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Autonomy promotion, responsiveness, and emotion regulation promote effective social support in times of stress

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Adult attachment theory provides guidance for providing optimal social support in intimate relationships. According to attachment theory, facilitating autonomy (secure base support) sometimes is more important than providing nurturance (safe haven support). In addition, it is important that couples celebrate one another's triumphs and successes (another form of secure base support). A key construct that explains the development of attachment is responsiveness to the individual's needs. Support that is delivered in a responsive manner (i.e., that leads the individual to feel understood, validated, and cared for) is more likely to enhance the relationship and less likely to damage self-esteem than assistance that is not responsive. A responsive exchange is more likely if emotion dysregulation can be prevented. Attachment theory offers explanations for why people vary in their effectiveness at emotion regulation. Appropriate emotion regulation is more likely if disclosures of current difficulties can be made in a way that is not defensive or accusatory, an ability that varies as a function of attachment orientation. Attachment theory also offers guidance regarding the optimal forms of social support for specific individuals. All these insights from adult attachment theory can be integrated into interventions to help couples become more effective support providers.

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Introduction

Social support is an important component of successful coping with stress. The past fifteen years have brought a wealth of new insights into social support processes as they unfold in the context of intimate dyadic relationships. New theoretical advances have come from an integration of attachment theory into conceptualizations

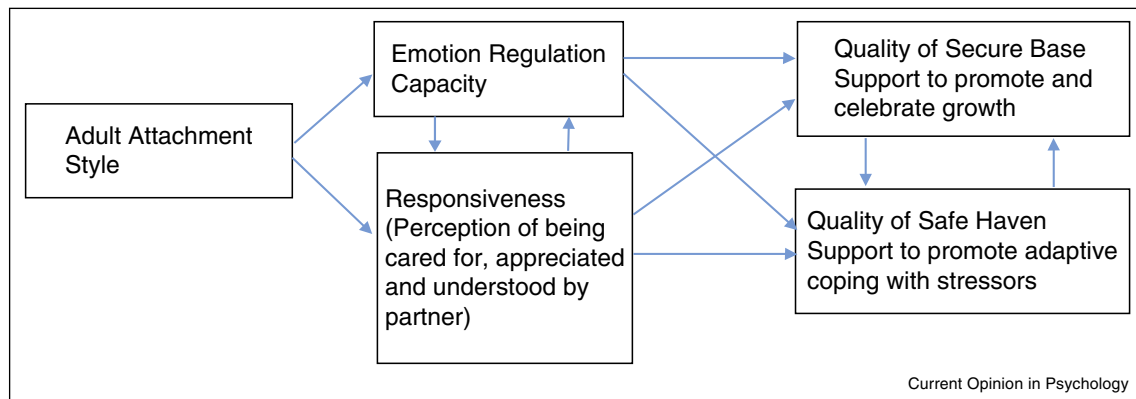
of social support. Observational techniques that analyze specific support transactions and event-sampling methods (daily diaries) that track the behaviors of intimate partners over time have also provided rich new information. This article will provide a selective sampling of recent developments, all of which can be traced back to adult attachment theory. Advances in conceptualizations of social support include the importance of intimate partners in fostering autonomy and celebrating achievement, both of which build a reservoir of trust that may be drawn upon in times of adversity. Additional insights include the importance of perceived partner responsivity and emotion regulation as components of successful support transactions in couples. Differences in preferences for and ability to profit from different types of social support have also been found to vary as a function of adult attachment style. These topics were chosen because they have implications for improving the quality of support interactions among intimate partners, but have not yet been widely integrated into interventions to promote social support in couples. A theoretical model linking key constructs may be found in [Figure 1](#).

