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An upward spiral: Bidirectional associations between positive affect and positive aspects of close relationships across the life span

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ABSTRACT

Both positive affect and positive close relationships contribute significantly to overall well-being. This review examines the literature assessing associations between positive affect and positive indices within close relationships across the life span. Specifically, the reviewed research includes parent–child relationships, friendships, and romantic relationships in relation to a variety of positive emotions and happiness more generally. This review also highlights several processes that may serve as partial mechanisms linking positive close relationships and positive affect including the interpersonal regulation and coregulation of positive emotion and the biological processes involved in experiences of positive affect and close relationships. Throughout the review, evidence of bidirectional, reciprocal associations between positive affect and positive close relationships is emphasized. Based on the current state of the literature, future directions for research in this area are considered.

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Introduction

Both positive affect (PA) and positive close relationships are sources of human strength and well-being. However, studying PA and positive relationship processes in relation to each other had been relatively rare until recently when a surge of research on both PA (see [Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008](#) for

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a review) and positive close relationships (see [Fincham & Beach, 2010](#), or [Gable & Gosnell, 2011](#) for a review) gave way to a large amount of literature linking these two oft-desired matters. Moreover, the literature as a whole indicates that the associations between PA and positive close relationships are bidirectional, with each mutually influencing the other resulting in an upward spiral (e.g., [Fredrickson, 2001](#)). This review highlights this upward spiral by reviewing direct associations between PA and several important close relationships across the life span, as well as the socioemotional and biological mechanisms linking them.

Positive close relationships

Close relationships such as parent–child relationships, friendships, and romantic relationships are some of the most significant aspects of life and are the most important of our social ties. Importantly, *positive* close relationships are not defined by their absence of negative experiences or processes (as negative experiences still occur at low levels even in the happiest relationships; e.g., [Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998](#)), but by their high level of flourishing properties such as experiences of intimacy, affection, shared fun, and perceived partner responsiveness (e.g., [Reis, 2012](#); [Reis & Gable, 2003](#)). Positive close relationships strongly influence behavior and development ([Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000](#)) and are critically important for a host of reasons. Specifically, positive close relationships are partially responsible for enhanced psychological well-being (e.g., [Ryff & Keyes, 1995](#)) and favorable physical health, with social support and integration directly influencing physical well-being, buffering against the harmful effects of stress, and reducing the risk of mortality (e.g., [Cohen & Wills, 1985](#); [Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010](#); [House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988](#)). Close relationships also fulfill the human need to form attachments to others.

Forming attachments to close others is necessary for infants' survival and aids in ideal functioning across the life span. The attachment system is an adaptive framework in which infants behave in ways to ensure proximity to caregivers for care and protection. In the first year, it is theorized that infants create mental representations of how sensitive and responsive caregivers are to the infants' needs ([Bowlby, 1969/1982](#)). Individual differences in attachment develop based on the caregiver's responsiveness, with responsive caregivers promoting secure attachment and unreliable or inconsistent caregivers promoting insecure attachment ([Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978](#)). Attachment security is ideal and provides the foundation for optimal development. With age, children's encounters with others and development of affectional bonds (e.g., with friends, [Ainsworth, 1989](#)) are dictated by their early attachment histories ([Ainsworth et al., 1978](#); [Bowlby, 1969/1982](#)), and attachment styles remain fairly stable across time (see [Fraleay, 2002](#) for a meta-analysis), continuing to influence interpersonal relationships in adulthood ([Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007](#); [Sroufe, 2005](#)). Ultimately, those with secure attachment styles are more likely to have positive close relationships (e.g., [Simpson et al., 2007](#)) and are more prone to experiencing PA both in their relationships (e.g., [Kafetsios & Nezlek, 2002](#)) and in general (e.g., [Alford, Lyddon, & Schreiber, 2006](#); also see [Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013](#) for a review).

Positive affect

PA is broad term referring to positively valenced attitudes, moods, and emotions. Positive attitudes pertain to fairly stable beliefs about how good something is. Positive moods like happiness are less stable and more general than attitudes, and are not directed at specific things. Positive emotions like joy are the most discrete, are usually very brief, and occur in response to good situations (e.g., [Gross, 2010](#)). Positive emotions could also be considered state PA, whereas trait PA refers to general, characteristic experiences of PA. Trait PA is an important element of subjective well-being, which is defined as the affective and cognitive evaluations people have of their own lives. Subjective well-being is made up of high PA, low negative affect (NA), and high life satisfaction, or the cognitive judgment of how well life is going globally (e.g., [Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009](#)). PA is functionally important as it allows us to take advantage of opportunities ([Carver, 2003](#)) and enhance our resources. Specifically, [Fredrickson's \(1998b, 2001\)](#) broaden-and-build model proposes that experiencing positive emotions broadens our thoughts and actions in the moment and that this broadening builds resources that can

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