions when they discovered they were valued and accepted interpersonally (vs. being in a no value/no acceptance control condition; Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006).

Second, avoidant individuals may adopt more secure mental representations of others in situations where stress stems from nonrelational contexts. Avoidant individuals strive to resolve personal problems and issues independently (N. L. Collins & Feeney, 2004; Simpson et al., 1992). They also resist emotional forms of partner support (Girme et al., 2015; Simpson et al., 2007), partly because this form of support implies they need to rely on others, which makes avoidant people feel dependent (cf. Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000). Their partners may adopt a self-interested response or remain uninvolved. However, when partners transform a situation into an opportunity to provide support, especially when it requires effort or sacrifice on their part (Van Lange et al., 1997), they communicate that they are being genuinely helpful and dependable in crucial moments (Holmes, 2002; Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Simpson, 2007). Partners who convey genuine caring and dependability create a safe context in which negative emotions can be expressed, which facilitates change in chronic working models (Johnson, Bradley, Furrow, Lee, & Palmer, 2005). Research has confirmed that providing support to avoidant individuals requires tailored efforts. Avoidant individuals repel from emotional support. However, with respect to instrumental or practical support, they benefit either from support that occurs beyond their awareness (cf. Overall et al., 2016) or instead from very strong, genuine support that is offered when they are highly distressed, feel overwhelmed, and cannot use their normal defenses to regulate their emotions, as revealed by a curvilinear effect of low and high partner support (Girme et al., 2015; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009). These moments

convey the benefits of dependence in personally distressing situations, which should weaken cognitive links between dependence and negative outcomes (Feeney, 2007).

Although these situations provide opportunities to gain new and diagnostic information, lasting change in chronic working models of others may also hinge on redefining expectations about interpersonal situations assumed to be aversive. Avoidant individuals are not likely to appreciate dependence unless they experience situations that strongly and consistently contradict their negative expectations of intimacy (i.e., experiences that provide “corrective feedback” to learn new ways of thinking and feeling; Bowlby, 1988). For example, avoidant individuals may balk at large requests by others. However, when a partner communicates confidence in an avoidant person abiding by a large request, the avoidant person becomes more trusting (Farrell et al., 2016); the partner’s faith may contradict an avoidant person’s negative expectations about large requests. Some of the most powerful and lasting changes occur during emotionally charged or stressful moments when avoidant individuals feel vulnerable and cannot suppress emotions (Diamond & Hicks, 2005; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). For example, when faced with the unrelenting stress of caring for a newborn infant, avoidant persons who unexpectedly become caregivers may interact with their romantic partners in more supportive or self-disclosing ways; it may surprise them to realize that interdependence can feel good.

Partners cannot force avoidant individuals to change their working models, but they can guide and shape how avoidant individuals perceive and encode positive dependence into their mental representations of others. The process of guiding expectations may be more effective if it is subtle and gradual (cf. Howland & Simpson, 2010; W. Wood & Neal, 2007). Avoidant individuals are also more likely to shift toward greater security when they discover their interpersonal competence and value on their own (Deci & Ryan, 2000), rather than when they feel persuaded or coerced by others. Returning to our Annie and Alan example, Alan may overcome initial reluctance to become involved in her career prospects when he sees the profound effect that his mentioning of her pursuing a marketing job has on her. When Annie responds positively to Alan’s suggestions of her applying to a marketing job and makes him feel valued and appreciated, Alan will become more motivated to help her make the career change.

*Reduced attachment avoidance through enhanced models of others.* Several lines of research support the theoretical proposition that individuals become less avoidant via a process that targets their models of close others. As discussed earlier, Arriaga et al. (2014) examined concurrent and longitudinal predictors of attachment orientations among newly committed couples. Their analysis of attachment avoidance provided results that support the ASEM. In concurrent analyses, individuals who had elevated levels of attachment avoid-

ance were more likely to perceive that their partners do not value their personal goals, consistent with the typical avoidant response to not rely on others for personal matters. In longitudinal analyses, however, trust predicted declines in attachment avoidance, above and beyond the effect of perceived goal validation, which became nonsignificant when pitted with trust. This supports the ASEM proposition that declines in attachment avoidance are more strongly related to building trust, even though attachment avoidant individuals are more focused on protecting personal goals.

