

Social Anxiety and Social Support in Romantic Relationships

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Little is known about the quality of socially anxious individuals' romantic relationships. In the present study, we examine associations between social anxiety and social support in such relationships. In Study 1, we collected self-report data on social anxiety symptoms and received, provided, and perceived social support from 343 undergraduates and their romantic partners. One year later couples were contacted to determine whether they were still in this relationship. Results indicated that men's social anxiety at Time 1 predicted higher rates of breakup at Time 2. Men's and women's perceived support, as well as men's provided support, were also significantly predictive of breakup. Social anxiety did not interact with any of the support variables to predict breakup. In Study 2, a subset of undergraduate couples with a partner high ($n = 27$) or low ($n = 27$) in social anxiety completed two 10-minute, lab-based, video-recorded social support tasks. Both partners rated their received or provided social support following the interaction, and trained observers also coded for support behaviors. Results showed that socially anxious individuals received less support from their partners during the interaction according to participant but not observer report. High and lower social anxiety couples did not differ in terms of the target's provision of support. Taken together, results suggest that social anxiety is associated with difficulties even in the context of established romantic relationships. Clinical implications are discussed.

Keywords: social anxiety; social support; romantic relationships

SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER (SAD) is one of the most prevalent mental health problems in the United States, affecting 12.1% of the population (Kessler et al., 2005). Social anxiety symptoms are continuously distributed throughout the population with SAD at the severe end of the continuum (Ruscio, 2010). Past research has demonstrated that both SAD and symptoms of social anxiety are associated with interpersonal difficulties in interactions with strangers or acquaintances (Alden & Wallace, 1995; Baker & Edelmans, 2002; Fydreich, Chambless, Perry, Buergener, & Beazley, 1998; Stopa & Clark, 1993; Voncken & Bogels, 2008). Furthermore, SAD and symptoms of social anxiety are associated with difficulties in forming relationships: Socially anxious individuals report having smaller social networks (Montgomery, Haemmerlie, & Edwards, 1991; Torgrud et al., 2004), are more likely to report having no close friends (Furmark et al., 1999), and are less likely to marry than nonanxious individuals (e.g., Davidson, Hughes, George, & Blazer, 1994; Schneier, Johnson, Hornig, Liebowitz, & Weissman, 1992). However, little is known about the quality of socially anxious individuals' romantic relationships once they are established. Socially anxious individuals often evidence a negative bias toward their own interpersonal interactions, viewing these interactions in a more negative light than do observers or their interaction partners (e.g., Stopa & Clark, 1993). Thus, if socially anxious individuals report difficulties in their romantic relationships, it remains unclear whether these difficulties truly exist, whether they are the product of this negative interpersonal bias, or both. Therefore, to better study relationship functioning among socially anxious individuals, researchers need to move beyond

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self-report measures to include partner- and observer-report measures.

One important function of romantic relationships is the provision of social support. Social support has been defined as the “provision of psychological and material resources intended to benefit an individual’s ability to cope with stress” (Cohen, 2004, p. 676). Support from one’s partner is associated with a number of beneficial future outcomes, including improved physical (Reblin & Uchino, 2008) and psychological health (Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999), greater satisfaction with the relationship (Dehle, 2007; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Saitzyk, Floyd, & Kroll, 1997), and decreased likelihood of divorce (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998).

Two distinguishable constructs are important in the social support literature: *Perceived support* is defined as the extent to which an individual perceives support to be available, whereas *received support* constitutes the frequency with which an individual is the recipient of specific support behaviors. Thus, measures of perceived support capture a respondent’s perception of the *potential* for support, whereas measures of received support capture a respondent’s perception of the *actualization* of that support. A number of studies suggest that perceived support is typically more strongly predictive of positive outcomes such as psychological adjustment than is received support (e.g., Cohen, 2004; Prati & Pietrantonio, 2010). Given their negative interpretation bias of interpersonal relationships, socially anxious people might be especially likely to report less perceived support from their partners, in that such perceptions lack specific behavioral referents.

In the present study, we sought a better understanding of social support, both perceived and received, in the romantic relationships of socially anxious individuals. Several studies have demonstrated that social anxiety is associated with decreases in perceived availability of support from one’s romantic partner (Cuming & Rapee, 2010; Rapee, Peters, Carpenter, & Gatson, 2015), though this association reached significance only among women in one of these two studies. To date, only two studies have examined the relationship between social anxiety and received social support from a romantic partner.¹ Beck, Davila, Farrow, and Grant (2006) compared social support behaviors among female targets

selected to be high or low in social anxiety and their male partners as the partners helped targets prepare for a surprise speech task. Observers then coded video recordings of the 5-minute interactions prior to the speech task for support behaviors. The authors found no differences between the support behaviors of the partners of high social anxiety (HSA) and low social anxiety (LSA) targets or between the support receipt behaviors of HSA and LSA targets themselves.

In contrast, Porter and Chambless (2014) found some evidence that social anxiety is associated with difficulties with social support. The authors asked undergraduate couples to complete measures of social anxiety symptoms and received, provided, and desired social support, as well as other relationship constructs. They found that among women, social anxiety was associated with decreased received and provided support in the relationship by self-report, but not partner report. Further, although socially anxious women reported desiring less support from their partners, lack of support in their relationships appeared to have negative consequences: These women also reported decreased relationship satisfaction, and low levels of received support mediated the relationship between social anxiety and low relationship satisfaction. Among men, social anxiety was unrelated to social support. Thus, these results suggest that social anxiety may be associated with difficulties in social support, at least among women. However, given that the effects of social anxiety on support emerged only on self-report measures, it remains unclear whether socially anxious individuals truly receive less support from and provide less support to their partners, or whether these findings reflect socially anxious individuals’ tendencies to perceive their interpersonal interactions and relationships in a negative light.

In the present study, we sought to clarify the association between social anxiety and social support in romantic relationships. In Study 1, we examined the effects of social anxiety and perceived and received social support on relationship dissolution 1 year later. Specifically, we were interested in whether the effects of social support, a known predictor of relationship dissolution, were moderated by social anxiety, given our previous findings that socially anxious women desire less support. We were also interested in whether the main effect of social anxiety was predictive of breakup. We speculated that on one hand, social anxiety may put a strain on romantic relationships. Consistent with this notion, Kashdan et al. (2013) found that social anxiety conferred a greater likelihood of breakup. On the other hand, socially anxious individuals

¹Kashdan, Ferrisizidis, Farmer, Adams and McKnight (2013) examined the associations between social anxiety and support capitalization in romantic relationships. However, we do not review this study in detail because it focused on supportive responses to good news, whereas the present study focuses on support provision in response to a problem or a stressful life event.

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