

The power of diagnostic situations: how support and conflict can foster growth and security

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Intimate relationships are a central ingredient of health and well-being. Close relationships help people live longer, healthier, and more meaningful lives, in part because support from intimate partners helps individuals traverse the challenges of life (Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). But well-intended support can also backfire and undermine coping and reduce relationship satisfaction (e.g., Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000; Brock & Lawrence, 2009). Moreover, just as they generate love and happiness, intimate partners can also cause pain and heartache. Relationship conflict is common, and it often leads to depression and poorer health outcomes (Beach, Fincham, & Katz, 1998; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Unresponsive or neglectful caregiving can also cultivate attachment insecurity – relatively enduring orientations that undermine people's ability to be happy in relationships (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980).

Developing satisfying and long-lasting relationships is a tough job considering that both positive elements of relationships, such as support, and negative features of relationships, such as conflict and rejection, can undermine well-being. However, instead of being impediments to optimal relationship development, such difficulties can actually be opportunities for growth, even for insecure individuals who typically respond in destructive ways during support and conflict interactions. These situations offer the potential for growth because partners' support and conflict behavior provides "diagnostic" information regarding the partners' underlying motives, regard, and dependability (Kelley et al., 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). For example, when a partner gives the specific kind of support that a recipient needs, this reveals that he or she is a reliable and sensitive caregiver (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Similarly, when a partner puts his or her personal dissatisfactions aside to solve relationship problems and be caring during relationship conflicts, the partner is demonstrating that he or she is committed, invested, and trustworthy (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

In the current chapter, we discuss the power of these diagnostic situations to foster growth and security in intimate relationships. We first consider when and how support enacted by intimate partners can be costly and beneficial to support recipients and then illustrate how the right kind of support that matches recipients' needs can promote resilience and growth, especially for those who need it most. We then consider how conflict can improve relationships, not merely by resolving relationship problems, but also by providing an opportunity for partners to establish or reconfirm that they are invested and committed. By identifying the types of partner support and conflict behaviors that "work" for different types of people, we provide insights into how to facilitate relationship happiness and stability, particularly among individuals who typically experience difficulties sustaining happy relationships.

PROVIDING THE RIGHT KIND OF SUPPORT FOSTERS RESILIENCE, GROWTH, AND SECURITY

Support from close others can have sweeping benefits, including reducing distress, bolstering self-esteem, and protecting psychological and physical health when individuals are confronted with major life challenges (Cacioppo & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999; Feeney, 2004; Uchino, Wethington, & Kessler, 1986). Partner support also helps individuals thrive by aiding the pursuit and achievement of personal goals (Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Collins, 2014; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2010). Moreover, by providing reassurance and conveying positive regard, support from intimate partners can generate feelings of being loved and supported, which in turn fosters greater closeness and satisfaction (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Feeney & Collins, 2003; Gleason, Iida, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008; Pasch, Bradbury, & Sullivan, 1997; Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010; Verhofstadt, Buysse, Ickes, Davis, & Devoldre, 2008).

Unfortunately, even though perceiving support can be tremendously beneficial, the actual provision of support by intimate partners can have surprising costs. Support behaviors that are direct, overt, and visible to support recipients – dubbed *visible* support – can heighten recipients' anxiety and depressed mood (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger et al., 2000), reduce feelings of self-efficacy (Howland & Simpson, 2010), and undermine recipients' confidence about achieving their goals (Girme, Overall, & Simpson, 2013). In addition, the overprovision of support (i.e., getting more support than is desired) forecasts lower relationship satisfaction (Brock & Lawrence, 2009; Cutrona, 1996). All of these costs of support are believed to occur because overt support increases the salience of stressors, signals that recipients may be unable to cope on their own, and creates feelings of indebtedness to partners (Bolger et al., 2000). Thus, even when visible support helps people feel more cared for and connected, its provision

can impinge on people's need for autonomy (self-direction) and competence (ability to achieve), thereby hindering recipients' well-being and goal achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002).

These costs of visible support have led Bolger and his colleagues to conclude that partner support should be most effective when it is *invisible* (i.e., when it goes unnoticed by recipients) and avoids undermining recipients' sense of autonomy and competence (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger et al., 2000; Shrout, Herman, & Bolger, 2006). Invisible support is indexed by a mismatch between the reports of support providers and support recipients, where partners report providing support, but recipients fail to perceive it (e.g., Bolger et al., 2000; Gleason et al., 2008; Maisel & Gable, 2009; Shrout et al., 2006). Specific types of invisible support behaviors have also been identified during couples' discussions, including subtle and indirect behaviors that de-emphasize who is the support provider and who is the support recipient and shift the focus of the problem away from the support recipient onto others who have experienced similar issues (Girme et al., 2013; Howland & Simpson, 2010). This body of research has shown that the enactment of invisible support is associated with reductions in depressed mood and anxiety (Bolger et al., 2000; Shrout et al., 2006), increased self-efficacy (Howland & Simpson, 2010), more positive perceptions that others perceive the self as capable (Bolger & Amarel, 2007), and greater goal achievement over time (Girme et al., 2013).

