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Thriving through relationships

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The specific pathways through which close relationships promote optimal well-being are not well understood. We describe a model (building on attachment theory's notion of safe haven and secure base support) that explains how close relationships promote thriving. This model defines thriving, identifies distinct contexts through which individuals may thrive (life adversity and life opportunities for growth), describes two distinct social support functions in close relationships that promote thriving (source of strength support and relational catalyst support), and identifies mediators through which relational support leads to long-term thriving.

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Close and caring relationships are undeniably linked to health and well-being at all stages in the lifespan. Yet the specific pathways through which relationships promote optimal well-being are not well understood. The theoretical model of *thriving through relationships* seeks to address this gap by identifying the specific interpersonal processes through which relational support promotes thriving [1••]. This model builds on attachment theory and traditional social support theory by (a) emphasizing the important end-state of receiving relational support as 'thriving' (not just stress-buffering), (b) highlighting two life contexts in which people can thrive (adversity and opportunity), (c) specifying two corresponding relational support functions that promote thriving in each context (*source of strength support* and *relational catalyst support*), and (d) identifying specific mediators that are likely to explain the link between support and long-term thriving outcomes (see Figure 1 for a theoretical overview).

Defining thriving and thriving contexts

To understand how relationships facilitate (or hinder) thriving, it is important to begin with a clear definition of thriving. Drawing from diverse perspectives on resilience and optimal well-being, we conceptualize thriving in terms of five broad components of well-being including (1) *hedonic well-being*, (2) *eudaimonic well-being*, (3) *psychological well-being*, (4) *social well-being*, and (5) *physical well-being* (see Table 1).

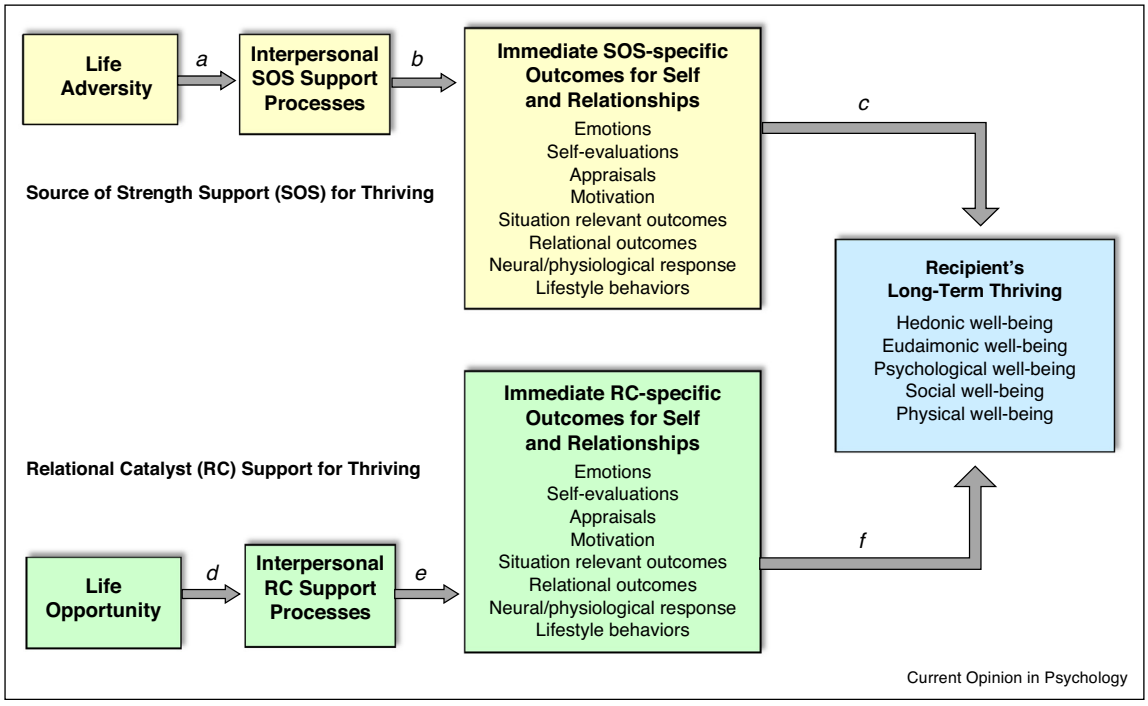
In addition, we differentiate two life contexts through which individuals may potentially thrive. A first context involves the experience of adversity. Individuals thrive in this context when they are able to cope successfully with adversities, not only by being buffered from potentially severe consequences of adversity when it arises, but also by emerging from the experience as a stronger or more knowledgeable person. Because thriving connotes growth and development, thriving in the face of adversity involves more than simply returning to baseline or maintenance of the status quo. Thriving occurs when people weather the storms of life in ways that enable them to learn and grow from the experience.

