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978-1-107-10274-3 - Positive Approaches to Optimal Relationship Development

Edited by C. Raymond Knee and Harry T. Reis

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POSITIVE APPROACHES TO OPTIMAL RELATIONSHIP
DEVELOPMENT

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.

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PREFACE

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.

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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

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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!

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Reis, H. T., & Knee, C. R. (1996). What we know, what we don't know, and what we need to know about relationship knowledge structures. In G. F. O. Fletcher & J. Fitness (Eds.), *Knowledge structures and interaction in close relationships: A social psychological approach*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.