However, knowing that partners *are* supportive, available, and responsive is also critical to feeling secure and happy in relationships (Reis et al., 2004). Compared to visible support, invisible support may do little to fulfill recipients' needs for connection or relatedness. For example, when support is clearly perceived and visibly provided during support exchanges, it produces greater relationship closeness and quality (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2003; Overall et al., 2010; Pasch et al., 1997; Sullivan et al., 2010). Indeed, perceiving the partner as being responsive and supportive may be paramount in many support interactions, trumping autonomy and competence needs and overriding potential hits to personal coping or self-efficacy. For example, Maisel and Gable (2009) found that invisible support resulted in greater sadness and reduced feeling of closeness in recipients when partners were perceived as being less understanding and less responsive. When accompanied by positive perceptions of the partner's understanding and validation, visible support did *not* generate more negative moods in recipients and, instead, generated greater relationship closeness (also see Gleason et al., 2008).

Viewed as a whole, the existing literature indicates that different types of support are likely to meet different types of needs in support recipients. The key to effective support, therefore, should be proper *matching* of the type of support to the primary needs of the recipient in the particular context in which a support transaction is occurring (Cutrona, 1990). For example, when

recipients desire emotional reassurance, but their partner provides practical guidance, recipients perceive their partner as less sensitive and evaluate the support more negatively (Cutrona, Shaffer, Wesner, & Gardner, 2007). The same is true with regard to visible versus invisible support. Although early work demonstrated that visible forms of emotional support undermined coping (e.g., Bolger et al., 2000), recent research has shown that when individuals are distressed when discussing their goals with their partners, receiving visible emotional support is associated with recipients feeling more supported and more confident about achieving their personal goals (Girme et al., 2013). In contrast, when discussing goal strivings with partners is not distressing, receiving more visible emotional support reduces recipients' goal-related confidence and feelings of efficacy (Girme et al., 2013). A similar pattern might arise with practical support. For example, recipients may be more appreciative of visible practical support if they really lack the resources to accomplish their goals (Cutrona, 1990).

In sum, the enactment of support by intimate partners can both facilitate and hinder recipients' needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. The benefits of support should be maximized (and its potential costs minimized) when enacted support meets the contextual needs of recipients. Invisible support should be most effective in contexts in which visible support impinges on people's sense of competence and autonomy needs (e.g., Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger et al., 2000) or recipients cannot bolster their sense of competence by reciprocating support they have received (e.g., Gleason et al., 2008). In contrast, visible support will be most beneficial when recipients are experiencing emotional distress and need their partner's care and comfort (e.g., Girme et al., 2013) or want evidence of their partner's understanding and responsiveness (e.g., Maisel & Gable, 2009). In addition, the provision of emotional support (e.g., listening, offering comfort, soothing) versus practical support (e.g., giving advice, guidance, and/or tangible aid) addresses very different needs, so each type of support should be most effective when it matches the current desires, needs, and demands of support recipients (Cutrona et al., 2007).

Needless to say, providing the right kind of support is not easy. However, partners who are able to responsively tailor their support provision to recipients' needs may not only help recipients navigate stressful challenges and achieve their personal goals; they may also demonstrate to recipients that they (partners) can be counted on to be a "safe haven" in times of need and a "secure base" from which to embark on life's endeavors (see Feeney & Collins, 2014; Reis et al., 2004). Indeed, as we discuss next (and summarize in Table 7.1), support interactions can offer an *opportunity* for partners to show insecure individuals that they (partners) are sensitive and reliable caregivers, which in turn may enhance trust in relationships.

Meeting the needs of avoidantly attached support recipients

One important individual difference that shapes how people respond to partner support is attachment avoidance. According to Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), people who become highly avoidant have been rejected by their prior caregivers, especially during times of need. As a result, highly avoidant individuals believe they cannot trust and depend on close others and, therefore, eschew closeness and intimacy and become rigidly self-reliant (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Highly avoidant individuals' deep distrust of others, and their strong motivation to avoid depending on their partners, produces a unique style of regulating distress – suppressing their attachment needs and defensively withdrawing from their attachment figures, especially when they are upset (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Accordingly, when highly avoidant individuals are stressed and could benefit from support, they distance themselves from their partners rather than seek support (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Highly avoidant support recipients also exaggerate their partners' lack of responsiveness, perceiving them as less supportive and caring than they really are (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Rholes et al., 2011). And, because they do not believe they can rely on their partners, avoidant individuals often respond to partners' support attempts with hostility and withdrawal to prevent becoming vulnerable to hurt by their partners (Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich, 2001; Rholes, Simpson, & Oriña, 1999; Simpson et al., 1992).

