



Failure to capitalize on sharing good news with romantic partners: Exploring positivity deficits of socially anxious people with self-reports, partner-reports, and behavioral observations[☆]



Todd B. Kashdan*, Patty Ferssizidis, Antonina S. Farmer, Leah M. Adams, Patrick E. McKnight

George Mason University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Extending prior work on social anxiety and positivity deficits, we examined whether individual differences in social anxiety alter the ability to share and respond to the good news of romantic partners (i.e., capitalization support) and how this influences romantic relationship satisfaction and commitment. In this study of 174 heterosexual couples (average age of 21.5 with 58.3% identifying as Caucasian), greater social anxiety was associated with the provision and receipt of less supportive responses to shared positive events as measured by trait questionnaires, partner reports, and behavioral observations in the laboratory. In longitudinal analyses, individuals in romantic relationships with socially anxious partners who experienced inadequate capitalization support were more likely to terminate their relationship and report a decline in relationship quality six months later. As evidence of construct specificity, social anxiety effects were independent of depressive symptoms. Taken together, social anxiety influenced a person's ability to receive and provide support for shared positive events; these deficits had adverse romantic consequences. Researchers and clinicians may better understand social anxiety by exploring a wider range of interpersonal contexts and positive constructs. The addition of capitalization support to the social anxiety literature offers new insights into interpersonal approaches and treatments.

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Social interactions provide rewarding opportunities and social anxiety may limit access to these rewards. Interpersonal difficulties are central to theoretical models of social anxiety (Clark & Wells, 1995; Gilbert, 2001; Leary, 2000). According to these models, socially anxious people become anxious prior to and during social interactions because they believe their behavior or perceived defects will prompt others to reject them. To prevent undesirable social outcomes, socially anxious people avoid social contact, become vigilant to social threats, and deflect attention when in social situations (Clark & Wells, 1995). Although these efforts may reduce the likelihood of rejection, they also lead to rigid, constrained social behavior (Alden & Taylor, 2004) and deplete the attentional resources and stamina needed to engage in and extract rewards from pleasurable social interactions (Heimberg, Brozovich,

& Rapee, 2010; Kashdan, Weeks, & Savostyanova, 2011). Thus, social anxiety interferes with the potential rewards of social interactions by either depriving an individual of those social encounters or disturbing the social process.

Few occasions are more rewarding than the opportunity to share a personally meaningful experience with a close friend or romantic partner. Sharing these experiences in hopes of getting a receptive, supportive audience is called a *capitalization attempt* (Langston, 1994). The resulting support following disclosure (i.e., capitalization support) can be construed as a relationship maintenance strategy. Communicating personal information to another person and having them respond to these disclosures is essential to developing intimacy with another person (Reis & Shaver, 1988) and generating satisfaction in close relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994). Previously, researchers focused on the importance of supportiveness during difficult times, however, recent work suggests that capitalization support is an even better predictor of well-being and relationship satisfaction, commitment, and longevity (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004).

When people positively respond to capitalization attempts, they signal that they are invested in their partner's well-being (Gable &

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* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, MS 3F5, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030, United States. Tel.: +1 703 993 9486; fax: +1 703 993 1359.

E-mail address: tkashdan@gmu.edu (T.B. Kashdan).

Reis, 2010). Positive behavioral responses to capitalization attempts are characterized as being active (interested and engaged in what one's partner has to say) and constructive (enthusiastic and encouraging elaboration). When a partner listens attentively with a curious attitude, the person who disclosed the event experiences more intense, enduring positive emotions; these positive emotions are also attributed to the relationship partner and the relationship as a whole (Gable et al., 2004, 2006; Reis et al., 2010). In contrast, the quality of a relationship is compromised when people respond to shared positive events in a style that is passive (attentive but without attempts to ask for details or extend the conversation) or destructive (pointing out the downsides of an event, thus undermining its positive nature). Passive and destructive response styles convey disinterest in what is important to romantic partners and are linked to greater conflict and less commitment, satisfaction, intimacy, and trust within a relationship (Gable et al., 2004). In summary, romantic relationships develop and mature through small positive interactions such as capitalization. We extended this work by exploring individual differences that moderate the presence and benefits of healthy, supportive responses to capitalization attempts. Specifically, we explored whether individual differences in social anxiety disturb the capitalization process in romantic relationships.

