



# Mere presence is not enough: Responsive support in a virtual world

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## ABSTRACT

When individuals are faced with novel or threatening situations, the presence of a trusted companion should reduce anxiety and promote feelings of security. Attachment theory assumes, however, that mere presence is not sufficient for establishing security; an attachment figure must also be attentive and emotionally responsive. To test this idea, participants came to the lab with their romantic partner and completed a threatening cliff-walking task in a digital immersive virtual environment. The presence and nonverbal support behavior (attentive vs. inattentive) of their partner was experimentally manipulated. Results indicated that participants in the attentive-partner condition experienced the task as less stressful than those who were alone; they also reported feeling more secure during the task and were less vigilant of their partner's behavior compared to those in the inattentive-partner condition. Those in the inattentive-partner condition felt less cared for and kept greater physical distance from their partner on a subsequent task. These findings suggest that human beings are predisposed to monitor their social environment for signs of responsiveness, and that perceived responsiveness, not mere presence, is the key modulator of emotional security.

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## Introduction

During times of stress or adversity, people of all ages turn to close others for comfort, assistance, and support. According to attachment theory, the desire for proximity to close others during times of threat is driven by an innate attachment behavioral system that functions to promote safety and survival by keeping individuals in contact with nurturing caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). However, attachment theory assumes that people will be most likely to thrive when close relationship partners are not merely physically present but also emotionally responsive when needed. Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of responsiveness for individual health and well-being and for the development of healthy and satisfying relationships.

The importance of caregiver responsiveness is well-documented in the infant attachment literature, which shows that an infant's ability to cope effectively with novel or threatening environments depends strongly on the degree to which his or her attachment figure is attentive and emotionally attuned during the interaction. Although it is of obvious survival advantage for infants to regulate their security through contact with nurturing caregivers (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters

& Wall, 1978), it is less clear whether, or to what degree, the attachment system operates similarly in adulthood or in intimate relationships, the prototypical attachment bond in adulthood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994; Zeifman & Hazan, 2008). After all, adults are capable of caring for themselves and are not solely dependent on a romantic partner for survival. During times of threat or uncertainty, what is the impact of partner presence and attentiveness on stress appraisals, felt security, and relationship outcomes? Is the mere presence of a romantic partner enough to reduce threat and establish feelings of comfort, or will adults be aware of, and attuned to, subtle behavioral cues of their partner's attentiveness and emotional availability? To address these questions, the current investigation examines normative attachment processes in romantic couples and explores the impact of partner presence (vs. absence) and attentiveness during a threatening task on stress appraisals, attachment behavior, and relationship outcomes.

### Attachment behavior in infants

Although assumed to operate “from the cradle to the grave” (Bowlby, 1979/2005), the normative functions of the attachment behavioral system have been primarily documented in parent–child interactions (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Cassidy, 2008). Infants and young children seek proximity to attachment figures when faced with threatening situations (seeking a *safe haven*) and are more likely to confidently explore novel environments when in the presence of an attachment figure (a *secure base*). However, mere presence is not

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sufficient for establishing a child's sense of emotional security. Indeed, Bowlby (1973) observed that parents are often "physically present but 'emotionally' absent" (p. 23). Thus, attachment theory proposes that a child's sense of security will depend not only on whether an attachment figure is present but also on whether he or she is attentive and emotionally responsive.

Consistent with this idea, experimental work shows that infants and young children are highly attuned to signs of maternal responsiveness and modulate their attachment and exploratory behavior accordingly. For example, Sorce and Emde (1981) placed 15-month-old infants in a novel play environment and manipulated whether their mother was attentive (actively monitoring her child) or inattentive (reading a newspaper). When mothers were *inattentive*, infants were less emotionally comforted by their mother's presence (e.g., smiled less, displayed more negative emotional tone), were more vigilant of their mothers' behavior, and were less likely to venture out and explore the environment. Similarly, Carr, Dabbs, and Carr (1975) found that two-year-old children spent a larger percentage of time looking at their mothers (greater vigilance) when their mothers were inattentive (vs. attentive). Thus, at very early stages in development, human beings are capable not only of monitoring the presence or absence of attachment figures, but also of discerning the degree to which they are willing and able to come to their aid should difficulties arise.

#### *Attachment behavior in adults*

Proximity to trusted social partners, especially during times of stress or adversity, should be vital to well-being at all stages in the life span. Thus, attachment theory and other prominent evolutionary perspectives on social bonding assume that adults, like children, will be most likely to thrive when they have close relationship partners who are responsive to their needs and deeply invested in their welfare (Bowlby, 1969; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Coan, 2008, 2010; Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). However, the causal impact of an attachment figure's ongoing signaling of responsiveness on adult attachment behavior is not well understood. One reason for this gap is that prior work on adult attachment has focused on individual differences in adult attachment styles; much less attention has been paid to normative attachment dynamics.