The striving for independence associated with attachment avoidance might suggest that more subtle, invisible forms of support that do not threaten individuals' sense of autonomy and competence could be one effective way to support highly avoidant people without triggering the distancing strategies they display when feeling dependent on their partners. However, maintaining independence from partners is a defensive priority arising from deep-seated beliefs that partners cannot be relied on to be good, available, and responsive caregivers (Bowlby, 1973). Thus, it is not that avoidant individuals do not want love and support or do not have strong relatedness needs; they do (Mikulincer, Birnbaum, Woddis, & Nachmias, 2000; Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). Rather, avoidant individuals deny these needs in order to protect themselves from the neglect and hurt they believe will happen if they expect love and support from their partners. Paradoxically, despite their defensive focus on sustaining independence, we think it is these foundational beliefs that account for why prior research has shown that avoidant individuals are more reactive to their partner's enacted support, including both responding negatively when their partner fails to provide support (e.g., Rholes et al., 1999) and responding more positively when their partner provides the clear, direct support they need to believe their partner is actually "there" for them (e.g., Simpson et al., 1992).

This point becomes clear when considering the specific conditions in which highly avoidant support recipients react negatively in support contexts – when their partners confirm avoidant individuals' negative expectations by providing low levels of support. Rholes et al. (1999), for example, found that highly distressed avoidant women were angrier when their partners offered them lower levels of support, but not when their partner's support was higher. Collins and Feeney (2004) also found that highly avoidant individuals appraised low (but not high) amounts of support more negatively, and they performed more poorly during a speech task when their partners provided low (but not high) support. Thus, rather than being happy relying on their own abilities and resources, highly avoidant individuals show poorer coping in the *absence* of support.

The underlying fear of dependence and expectations of neglect, which lie at the core of avoidance, also mean that partner support must be especially clear and salient to benefit avoidant support recipients. Indeed, high levels of support may break through avoidant defenses by sharply contradicting the negative expectations of avoidant people and providing them with undeniable evidence of their partner's availability. For example, although Simpson and his colleagues (1992) found that highly avoidant recipients sought less support from their partners when they were more distressed, avoidant recipients were the *most calmed* by very high levels of partner support. Studying the transition to parenthood, Rholes and his colleagues (2011) found that lower levels of perceived cooperative care from partners predicted increases in depressive symptoms across time in avoidant individuals, but higher levels of cooperative care forecasted reductions in depressive symptoms (also see Girme, Overall, Simpson, & Fletcher, 2015).

Thus, when low levels of support convey that partners are unreliable, unavailable, or neglectful, highly avoidant support recipients fare more poorly. However, when very high levels of support provide irrefutable evidence of the partner's availability, this allows highly avoidant individuals to safely experience their partner's care and support, ensuring that their defensive self-reliance and distancing do not hamper the support provision process. Partner support, however, still needs to remain sensitive to the discomfort that avoidant individuals tend to experience during intimate, emotionally imbued interactions. This explains why highly avoidant support recipients are more calmed when their partners offer specific advice or concrete solutions to problems (practical support) rather than encouraging intimacy or disclosure of emotions (emotional support; Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, & Oriña, 2007; also see Mikulincer & Florian, 1997). Thus, higher levels of practical support that focus on offering helpful advice may provide the evidence that most avoidant support recipients need to believe their partners are really there for them, without

the intimacy and vulnerability that often comes with receiving emotional caregiving. Confirming this notion, Girme, et al. (2015) recently demonstrated that the defensive responses highly avoidant recipients demonstrate at low levels of support are overturned when partners provide very high levels of practical support.

The complex emotional and behavioral reactions of highly avoidant support recipients highlight two important points. Delivering the right kind of support (1) provides diagnostic information regarding the degree to which partners are sensitive and reliable caregivers, and (2) is contingent on meeting the specific needs of particular support recipients. Thus, the right kind of support for avoidant recipients involves a higher level of practical support that: (1) provides irrefutable evidence of the partner's availability and thus contradicts expectations that partners will be neglectful or rejecting, but also (2) does not pull for too much emotional disclosure and intimacy, which may require too much vulnerability to lower avoidant defenses effectively (see Table 7.1). The more couples encounter support contexts, the more partners who provide this type of support can demonstrate they are reliable and can be trusted, which in turn should improve relationship outcomes and may even build greater attachment security across time. Supporting this latter proposition, greater trust that the partner is available and dependable predicts decreases in attachment avoidance across time (Arriaga, Kumashiro, Finkel, VanderDrift, & Luchies, 2014). Importantly, trust should be built up by partners who consistently provide evidence that they can be counted on to support highly avoidant recipients both when they need it and how they need it.