Social anxiety and the quality of romantic relationships

Research on the romantic relationships of socially anxious people has been mixed. Socially anxious people struggle to initiate romantic relationships (Schneier et al., 1994) and enter into lasting relationships such as marriage (Lampe, Slade, Issakidis, & Andrews, 2003). When in a romantic relationship, socially anxious people tend to describe it as less intimate and supportive (Cuming & Rapee, 2010; Sparrevohn & Rapee, 2009), recount less pleasurable sexual activity (Kashdan, Adams, et al., 2011), and report greater conflict avoidance, less emotion expression, and fewer self-disclosures (e.g., Davila & Beck, 2002). These findings might appear face valid given the social difficulties experienced by the socially anxious, yet other researchers found no association between social anxiety and romantic relationship quality (Beck, Davila, Farrow, & Grant, 2006; Wenzel, Graff-Dolezal, Macho, & Brendel, 2005), and some researchers found a small inverse association (e.g., Cuming & Rapee, 2010; Filsinger & Wilson, 1983). These inconsistencies might reflect methodological differences such as sampling or measurement. Our collective knowledge of social anxiety and romantic relationships comes predominantly from cross-sectional studies where social anxiety symptoms and romantic relationship functioning were measured during a single assessment with a single informant—an approach that cannot capture how psychological processes affect each person in the relationship over time (McNulty & Fincham, 2012).

To date, only three published studies of social anxiety have collected information from both romantic partners in a couple and all of them were limited to a cross-sectional design. One study found a negative association between social anxiety and marital adjustment — but only for socially anxious spouses; there was no evidence for partner effects (Filsinger & Wilson, 1983). In two additional studies, researchers examined the behaviors of socially anxious people during laboratory interactions. Wenzel and colleagues (2005) found that socially anxious individuals showed less frequent positive behaviors and more extreme negative behaviors during conversations manipulated to be on positive, negative, or neutral topics.

Studying socially anxious women in romantic relationships, Beck et al. (2006) found that social anxiety has no direct effect on the frequency of positive or negative behaviors during an interaction between romantic partners. These researchers did find that

greater social anxiety led to greater distress when disclosing difficult life events, but only when their partners displayed a high frequency of positive, supportive behaviors. Due to the cross-sectional nature design, it remains unclear whether partners were more supportive of socially anxious women when they displayed distress or if receipt of supportive responses exacerbated the distress of socially anxious women.

With mixed findings, there remains some doubt about the relevance of social anxiety to relationship quality. Notably, prior studies failed to address how the social anxiety of one romantic partner influences the behaviors and cognitions of the other partner. To understand social anxiety, similar to any other personality dimension, we need to move from an individualistic to interpersonal perspective in theory, methodology, and data analytic strategies (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). A truly interpersonal approach requires consideration of dynamic influences between partners, and cannot be addressed with surveys or information processing tasks given to one person in a dyad (Coyne, 1999; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Prior social anxiety studies have narrowly focused on social support for difficult life events whereas research on capitalization support has yet to address vital individual differences that moderate the presence and benefits of this process.

Social anxiety and positivity deficits

Relationship researchers have shown that positive behaviors are equally or of greater importance to relationship satisfaction and longevity than negative behaviors (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010; Aron & Aron, 1997; Gable et al., 2006). Socially anxious people are at particular risk of positivity deficits. Studies on cognitive processing and neural networks have shown that socially anxious people are overly sensitive to negative information and also less reactive to positive social cues such as happy faces (Quadflieg, Wendt, Mohr, Miltner, & Straube, 2007; Silvia, Allan, Beauchamp, Maschauer, & Workman, 2006), and lack a natural approach orientation under conditions of low threat (Hirsch & Matthews, 2000). Compared to a healthy comparison group, socially anxious people spend less time paying attention to positive stimuli, disengage quicker, and perseverate longer on negative stimuli (Chen, Clarke, MacLeod, & Guastella, 2012). Collectively, social anxiety symptoms are linked to a wide range of positivity deficits that can be expected to interfere with the maintenance of healthy, close relationships.

Socially anxious people tend to underestimate their performance and denigrate themselves in social situations, often viewing themselves more negatively and less positively than how others perceive them (Christensen, Stein, & Means-Christensen, 2003; Kashdan & Savostyanova, 2011; Wilson & Rapee, 2005). Upon receiving positive feedback from others, socially anxious people are less likely to enjoy this experience —due to worries about being unable to reach new, higher social standards in the future (e.g., Alden & Wallace, 1995; Weeks, Heimberg, & Rodebaugh, 2008). These information processing and motivational deficits might account for why socially anxious people are susceptible to less frequent, intense, and enduring positive emotions and social events (Kashdan & Steger, 2006; Kashdan et al., 2013).

Social anxiety and capitalization support

To extend work on social anxiety in a relational context, we considered whether dysfunctional capitalization support helps to explain when social anxiety is related to romantic relationship problems. Given the emotional and interpersonal features of social anxiety, socially anxious people may be at particular risk of dysfunctional capitalization support within their close relationships. One possibility is that socially anxious people may be less

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