

Affectionate Communication in Close Relationships

Few communication behaviors are more consequential to the development and maintenance of close relationships than the expression of affection. Indeed, people often use affectionate gestures to initiate or accelerate relationship development. In contrast, the absence of affection in established relationships frequently coincides with relational deterioration. This text explores the scientific research on affection exchange that has emerged from the disciplines of communication, social and clinical psychology, family studies, psychophysiology, sociology, nursing, and behavioral health. Specific points of focus include the individual and relational benefits – including health benefits – of affectionate behavior, the significant detriments associated with lacking sufficient affection, and the risks of expressing affection. It also discusses the primary social and cultural influences on affection exchange, critiques principal theories and measurement models, and offers suggestions for future empirical research.

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Preface

I started studying the communication of affection around the age of twelve. Having been raised by parents who both valued and practiced the expression of affection, I assumed – like many people do – that what was true in my family was true in *every* family. It was therefore utterly perplexing to me when, as an adolescent, I made the discovery that not everyone enjoys affectionate behavior.

Being a highly affectionate person myself, I found that incomprehensible. In my mind, communicating affection was one of the absolute best parts of having close relationships, so I failed to understand why anyone might react negatively to a hug, a pat on the back, or an *I love you*. Many years later, when I began graduate school and realized I was going to need a question to research, I saw my opportunity to unravel that mystery.

Although my empirical work on affectionate communication began with a focus on its risks, I quickly discovered that there was much about affectionate behavior that was intriguing. Why do we express affection in the first place? How do we do so? Which people and relationships are more affectionate than others, and why? When is affection good for us, and under what circumstances is it bad for us? Who suffers from affection deprivation, and how do they cope? These and other questions have fueled my scholarly curiosity for more than two decades now, and despite dozens of studies with thousands of participants, I believe there is still much more to be learned.

In 2006, I published *Communicating Affection: Interpersonal Behavior and Social Context* (Cambridge University Press). That was the first text that attempted a somewhat comprehensive review of the affectionate communication literature, and it was also the formal delineation of my theory, affection exchange theory. One rhetorical device I employed in that book was to pose research questions that were provocative but as yet unaddressed. I did so at the time to highlight the fact that there was much left to learn about affectionate behavior. Since the publication of that book, many of those questions – and many others not even envisioned at

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the time – have been answered. The affectionate communication literature has advanced substantially in the last twelve years – indeed, of the published empirical studies on affectionate communication cited in this book, more than half were published after 2006 – which made me realize the time was ripe for a new and even more comprehensive text.

This book is my own product, but the research that made it possible belongs to many people. First and foremost, I am extremely grateful for a long and productive collaboration with Mark Morman. Mark and I began studying affectionate communication in the late 1990s when we were both finishing our doctoral programs, and many of the foundational components of the literature – including the Affectionate Communication Index and the Tripartite Model of Affectionate Behavior – emerged from our work together. He has been a true partner in this endeavor and I will always be thankful for his contributions and his friendship.

In addition, I have been blessed to work with many wonderful co-authors to illuminate the intricacies of affectionate communication, and I am extremely grateful for their insights and contributions: Tamara Afifi, Justin Boren, Judee Burgoon, Lou Clark, Kristen Davis, Doug Deiss, Amanda Denes, Mark Di Corcia, Dana Dinsmore, Jen Eden, Larry Erbert, Lisa Farinelli, Mark Generous, Kelby Halone, Annegret Hannawa, Mark Haynes, Jon Hess, Colin Hesse, Jeff Judd, Angela La Valley, Daniel Mansson, Bree McEwan, Ian McLeod, Lisa Miczo, Alan Mikkelsen, Mary Claire Morr Serewicz, Malcolm Parks, Perry Pauley, Corey Pavlich, Colter Ray, George Ray, Sarah Riforgiate, James Roberts, Jack Sargent, Albert Simon, Jordan Soliz, James Stein, Melissa Tafoya, Kyle Tusing, Lisa van Raalte, Alice Veksler, Mike Voloudakis, Jason Wilson, Nathan Woo, and Michael Wu. I am certainly also grateful for the many other scholars – some whom I know and most whom I do not – whose research has produced important discoveries about affectionate behavior in human relationships.

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My final and most profound thanks belong to my partner, Brian, and our three canine companions, Cruise, Buster, and Champ. Together, they serve as a constant reminder to me of why affection is so valuable.