Meeting the needs of anxiously attached support recipients

According to Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), attachment anxiety arises when attachment figures have sometimes responded to bids for support with love and care, but at other times responded with anger or rejection. These experiences create a profound hunger for emotional closeness and intimacy, coupled with intense fears of rejection and abandonment. Unlike highly avoidant people, who cope with their negative expectations by downplaying relatedness needs and by striving to prevent dependence, highly anxious individuals manage their fears by continually seeking reassurance and constantly trying to obtain their partner's care, positive regard, and support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Unfortunately, their hyperactivated relatedness needs mean that anxious individuals exhibit intense, ruminative reactions to distressing situations (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007) and engage in clingy, emotionally manipulative strategies to seek support (Collins & Feeney, 2000). Unfortunately, the more recipients engage in this type of support seeking, the less partners tend to respond with positive support behaviors (Barbee &

TABLE 7.1. *Examples of partner behavior in diagnostic contexts that foster growth and security*

Diagnostic context	Partners' behavior	Demonstrates	Facilitating resilience, growth, and security in insecurely attached individuals	
			Meeting the needs of highly avoidant individuals	Meeting the needs of highly anxious individuals
Support	<p>Partner support that is responsive to the contextual needs of recipients</p> <p><i>Example: visible forms of care and reassurance to recipients who are upset/distressed; invisible forms of support to recipients who need to feel efficacious and competent to deal with impending stressors</i></p>	Partner is reliable and dependable	High levels of practical support that provide irrefutable evidence that the partner is a safe haven	Global perceptions of the partner's support and availability that provide reassurance the partner is a secure base
Conflict	<p>Conflict behavior that is responsive to the contextual needs of recipients</p> <p><i>Example: minimizing anger and engaging in accommodation for minor problems; engaging in conflict and expressing negative affect for major problems</i></p>	Partner is invested and committed	Softening communications and conflict recovery behaviors that demonstrate the partner has good intentions	Accommodation behaviors and emotional expressions (e.g., guilt) that illustrate the partner is committed to and values the relationship

Cunningham, 1995; Don, Mickleson, & Barbee, 2013). Moreover, because highly anxious individuals are sensitive to signs that their partners are not giving them what they crave, they tend to experience more negative emotions when their partners fail to provide sufficient support (Rholes et al., 1999).

Their persistent and intense need for closeness and support suggests that invisible forms of support should not be effective – and might even be detrimental – for anxious support recipients. Instead, highly anxious recipients might be most receptive to and soothed by high levels of clear, direct, and visible support. However, partner support is often relatively ineffective at soothing highly anxious support recipients (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Moreira et al., 2003; Simpson et al., 1992), and highly anxious recipients evaluate the partner support they do receive more negatively (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2004; Gallo & Smith, 2001; Priel & Shamai, 1995; Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, & Wilson, 2003). We think this is because highly anxious individuals have an insatiable desire for closeness and reassurance that is difficult for partners to fulfill, particularly in interactions that create expectations that the partner should provide care and support, such as when anxious individuals are in the role of the support recipient. Thus, in stressful support-based exchanges, even high levels of partner support may not gratify highly anxious individuals' craving for love and support.

Can anxious individuals ever reap the benefits of caring and supportive partners? Thus far, we have discussed the consequences of specific types of support enacted by partners in support-relevant contexts. Although the actual receipt of support provided by partners is not uniformly beneficial to recipients, more general perceptions that partners are supportive and caring have consistently positive effects on personal and relationship well-being (e.g., Kaul & Lakey, 2003; Lakey, 2013; Uchino & Garvey, 1997; Wethington & Kessler, 1986). These broader, more stable perceptions may typically arise from couples' everyday exchanges that indicate the partner is a constant source of positivity and regard (Lakey, 2013). In addition, although the support delivered during support exchanges may not immediately soothe recipients, seeing the partner attempting to provide support during these events may accumulate across time to generate more general and positive perceptions of partner support. Thus, although their overwhelming distress and insatiable appetite for support may make highly anxious recipients difficult to console during support interactions, more global perceptions that their partner is caring, available, and supportive is likely to have very positive effects on highly anxious individuals.