Conceptualizing social support – incorporating boosts and celebration

A new framework for conceptualizing the construct of social support comes from the work of attachment theorists. Prior definitions viewed support primarily as a resource in times of adversity. A recent re-conceptualization of social support argues for the importance of support in both high-stress and low-stress situations [1–3]. This re-conceptualization involves two types of support: safe haven and secure base. Safe-haven support is defined as comfort and assistance to another in times of stress or adversity (traditional social support). Secure-base support is defined as support for the individual's autonomy and exploration when not distressed. From this perspective, support has an important role in promoting goal attainment and autonomous functioning as well as assistance in times of stress.

Evidence of the importance of social support in the context of achievement comes from research by Gable and colleagues, who have demonstrated the importance of supportive reactions to positive events [4,5]. For example, in a daily-diary study, on days when individuals shared a positive event with another person, they experienced more positive affect and life satisfaction than on days when a positive event occurred but they did not tell anyone [5]. An enthusiastic response to a positive event

Figure 1



Theoretical model depicting the influence of adult attachment style on emotion regulation and responsiveness to one's intimate partner. Experiences with caregivers during development contribute to the formation of expectations regarding the availability of other people in times of need and one's own worthiness to receive love and assistance from others. These expectations, or working models, give rise to different approaches to dealing with relationships, termed adult attachment styles or orientations. Individuals with secure attachment styles are able to regulate their emotions and behave in a way that is responsive to other peoples' needs. This makes them good providers of social support. Those with avoidant or anxious attachment styles have more difficulty with both emotion regulation and responsiveness to others, which interferes with the quality of social support they can provide. Two types of social support are important for intimate relationships. The first, safe haven support, involves comfort and assistance to the partner in times of adversity. The second, secure base support, involves encouragement of exploration and pursuit of personal goals. Both are critical to successful relationships and they have reciprocal effects on each other, building a firm belief in the partner's responsiveness.

by another person communicates important information, that is, that the responder understands the significance of the event, takes an interest in the discloser's experiences, and derives pleasure from the discloser's positive personal events [6]. Thus, a key advance in recent years is the insight that part of providing support to one's partner is encouraging the other in efforts toward growth and cheering him or her on when these efforts are successful.

The role of responsiveness

Also building on attachment theory concepts, Cutrona [7] defined social support as acts that reflect responsiveness to another's needs. Responsiveness, relating to others in a way that allows them to feel understood, validated, and cared for, is at the heart of many relationship processes [8]. Responsive caregiving is viewed by attachment theorists as the cornerstone of the bond that grows between infant and caregiver in the earliest months of life, and shapes the child's beliefs about the essential goodness of both the self and others [9,10]. In adult relationships, intimacy grows when individuals disclose important aspects of themselves, and these self-disclosures are met with understanding, validation, and caring [11]. Expectations that form the core of trust are those that focus on the partner's responsiveness to one's needs in situations of stress [12]. As couples are assisted in their efforts to become more effective sources of support to their partner, it may be important to emphasize empathic listening, validation, and expressions of caring as much as specific types of social support.

Preventing the negative effects of support: a role for secure base support and responsive caregiving

No studies have had greater impact on social support research than those of Bolger and colleagues, who found that social support from one's partner can increase distress. Possible ways to circumvent this unwanted consequence of support by incorporating the concepts of secure base support and responsiveness will be proposed. Bolger and colleagues conducted a series of daily diary studies of couples in which one member of the couple faced the stress of preparing for the bar examination [13–15]. Each day for several weeks before the exam, the examinee and his or her partner recorded whether or not they had provided and/or received emotional support from the other. Daily ratings of mood were also collected. An unexpected but consistent finding across studies was that when examinees reported they had received social support from their partner on a given day (termed 'visible support,' because the recipient was aware of having received it), their mood was worse the following day. By contrast, on days when partners reported that they had provided support to the examinee but the examinee did not notice this support (termed 'invisible support'), the examinee's mood improved the following day [13]. The negative impact on mood of visible support has been replicated, both by Bolger and associates [14,16–18] and other researchers [19].

It may be that individuals preparing for the bar exam reacted negatively to the support they received because

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