How can we get the most out of our close relationships? Research in the area of personal relationships continues to grow, but most prior work has emphasized how to overcome negative aspects. This volume demonstrates that a good relationship is more than simply the absence of a bad relationship, and that establishing and maintaining optimal relationships entails enacting a set of processes that are distinct from merely avoiding negative or harmful behaviors. Drawing on recent relationship science to explore issues such as intimacy, attachment, passion, sacrifice, and compassionate goals, the essays in this volume emphasize the positive features that allow relationships to flourish. In doing so, they integrate several theoretical perspectives, concepts, and mechanisms that produce optimal relationships. The volume also includes a section on intensive and abbreviated interventions that have been empirically validated to be effective in promoting the positive features of close relationships.

C. Raymond Knee is Professor of Psychology and Director of Graduate Education in the Department of Psychology at the University of Houston.

Harry T. Reis is Professor of Psychology at the University of Rochester.
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_Purdue University_

John P. Caughlin
_University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign_

Susan Sprecher
_Illinois State University_

C. Raymond Knee
_University of Houston_

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C. Raymond Knee
University of Houston

Harry T. Reis
University of Rochester
CONTENTS

List of figures and tables
List of contributors
Preface

PART I MAJOR THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

1 Promoting intimacy: strategies suggested by the appetitive side
Harry T. Reis, David C. de Jong, Karisa Y. Lee, Stephanie D. O’Keefe, and Brett J. Peters

2 Optimal relationships as mutual fulfillment of self-determination theory’s basic psychological needs
C. Raymond Knee, Benjamin W. Hadden, and Zachary Baker

3 Attachment theory as a framework for the promotion of optimal relationships
Mario Mikulincer and Phillip R. Shaver

4 The self-expansion model and optimal relationship development
Xiaomeng Xu, Gary W. Lewandowski Jr., and Arthur Aron

PART II CONCEPTS AND MECHANISMS

5 Capitalization: the good news about close relationships
Shelly L. Gable and Jason F. Anderson

6 The positive implications of sex for relationships
Amy Muise, James J. Kim, James K. McNulty, and Emily A. Impett

7 The power of diagnostic situations: how support and conflict can foster growth and security
Nickola C. Overall, Yuthika U. Girme, and Jeffry A. Simpson
Contents

8 The role of passion in optimal relationships 171
Robert J. Vallerand and Noémie Carbonneau

9 The dyadic nature of ideal and partner perceptions in romantic relationships 197
Lorne Campbell and Sarah Moroz

10 For it is in giving that we receive: the benefits of sacrifice in relationships 211
Lisa C. Day and Emily A. Impett

11 For better or worse: compassionate goals create good relationships in good times and bad 232
Jennifer Crocker and Amy Canevello

12 Synchrony in positive social relationships 257
Tanya Vacharkulksemsuk

PART III EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS 279

13 Effective interventions for optimal relationships 281
Justin A. Lavner and Thomas N. Bradbury

14 Forgiveness interventions for optimal close relationships: problems and prospects 304
Frank D. Fincham, Ross May, and Steven R. H. Beach

15 Brief interventions to strengthen relationships and prevent dissolution 326
Jaci L. Rolfs and Ronald D. Rogge

Index 350
FIGURES AND TABLES

FIGURES

5.1 General model of positive events and capitalization. page 107
5.2 Sample items from the perceived responses to capitalization attempts. 108
5.3 Proposed consequences of responsive and unresponsive reactions to capitalization attempts. 112
8.1 Passion, affect, and relationships within the activities. 178
8.2 The role of conflict in the passion–couple relationship satisfaction. 180
12.1 Simplified illustrations of superconductivity. 266