Research outside the context of acute and potentially distressing support exchanges does indicate that perceptions of support may have benefits for highly anxious individuals. For example, although they do not experience day-to-day supportive events more positively than other people, highly anxious individuals believe such events are more likely to have positive

consequences for the survival of their relationships (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). Exaggerated daily expressions of affection by partners also help anxious individuals feel more loved and regarded (Lemay & Dudley, 2011). During the transition to parenthood, highly anxious parents also experience more stable relationship satisfaction, fewer depressive symptoms, and reductions in attachment anxiety when they possess more positive perceptions of spousal support – that is, perceiving that their partner is dependable and provides a sense of emotional security (Rholes et al., 2001; Rholes et al., 2011; Simpson et al., 2003). Moreover, highly anxious individuals report reductions in attachment anxiety across time when they perceive that their partners are validating and supporting their personal goals, thereby providing a secure base for them to thrive more independently (Arriaga et al., 2014).

In sum, the specific constellation of needs associated with avoidance and anxiety highlight that different support processes foster resilience, growth, and security in highly avoidant and highly anxious individuals (Overall & Simpson, 2015). Their deep-seated fear of dependence and resulting defensive focus on independence means that highly avoidant support recipients need undisputed evidence that their partner is a safe haven, which may build trust and reduce avoidance across time. In contrast, their overdependence and vigilant focus on relatedness limits the degree to which partners can console highly anxious individuals in the midst of stressful interactions. However, global perceptions that the partner is supportive and caring may serve as a secure base that promotes strength and happiness in highly anxious individuals. These unique dynamics once again highlight that when support matches the specific needs of support recipients, it can create the conditions for optimal personal and relationship development (see Table 7.1).

RELATIONSHIP CONFLICTS AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR REPAIR AND GROWTH

It seems rather obvious that support tends to be good for relationships and the people in them, but perhaps more surprising is the fact that support can also be bad. It is also obvious that conflict can be damaging to both partners and relationships, but it may come as a bit more surprising that conflict can actually be *good* for relationships. Conflict can definitely take a toll on partners and relationships. For example, couples that have more frequent conflict are more likely to report declines in satisfaction and their relationship is more likely to dissolve (e.g., Kluwer & Johnson, 2007; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010; Orbach, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002). On the other hand, avoiding conflict and loyally maintaining positivity in the face of persistent relationship problems also leads to declining relationship satisfaction, particularly if relationship problems remain unresolved

(e.g., Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Drigotas, Whitney, & Rusbult, 1995; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; McNulty, 2010; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009; Overall, Sibley, & Travaglia, 2010). Indeed, there is now a solid body of research showing that solving relationship problems often requires directly engaging in conflict, even when that involves high levels of anger and hostility (e.g., Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall et al., 2009).

Maximizing a relationship's potential can occur only if the source of major relationship conflicts are addressed and improved (Overall & Simpson, 2013). Beyond this, however, conflict can also be an opportunity for relationship repair and growth because, if conflicts are managed well, they can provide valuable, diagnostic information about the partner, which in turn can improve relationships. In particular, partners' conflict-related behaviors and emotions reveal the degree to which partners are truly committed and can be trusted to put aside their own desires for the good of the relationship (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). During conflict, when hurt and anger often run high, the typical "gut response" is to protect the self by derogating, blaming, or attacking the partner and/or by withdrawing altogether. When partners are able to transform this initial impulse into a more controlled effort to resolve the problem by voicing concerns in a calm, forgiving, and constructive manner – called *accommodation* – this helps to build and maintain closeness and satisfaction (e.g., Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). These benefits occur because accommodation requires high levels of self-control and commitment (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001), which signal the partner's dedication and pro-relationship motives. Thus, when people see their partners accommodating during heated conflicts, they may experience greater trust and commitment over time (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999).

Sometimes even negative emotional and behavioral responses by the partner can be signs that the partner is invested and committed to the relationship (Baker, McNulty, & Overall, 2014). For example, people who are more dependent and strongly committed to their relationship tend to experience greater hurt feelings when they encounter conflict. More intense hurt feelings, in turn, motivate stronger efforts to restore closeness and repair the relationship bond, which has important interpersonal benefits (Lemay, Overall, & Clark, 2013). As with accommodation behavior, because hurt feelings arise when people care about and are committed to their relationship, individuals respond more positively to partners who express or are perceived to be experiencing hurt feelings (Lemay et al., 2013), which can lead people to feel more secure and satisfied in their relationship (Overall, Girme, Lemay, & Hammond, 2014).