Declines in avoidance should occur during specific moments that afford greater security in mental representations of others. Indeed, individuals become less avoidant over time when they experience events that challenge the need for caution when experiencing high levels of intimacy or closeness with their partners. In a longitudinal study of couples transitioning to parenthood, Simpson et al. (2003) found that chronically avoidant husbands became less avoidant over time if they provided more support to their wives, and wives became less avoidant if they sought more support. As suggested above, individuals may become less avoidant when they must confront situations that require asking for help and/or being needed by others, which may unexpectedly evoke positive feelings that run counter to their working models. These situations, however, may need to be emotionally charged and sufficiently powerful to elicit broader inferences about feeling fulfilled.

In sum, fostering secure working models of relationship partners and close others is a gradual, dyadic process that highlights an individual’s value and competence in interpersonal domains. When avoidant individuals associate positive feelings about their relationship with feeling uniquely cared for and loved, and as they feel increasingly capable in managing situations of dependence, they should feel more trust (Feeney, 2007; Holmes & Rempel, 1989; S. L. Murray et al., 2006), which should predict declines in avoidance over time (Arriaga et al., 2014). Moreover, fortifying their models of others with more secure beliefs, emotions, scripts, and action tendencies should have rippling effects that further foster a more secure model of self. When avoidant individuals begin to internalize positive expectations about being interdependent with others, such boosts should convey a sense of being valued and having authentic (rather than defensive) reasons to improve their self-model (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

## Summary

Romantic involvements affect the mental models that sustain attachment orientations. Situations that occur in romantic relationships provide opportunities to perceive the self and others in ways that can enhance security. These situations are more likely when partners are willing and able to manage moments in which a person’s insecure responses could otherwise erode a relationship. Several partner strategies have been identified based on existing research that should buffer

the effects of anxious and avoidant insecure responses. Insecure individuals may benefit in-the-moment from these partner strategies, but they may also benefit from the broader meaning of their partner's behavior—how it conveys positive qualities about each other and their relationship.

The security-enhancing processes we have described are complex. At times, even positive partner efforts can backfire (cf. J. V. Wood, Perunovic, & Lee, 2009). For example, a partner may encourage an anxious person to discuss a new goal at work, only to have the discussion trigger feelings of incompetence. Conversely, when avoidant individuals are invited to join a partner's preexisting hobby or activity, this may result in the perception that the partner already has "the upper hand." Skilled partners learn through experience to identify situations that trigger tension in their relationship and may exhibit flexibility in shifting from fostering secure working models to preventing distress (i.e., switching from the right side of Figure 1 back to the left side). Thus, security enhancement is a dynamic process; what partners each need and what they might provide to each other will depend on specific interactions.

### **Striving for Well-Being: Enhancing Security Creates More Balanced Needs**

Do individuals and couples derive benefits through attachment security-enhancing processes? Having greater attachment security is desirable because it is associated with greater happiness, higher self-confidence and ambition, more rewarding and trusting relationships, and more resilient responses to challenging and stressful situations (e.g., Feeney, 2004; Green & Campbell, 2000; Li & Chan, 2012; Luke, Sedikides, & Carnelley, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Salvatore et al., 2011). Individuals themselves benefit when they become more secure in the context of a trusting relationship, and their relationships become more rewarding (Li & Chan, 2012; S. L. Murray & Holmes, 2009; Pietromonaco et al., 2013).