There is some evidence for the normative activation of the attachment system in adult close relationships. For example, correlational studies show that intimate partners rely on one another as a safe haven of comfort when distressed (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000; Simpson, Rholes and Nelligan, 1992) and a secure base for exploration and personal growth (e.g., Feeney, 2004). Studies also show that adults turn their attention toward attachment figures when distressed, and that these effects can occur automatically and outside conscious awareness. For example, after being subliminally primed with threat-related words (vs. control words), participants responded more quickly to the names of their attachment figures (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002).

A small number of experimental studies show that the actual or symbolic presence of a close relationship partner can reduce threat appraisals in adults. For example, holding the hand of an intimate partner attenuated threat-related brain activity in response to mild electric shocks (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006) and reduced perceptions of pain in response to heat stimuli (Master et al., 2009). The presence of a trusted companion can also make the physical world appear less daunting (Schnall, Harber, Stefanucci, & Proffitt, 2008); while wearing a heavy backpack, participants judged a hill to be less steep when in the presence of a friend or when thinking about a supportive close relationship partner. These studies provide some causal evidence for the social regulation of security in adults, but they fail to distinguish between partner presence and partner responsiveness. A closer inspection of the findings, however, suggests that responsiveness may have played a key role in shaping these effects. For example, the threat attenuating effects of hand-holding were

strongest for those in high quality relationships (Coan et al., 2006). Likewise, the hill was judged to be less steep when participants thought about a significant other who had been a source of support but not when they thought about a significant other who had disappointed or betrayed them (Schnall et al., 2008). These findings suggest that the beneficial effects of social presence depend in large part on the degree to which a partner is likely to be supportive and responsive to one's needs.

In summary, prior research provides initial evidence for the normative activation of the attachment system in adulthood and the safety-regulating function of attachment bonds in intimate relationships. However, it is still unclear how partner presence versus responsiveness modulates the attachment system in adulthood. To our knowledge, no studies have experimentally manipulated partner responsiveness during a stressful episode to examine its causal impact on stress appraisals and behavioral outcomes. Although mere presence can serve as an important safety signal, partner responsiveness should play the key role in shaping attachment behavior and emotional outcomes. That is, a partner must not only be present but must also show signs of being attentive, available, and willing to assist if needed. The presence of a partner whose attention is directed elsewhere should be a less effective safety signal and may even signal a lack of care. Thus, we propose that, when faced with stressful or threatening situations, adults, like children, will be highly sensitive to behavioral cues of their partner's attentiveness and emotional availability. When partners are present and attentive (vs. absent or inattentive), adults should experience lower stress, a greater sense of emotional security, and reduced behavioral vigilance. Conversely, and similar to the infant literature, unresponsive partners may actually interfere with effective coping or successful goal pursuits because adults may become vigilant for signs of responsiveness and preoccupied with fulfilling their attachment needs (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008).

In addition to shaping stress-related outcomes, partner attentiveness and sensitivity to needs should have important implications for the development and maintenance of secure and well-functioning relationships. Caregiver responsiveness plays a key role in the development of secure parent–child relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1978), and the same should be true for adult attachment bonds. Many theories in the close relationships literature identify *perceived partner responsiveness to the self* as a key factor in the development of trust and intimacy in close relationships (e.g., Murray, Holmes & Collins, 2006; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Perceived responsiveness is typically defined as the degree to which an individual feels understood, validated, and cared for by an interaction partner (Reis & Shaver, 1988). When a partner is behaviorally supportive and emotionally attuned during a stressful event, support-recipients should feel more understood and cared for by their partner. In contrast, when a partner is inattentive or preoccupied with his or her own concerns, support-recipients are likely to feel misunderstood and invalidated, and to question their partner's concern for their welfare.

Finally, social support interactions provide individuals with a critical testing ground for discerning whether their partner will be there for them in good times and bad, and for shaping the broader conclusions they draw about their partner's intrinsic motivation to care for them when they are vulnerable and in need (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). Thus, adults should be highly attuned to diagnostic information about their partner's motivation to care for them. Behavioral responsiveness signals a partner's benevolent motives and provides an important cue that a partner is safe to approach. Just as children distance from unresponsive caregivers and seek proximity to responsive caregivers, adults should feel safer to approach a responsive partner compared to an unresponsive partner.

#### **The current study**

We investigated normative attachment processes in adult intimate relationships by exploring the impact of both the presence and

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