TABLE

7.1 Examples of partner behavior in diagnostic contexts that foster growth and security. 155
CONTRIBUTORS

JASON F. ANDERSON, University of California, Santa Barbara

ARTHUR ARON, Stony Brook University

ZACHARY BAKER, University of Houston

STEVEN R. H. BEACH, University of Georgia

THOMAS N. BRADBURY, University of California, Los Angeles

LORNE CAMPBELL, University of Western Ontario

AMY CANEVELLO, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

NOÉMIE CARBONNEAU, Université du Québec à Montréal

JENNIFER CROCKER, The Ohio State University

LISA C. DAY, University of Toronto

DAVID C. DE JONG, University of Rochester

FRANK D. FINCHAM, Florida State University

SHELLY L. GABLE, University of California, Santa Barbara

YUTHIKA U. GIRME, University of Auckland

BENJAMIN W. HADDEN, University of Houston

EMILY A. IMPETT, University of Toronto, Mississauga

JAMES J. KIM, University of Toronto, Mississauga

C. RAYMOND KNEE, University of Houston

JUSTIN A. LAVNER, University of Georgia

KARISA Y. LEE, University of Rochester

GARY W. LEWANDOWSKI JR., Monmouth University

ROSS MAY, Florida State University
List of contributors

James K. McNulty, Florida State University
Mario Mikulincer, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya
Sarah Moroz, University of Western Ontario
Amy Muise, University of Toronto, Mississauga
Stephanie D. O’Keefe, University of Rochester
Nickola C. Overall, University of Auckland
Brett J. Peters, University of Rochester
Harry T. Reis, University of Rochester
Ronald D. Rogge, University of Rochester
Jaci L. Rolffs, University of Rochester
Phillip R. Shaver, University of California, Davis
Jeffry A. Simpson, University of Minnesota
Tanya Vacharkulksemsuk, University of California, Berkeley
Robert J. Vallerand, Université du Quebec à Montreal
Xiaomeng Xu, Idaho State University
The inspiration for this edited volume emerged from numerous sources, including a figment of our imagination that we affectionately refer to as “Sal the Jedi Master” who specializes in relationships. Sal made an earlier appearance to us in a commentary we wrote back in 1996 (Reis & Knee, 1996). We thought then that he had left us for good, but like the Star Wars series, he recently returned with fresh insights. On a series of particularly challenging mountain bike rides, Sal would appear and share various pieces of wisdom about the field of close relationships and the direction in which it has been headed.

His first pearl of wisdom went something like this: “Studying the negative, hmmm? Taken you far, it has, but at what cost? There is more to relationships than avoiding their dark side. The light side of the force must be embraced and understood with equal ambition, no?”

Sal was concerned about the literature’s seeming assumption that a good relationship is simply the absence of a bad relationship. Clearly we resonated to Sal’s suggestion (the force was with us). As we surveyed the most popular empirical perspectives on what produces good relationships, we agreed that most of them focused on what went wrong with relationships and how to avoid those events or how to deal with them after they had already occurred.

Sal’s second suggestion was equally insightful. “From the positive side of the force, theories also benefit, do they not?”

Indeed, as Sal suggested, whereas theories that emphasize the study of positive psychological approaches had once been rare and empirically limited, contemporary empirical findings and theories make a compelling case for the independence of positive and negative relationship processes. Sal had helped us to realize that approaches that focus solely on the reduction of negative relationship experiences are potentially missing out on innovative ways to enhance positive relationship experiences.

On Sal’s third visit, his suggestion was more obscure. "Optimal relationships are more than simply what we typically observe to occur, no?” We scratched our heads a few times and eventually realized that Sal was getting philosophical on us.
All sorts of relationship processes have been documented and observed to occur, and research has amply documented normative patterns, but that does not mean that what is normative and typical is necessarily what is optimal. Sal had provoked us to think about not what does happen, but what can happen.

Sal’s fourth and final appearance came just as we were in the initial planning stages of the volume, pondering how we could best accomplish the goals he set for us. “Remember . . . a small army of Jedi who are attuned to the positive side of the force can achieve very great things.” Clearly Sal was not referring to us, but rather to the potential colleagues and Jedi Masters we could reach out to for help in this endeavor. We set out to assemble the strongest alliance of inspired relationship researchers we could find.

We hope that this volume will promote theoretical and empirical research advances on facilitating the optimal development of close relationships. Relationship science has put forth numerous empirically validated theories and mechanisms that predict the likelihood of having a satisfying relationship. This volume both complements and extends these efforts. By focusing on the development and functioning of optimal close relationships, we can provide a broader perspective on what it means to have a “good relationship.” We believe that this is what people aim for when they establish and then commit to a close relationship, yet too often these goals become obscure over time and circumstances. Relationship research can re-illuminate these intentions, as the chapters in this volume illustrate. Positive approaches can also facilitate the development of empirically validated interventions for promoting optimal relationships, and even brief interventions have been shown to be effective.

Here are a few examples of what we mean: satisfying relationships are those that mutually support and fulfill basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (according to self-determination theory); that promote mutual responsiveness and felt security (according to attachment theory), intimacy (as in the intimacy model), and facilitate disclosure of both positive and negative events (as with approach motives and capitalization); that are characterized by harmonious rather than obsessive passion (according to the dualistic model of passion), in which partners can authentically express and embrace their true selves (authenticity models), and enjoy satisfying sexuality. Further, optimal close relationships are self-expanding (according to self-expansion theory) and are characterized by compassionate goals rather than ego goals, and forgiveness; and satisfy partners’ relationship ideals (according to the ideal standards model).

The volume is divided into three parts. Part I introduces major theoretical perspectives on promoting optimal relationships. In particular, Reis, de Jong, Lee, O’Keefe, and Peters provide a framework on intimacy that distinguishes appetitive and aversive processes, and sets up the chapters that follow. Additionally, Knee, Hadden, and Baker (this volume) emphasize mutual fulfillment of basic psychological needs, and in doing so, attempt to integrate many of the concepts
and mechanisms that follow into a self-determination theory perspective. Mikulincer and Shaver (this volume) present attachment theory, one of the richest and most empirically validated theories on close relationships. Finally, rounding out the major theoretical perspectives, Xu, Lewandowski, and Aron (this volume) discuss self-expansion theory’s contributions to understanding optimal relationships. Part II introduces concepts and mechanisms that have been empirically shown to promote better relationships, ranging from capitalizing on positive events to the importance of passion and sex, the benefits of compassionate goals and sacrifices, and even behavioral synchrony and rapport. Part III sums up empirical research on both intensive and abbreviated interventions that have been shown to promote better relationships.

We hope that you enjoy this integrative volume as much as we enjoyed developing it. Who knows, after reading these chapters, perhaps Sal will appear to you with fresh insights!

REFERENCE