One of the mechanisms that may link attachment tendencies to positive outcomes is balancing fundamental needs. All theories of fundamental needs propose that greater well-being involves gratifying at least one self-oriented need (e.g., agency, autonomy, and/or competence) and one relational need (e.g., communion and/or relatedness; see Bakan, 1966; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Maslow, 1968; H. A. Murray, 1938; Ryff, 1989). Although much of the literature has examined personal and relational needs separately, recent research suggests that individuals thrive and relationships become stronger when relationship partners support both self-oriented and relational needs (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Rusbult et al., 2009). Achieving a good balance between various fundamental needs is strongly related to higher well-being (e.g., Kumashiro, Rusbult, & Finkel, 2008; Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006). Indeed, the relationships motivation theory suggests that individuals and their relationships thrive to the extent that relationships satisfy all three fundamental psychological

needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence, and efforts to satisfy relatedness often ripple into benefits for autonomy or competence (Deci & Ryan, 2014).

The personal-relational equilibrium model (Kumashiro et al., 2008) provides insights into why enhancing security should also enhance personal and relational well-being. Every individual has an optimal (desired) amount of time and resources to dedicate to personal and relational domains, but many people do not always balance their needs in ways that increase or sustain their well-being (cf. Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008, on optimal affect regulation). When people deviate from their optimal equilibrium, they typically experience tension and become motivated to restore an optimal equilibrium by devoting more time or attention to a preferred domain. From an attachment perspective, attachment insecurity may reflect devoting too much attention to certain domains at the expense of others. Anxious individuals, for example, may spend too much time and resources being relationship focused (relational domain), when they might benefit from personal domains that afford a sense of competence and reward autonomy. Avoidant individuals may spend most of their time and resources on the personal domain, when they might benefit from domains that afford positive connections with others. Neither insecure orientation allows for an optimal equilibrium, but having greater balance in need satisfaction may facilitate their overall well-being (Kumashiro et al., 2008; Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006).

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

The ASEM integrates extensive theory and research. Such theory integration can reveal convergent ideas, such as the centrality of feeling accepted and valued by others as a fundamental need for personal well-being and thriving (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2014; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Importantly, theory integration also identifies gaps in extant literatures. Several theories examine felt security but may not differentiate processes that mitigate insecurity from those that enhance security. Other theories may posit that satisfying and trusting relationships help people thrive but not specify the causal pathways for individuals with different attachment orientations. The ASEM advances new ways of reframing existing research. For example, a cross-sectional study suggested that feeling secure in a relationship may be more strongly affected by having autonomy needs satisfied than by having competence needs satisfied (La Guardia et al., 2000). The ASEM would predict that concurrently, anxious individuals feel greater security when their relatedness needs are satisfied (cf. Ren et al., 2016). Longitudinally, however, they may not sustain greater security unless their competence needs are equally satisfied. Research programs also have revealed ways to prime momentary or short-term security (Carnelley & Rowe, 2007; T. J. Collins & Gillath, 2012; Mikulincer et al., 2001). The ASEM would predict that

different situations will enhance momentary security depending on the attachment orientation.

The ASEM, thus, provides targeted predictions that take into account individual differences, situational features, and temporal considerations. Such specificity has implications for the science of couple functioning. Earlier we suggested, for example, that not everyone feels more secure when partners use safe strategies; avoidant individuals repel excessive emotional reassurance (Simpson et al., 2007). Similarly, not everyone may attain positive relationship outcomes through the same pathway; individuals are likely to differ based on their attachment orientation (cf. Karney & Bradbury, 1995). The ASEM advances novel predictions regarding processes that enhance security across time or have ripple effects in boosting relationship satisfaction—as when, for example, avoidant individuals redirect attention away from their own self-focused concerns and toward a positive connection with a partner, or when anxious individuals redirect their attention away from being relationship focused and toward being more personally competent and autonomous.

We have focused on romantic relationships as contexts that may reinforce or modify working models, but our analysis can be generalized to interactions with other attachment figures (e.g., close friends, parents and their children, family members). Future research is beginning to examine, for example, peer relationships that provide targeted forms of support and reduce insecurity (Canevello & Crocker, 2010).