A second context for thriving involves the experience of life opportunities for growth and prosperity in the absence of adversity. Individuals thrive in this context when they are able to fully participate in opportunities for fulfillment and personal growth through work, play, socializing, learning, discovery, creating, pursuing hobbies, and making meaningful contribution to community and society. These opportunities may be viewed as positive challenges because they often involve goal strivings and goal pursuits that require time, effort, and concentration. Thriving individuals are likely to formulate and actively pursue personal goals, and to pursue them in a self-determined manner [2–4].

Relational support functions as predictors of thriving

A key proposition of the thriving through relationships model is that well-functioning close relationships (with family, friends, and intimate partners) are fundamental to thriving because they serve two distinct support functions that correspond to the two life contexts through which people may potentially thrive (see Table 2). These support functions are rooted in attachment theory [5–7], which proposes that people enter the world with propensities to seek proximity to close others in times of stress (an attachment behavioral system), to explore the environment (an exploration system), and to support the attachment and exploration behavior of close others (a caregiving behavioral system). This model extends attachment theory in its focus on thriving and in its detailed

Figure 1



Theoretical model of thriving through relationships.
Adapted from Feeney and Collins [1••].

articulation of ways in which supportive relationships contribute to thriving outcomes.

Support for thriving through adversity

One important function that relationships serve is to support thriving through adversity, not only by buffering individuals from the negative effects of stress, but also by helping them to emerge from the stressor in a way that enables them to flourish either because of or despite their circumstances (Figure 1, paths a–c). A useful metaphor is that houses destroyed by storms are frequently rebuilt, not into the same houses that existed before, but into homes that are better able to withstand similar storms in the future. So too are people able to emerge from adverse life circumstances stronger and better off than they were before with the support of significant others who fortify and assist them in the rebuilding. In this sense, relationships can provide a source of strength, in addition to a refuge, in adverse circumstances.

In other work, we refer to the support of a relationship partner's attachment behaviors (i.e. proximity-seeking and support-seeking in times of adversity) as the provision of a *safe haven*. This conceptualization is based on attachment theory's notion of a safe haven [6], which functions to support behaviors that involve 'coming in' to

Table 1

Components of thriving.

Thriving components	Examples
1. Hedonic well-being	Happiness, life satisfaction, subjective well-being, pleasant affect, healthy affective balance — ratio of positive to negative affect
2. Eudaimonic well-being	Having purpose and meaning in life, having and progressing toward meaningful life goals, mastery/efficacy, control, autonomy/self-determination, personal growth, movement toward full potential
3. Psychological well-being	Positive self-regard, self-acceptance, resilience/hardiness, optimism, absence (or reduced incidence) of mental health symptoms or disorders
4. Social well-being	Deep and meaningful human connections, positive interpersonal expectancies (including perceived available support), prosocial orientation, faith in others/humanity
5. Physical well-being	Physical fitness (healthy weight and activity levels); absence (or reduced incidence) of illness and disease; health status above expected baselines; longevity

Adapted from Feeney and Collins [1••].