In contrast to hurt feelings, the expression of anger often elicits and intensifies hostility during most conflict interactions (Lemay et al., 2012; Overall et al., 2009). However, anger also instigates attempts to address the root cause of conflicts and produce desired changes (Canary, Spitzberg, & Semic, 1998; Lemay et al., 2012). Moreover, although expressions of anger and hostile attempts to change a problem typically exacerbate negativity in the short-term, these behaviors can be effective at improving relationship problems across time, which in turn produces higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall et al., 2009). Two underlying mechanisms may explain these long-term benefits. First, expressions of anger and hostility clearly convey the seriousness of the problem and thus can motivate important changes in one or both partners (Overall et al., 2009; Overall & Simpson, 2013). Second, once initial self-protective resistance dissipates, people may often understand that their partners' anger and hostile problem engagement is a sign that they want change because they are truly invested in and care about the relationship (e.g., Gottman, 1998; Heavey et al., 1993).

How can inhibiting negativity via accommodation and expressing hurt, anger, and hostility both promote relationship improvement and growth? Similar to support contexts, whether accommodation or expressing negative affect maintains satisfaction, improves relationships, and conveys commitment depends on contextual factors. McNulty and Russell (2010), for instance, found that blaming and demanding conflict behaviors led to more satisfying and stable relationships for couples that were facing serious problems, but resulted in increased problems and dissatisfaction when problems were relatively minor. This pattern most likely arises because when problems are very serious, partners' anger and hostile behaviors are more likely to reflect and be perceived as strident attempts to maintain and improve the relationship (McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall et al., 2009). In contrast, when problems are minor, disproportionate anger and hostility probably produces feelings of unfair derogation and rejection, thereby eliciting reciprocal negativity and undermining conflict resolution. Indeed, during routine conflicts, maintaining positivity and demonstrating that irritations and personal preferences are not worth endangering the relationship (by accommodating) should foster greater affection, trust, and stability (McNulty, 2010).

Just as problem severity shapes the importance and underlying meaning of accommodation versus hostility, so should the orientations and dispositions of people who are on the receiving end of these behaviors. For example, people who believe that facing conflict can cultivate relationship growth may be more likely to respond positively to their partners' hostile attempts to improve relationship-relevant problems (Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003). More securely attached people, who have learned they can rely on others' love and acceptance during hard times (Bowlby, 1969),

also approach conflict situations with greater confidence and more optimistic attributions (Collins, 1996; Collins et al., 2006), are less likely to feel the sting of negativity from their partners (Campbell et al., 2005; Simpson et al., 1996), and may be more likely to view negative emotions and behaviors as signs that their partner is trying to improve the relationship. In contrast, the threat inherent in conflict situations should trigger the concerns and defensive strategies of highly anxious and avoidant individuals, particularly when the partner displays intense emotions (Simpson & Rholes, 1994, 2012). To successfully traverse relationship conflicts, therefore, partners may need to accommodate the particular needs of anxious and avoidant individuals. And, as when providing the right kind of support, partners who are responsive to the specific concerns of insecure individuals should not only prevent insecurities from impeding problem resolution, but also facilitate greater stability and security by demonstrating they are committed and truly willing to put the needs of the relationship above their own desires and goals (see Table 7.1; also see Overall & Simpson, 2015).

Meeting the needs of avoidantly attached individuals

Highly avoidant individuals deal with their deep distrust of others by keeping a safe emotional distance from their partners, which provides them a sense of independence and personal control. During conflict, however, avoidant individuals must contend in some way with the needs and dissatisfaction of their partners while also being the target of their partner's influence attempts. Not surprisingly, these elements of conflict can impinge on the independence that avoidant individuals strive to retain, activating their defenses. Avoidant individuals tend to exhibit greater anger and withdrawal both during conflict discussions and when their partners try to influence them (e.g., Overall & Sibley, 2009; Simpson et al., 1996). These reactions encourage emotional distance and minimize the influence of partners by forcing them to back off, to cease seeking change, or to accept less intimacy, thereby helping avoidant individuals feel more in control and safe from the threat of dependence (Overall & Lemay, 2015).

Expressions of negative emotions, hostile demands, or direct influence attempts by partners should exacerbate these distancing strategies and confirm the negative expectations of avoidant people – that partners are intentionally malicious and uncaring. To bypass avoidant defenses and facilitate some kind of resolution, partners need to adopt a softer approach that accommodates the core defenses and needs of highly avoidant individuals. To test this possibility, Overall, Simpson and Struthers (2013) examined the emotional and behavioral responses of both partners as couples engaged in conflict discussions in which partners asked highly avoidant individuals to

change their thoughts or behaviors in some important way. As predicted, avoidant individuals responded with greater anger, disengagement, and withdrawal, which resulted in poorer conflict resolution. However, partners were able to down-regulate these defensive reactions when they "softened" their communication through (1) reducing direct influence attempts that challenged avoidant targets' independence (e.g., by downplaying the severity of the problem, acknowledging progress made, validating the targets' point of view), and (2) offering clear evidence that avoidant targets were valued (e.g., by reducing friction, inhibiting negativity, expressing positive regard). These softening behaviors are sensitive to the fragility underlying highly avoidant individuals' need to sustain independence, and they contradict the hostile intentions that avoidant individuals often anticipate from their partners.