Although the ASEM potentially could inform couple interventions, some of the model claims have not received direct empirical support and we caution against assuming that all couples can intentionally adopt security-enhancing strategies. Recent studies have called into question the long-term efficacy of interventions that rely on skills training or relationship education as means of preventing marital decline (Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2013; Williamson et al., 2015). Not all partners may have the ability or motivation to support each other through security-enhancing processes, and even well-intentioned partners may be limited by their own insecurities, vulnerabilities, or stressful circumstances (Rauer, Karney, Garvan, & Hou, 2008). We cannot claim that the ASEM can guide couple training efforts, but it can guide new research and novel predictions. Importantly, the ASEM is not a model designed to help distressed couples save their relationship. It is offered to provide a scientific understanding of the processes that enhance security in romantic relationships.

What, then, might be the practical relevance of the ASEM? The ASEM integrates research on normative couples (e.g., not exhibiting excessive relational distress, personal stress, or disruptive insecurity). Therefore, the processes may be most applicable to the typical insecurities that many people experience. One implication of the ASEM is to make distinctions between strategies that minimize negative relationship outcomes and strategies that promote positive outcomes. Conflict management skills and ongoing

support behaviors both are essential to healthy relationships. The ASEM situates these key dynamics in the context of attachment orientations. Another implication concerns identifying the abstract features that cause problems for specific couples. A couple, for example, may recognize a specific issue that causes them conflict (e.g., division of household labor). The ASEM reframes conflicts and other situations in terms of their abstract features—for example, detecting situations that involve a conflict of interest, versus focusing specifically on household chores. Detecting abstract features of current situations may direct attention toward future situations that become consequential.

Finally, the ASEM aims to identify relevant enhancement processes, rather than suggest specific practices. Couples adapt to the specific circumstances of their relationships. They may not apply the exact strategies that we have described; but if effective, their strategies likely fit with guiding principles contained in the ASEM, such as conveying strong commitment when individuals feel anxious. It should not be surprising that couple training efforts fail when they require specific behaviors (e.g., never criticize a partner) because any behavior could be contextualized (e.g., in some contexts, criticism and other direct negative statements may predict positive relationship outcomes; Overall & McNulty, 2017). Rather than continuing to enact the specified behaviors even when they are not helping, couples may experience the greatest benefits when they intuitively understand an underlying principle (e.g., conveying commitment) and organically adapt it to their own way of doing things.

## Conclusion

Attachment security has been robustly linked to numerous intrapersonal and interpersonal problems (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). The benefits of attachment security to individuals and to supporting satisfying relationships are well documented (Li & Chan, 2012; Pietromonaco et al., 2013). The ASEM makes novel contributions by suggesting specific pathways through which insecure individuals might derive greater security and, thus, greater well-being.

Enhancing attachment security is likely to involve complex and coordinated processes. We have provided a model, the ASEM, that (a) addresses specific aspects of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, rather than assume that the same situational processes similarly affect both orientations; and (b) recognizes that what works in the short term to manage insecurity may be different than what is needed in the long term. As with other processes that satisfy fundamental psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2014), these processes need not occur within conscious awareness. Even couple members who do not express a desire for greater attachment security will derive benefits from interactions that optimally prevent the damaging effects of insecurity and promote greater security. Ultimately, the ASEM contributes to relationship science by organizing fundamental interpersonal

processes into a coherent theoretical model, and eventually it may suggest ways of improving people's lives.

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### Note

1. Given that individuals vary on attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, some individuals may exhibit high (or low) levels on both dimensions relative to most people. The security-enhancing processes we describe may apply in different contexts for the same couple. That is, a person may withdraw emotionally in one context, but escalate their demands on a partner in another context. Most of the processes that we have identified are derived from research conducted with chronically insecure individuals, but they also may be relevant to individuals who temporarily feel insecure (i.e., are not chronically insecure).

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