By being responsive to the specific concerns and needs associated with avoidance, partners can enhance their relationships by resolving conflicts and improving major relationship problems. Partners' responsiveness might also help avoidant people develop more secure beliefs and expectations by clearly demonstrating they (partners) *can* be trusted, and they are not the cold, selfish partners that avoidant individuals fear (Overall & Simpson, 2015; Simpson & Overall, 2014). Salvatore, Kuo, Steele, Simpson, and Collins (2011) have provided some evidence for these positive, long-term effects by examining the degree to which partners recovered from conflict during a "cool-down" task that immediately followed couples' discussions of a major relationship problem. Attachment insecurity (primarily avoidance), which had been assessed 20 years earlier in infancy, predicted poorer conflict recovery, and insecure individuals whose partners could not "move beyond the conflict" were less likely to be together 2 years later. However, when insecure individuals were involved with partners who displayed greater positivity and repair attempts during conflict recovery, their relationships were more likely to remain intact. Partners' better conflict recovery should signal that they (partners) can let go of negativity and blame, which may have helped these couples maintain their relationships over time (also see Arriaga et al., 2014). Similar behaviors that are careful to not highlight the dangers of dependence and also strongly contradict the negative expectations associated with avoidance also bolster avoidant individuals' trust and commitment (see Farrell, Simpson, Overall, & Shallcross, *in press*).

Meeting the needs of anxiously attached individuals

The craving for closeness and fear of abandonment, which lies at the core of attachment anxiety, also makes conflict challenging for highly anxious individuals (Simpson & Rholes, 2012). Conflict inevitably carries the possibility of rejection, threatens the relationship bond, and can undermine feelings of love and acceptance. Moreover, highly anxious individuals maximize the

negative implications of conflict by perceiving it, and their partner's negative behaviors, as an indication that the relationship is in jeopardy (Collins, 1996; Collins et al., 2006). Accordingly, highly anxious individuals experience more pronounced distress during relationship conflicts (Campbell et al., 2005; Simpson et al., 1996; Tran & Simpson, 2009) and they find it difficult to "move past" their hurt feelings to handle conflict in constructive ways (Simpson et al., 1996; Tran & Simpson, 2009). Instead, anxious individuals tend to "protest" the loss of the relationship bond with exaggerated emotional displays and try to control and cling to their partners to re-establish proximity and closeness (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007; Overall et al., 2014).

Demonstrating that conflict can provide an opportunity to appreciate the partner's care and regard, recent research has shown that anxious individuals' responses to conflict do elicit evidence of their partner's commitment, which they so desperately crave. Overall et al. (2014) examined the emotional reactions and proximity-maintaining strategies exhibited by highly anxious individuals when faced with daily conflict and during couples' discussions of serious relationship conflicts. Highly anxious individuals experienced more pronounced hurt feelings when they dealt with conflict, which triggered guilt-inducing attempts to regain their partner's care and reassurance involving exaggerated emotional expressions of hurt and appeals to their partner's love, concern, or relationship obligations. These tactics are commonly used in close relationships to induce guilt, which typically motivates partners to apologize, provide reassurance, and make amends. Because guilt-induction tactics work to the extent that a partner cares about and is invested in the relationship, guilt provides strong evidence of the partner's commitment (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994), which is exactly what anxious individuals want. Accordingly, Overall et al. (2014) found that when highly anxious individuals successfully induced guilt in their partners, they reported more positive evaluations of their partner's commitment and relationship satisfaction across time.

These results suggest that anxious individuals may use conflict situations to test (or diagnose) their partner's level of commitment. The resulting negative emotions induced in partners generate the reassurance that highly anxious individuals desire, which in turn bolsters their feelings of relationship security and satisfaction. Partners should also be able to produce the same benefits (and bypass some of the costs associated with guilt induction) if they enter conflicts with direct expressions of care and regard for their partners (see Lemay & Dudley, 2011; Simpson & Overall, 2014). As described earlier, accommodation during conflict directly communicates love, commitment, and trustworthiness, thereby soothing anxious individuals. To test this proposition, Tran and Simpson (2009) assessed feelings of acceptance and accommodation behavior during couples' conflict discussions. Highly anxious individuals felt less accepted and

exhibited less accommodation, as did their partners. However, highly committed partners were able to prevent the reactivity of their highly anxious mates from infecting their own responses by displaying greater accommodation. Moreover, when partners were highly committed, and thus displayed greater accommodation, highly anxious individuals felt greater acceptance and behaved more positively (also see Tran & Simpson, 2011). Similar to the long-term benefits of guilt, by demonstrating strong commitment, these more positive dynamics during conflict interactions should help anxious individuals feel more secure and satisfied over time.

In sum, although relationship conflicts are often unpleasant, the way in which partners manage conflict can improve relationship problems and provide diagnostic evidence of the partner's genuine commitment and true relationship intentions. Moreover, because conflicts are attachment-relevant situations that activate the concerns and destructive reactions of insecure people, they also provide opportunities for partners to soothe the concerns of avoidant and anxious individuals, elicit more constructive reactions from them, and eventually build more secure and satisfying relationships. As with support contexts, the types of partner behaviors that facilitate relationship improvement and help insecure individuals depend on contextual needs (see Table 7.1). When serious problems need to be addressed, and attachment security removes the potential damage that can be caused by harsh problem-solving behaviors, even partner anger and hostility – if expressed appropriately – can facilitate problem resolution, demonstrate investment, and enhance relationship maintenance. Partner behavior needs to take a different, more measured tone with people who are avoidant in order to prevent and down-regulate their defensive strategies, which serve to maintain independence. However, by conveying that partners have benevolent, loving intentions, softer repair efforts focused on moving the relationship forward can facilitate greater commitment in avoidant individuals and enhance relationship maintenance. Anxious individuals also feel happier and more secure when their partners' emotional and behavioral responses during conflict provide clear evidence they (partners) are committed and value the relationship. These examples illustrate once more that precarious situations can be important opportunities for relationship and personal growth.

CONCLUSIONS

Relationships come with major risks. Relying on intimate partners for support makes individuals vulnerable to pain if partners are not adequately responsive. Relationship conflicts inevitably occur, which carry the risk of rejection and exploitation, especially when partners are not sufficiently

invested in the relationship. However, these dilemmas also provide opportunities for relationship and personal growth. Partners who are responsive to the specific needs of support recipients can help them weather challenges and demonstrate that they (partners) are reliable and sensitive caregivers. Partners who are upset by relationship conflict and strive to solve problems can reveal just how much they truly care about the relationship. And when partners regulate their own dissatisfaction in ways that are sensitive to the needs of insecure individuals, they demonstrate their high levels of investment and commitment. Thus, by exposing the partner's dependability, commitment, and trustworthiness, these diagnostic contexts have the power to solidify and enhance relationships.

It is in some ways ironic that the power of diagnostic contexts that foster growth may be strongest for those who find these situations most difficult, but it is the possible risks and vulnerabilities of *needing support* and *confronting conflict* that make these contexts so influential (Overall & Simpson, 2015). It is within these specific situations that a partner's behavior can convincingly counteract the negative beliefs and expectations of highly avoidant and anxious people. As the research reviewed in this chapter demonstrates, partners' responsive support and sensitive conflict behavior can temper the concerns and damaging responses of insecurely attached people, create more constructive interactions, and build greater commitment, trust, satisfaction, and security in them.

We focused on support and conflict situations because support is a key component of all attachment-based relationships, conflict can be a significant source of distress in almost all relationships, and both situations can damage relationships if they are not managed well. Many other dyadic contexts might also be used to gauge a partner's level of love, commitment, and/or trustworthiness, offering even more opportunities to facilitate growth and security. For example, more satisfying and frequent sexual activity generates expectations that partners are available, which helps maintain relationship satisfaction in insecure individuals (see Little, McNulty, & Russell, 2010; Muise, Kim, McNulty, & Impett, Chapter 6, this volume). Sharing and capitalizing on positive events is also an important contributor to maintaining quality relationships (see Gable & Anderson, Chapter 5, this volume), but can be difficult to negotiate with insecure individuals because anxious people disclose in demanding ways and avoidant people shy away from emotional intimacy (see Shallcross, Howland, Bemis, Simpson, & Frazier, 2011). And enacting or asking for sacrifices to sustain relationships can have both positive and negative effects, depending on each partner's goals and motives (Day & Impett, Chapter 10, this volume; Farrell et al., in press). As with the situations discussed in this chapter, partner responses that promote optimal relationship development and enhance security critically depend on *matching* the specific needs of people

within those interactions. Future research that investigates the different ways in which partners meet this challenge are likely to extend our understanding of how couples can leverage the power of diagnostic situations to sustain and strengthen their intimate relationships.

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