

# American Psychologist

## **Applying Relationship Science to Evaluate How the COVID-19 Pandemic May Impact Couples' Relationships**

Paula R. Pietromonaco and Nickola C. Overall

Online First Publication, July 23, 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000714>

### CITATION

Pietromonaco, P. R., & Overall, N. C. (2020, July 23). Applying Relationship Science to Evaluate How the COVID-19 Pandemic May Impact Couples' Relationships. *American Psychologist*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000714>

# Applying Relationship Science to Evaluate How the COVID-19 Pandemic May Impact Couples' Relationships

Paula R. Pietromonaco  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Nickola C. Overall  
University of Auckland

The coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic has profoundly altered people's daily lives and created multiple societal challenges. One important challenge of this unique stressor is maintaining well-functioning intimate relationships, which are inextricably tied to emotional and physical health. Yet research on romantic relationships shows that external stressors such as economic hardship, demanding jobs, and disasters can threaten the quality and stability of couples' relationships. Research within relationship science investigating how external stressors and existing vulnerabilities shape couple functioning can inform predictions about how the current pandemic will impact couples' relationships and which couples in which contexts may be most at risk for adverse relationship consequences. Drawing on theory and research from relationship science, the presented conceptual framework, adapted from the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), suggests that facing COVID-19-related external stress is likely to increase harmful dyadic processes (e.g., hostility, withdrawal, less responsive support), which will undermine couples' relationship quality. These harmful effects are likely to be exacerbated by the broader preexisting context in which couples' relationships are situated (e.g., social class, minority status, age), and their individual vulnerabilities (e.g., attachment insecurity, depression). The framework presented identifies the essential factors that need to be addressed in order to mitigate the potential adverse effects of the current crisis on relationships, and offers key directions for future research.

### *Public Significance Statement*

The current article draws on relationship science theory and research to illuminate the potential consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for couples' relationships. How well couples adapt will depend not only on the extent to which they face more severe COVID-19-related stressors but also the broader context of their lives (e.g., income, minority status) and couples' individual vulnerabilities (e.g., depression, attachment insecurity). This time of crisis raises opportunities for policies, interventions and couples to promote adaptive relationship processes and enrich the quality of couples' relationships.

*Keywords:* stress, close relationships, attachment, support, conflict



We've both recently been laid off . . . The reality of our life being turned upside down is settling in fast: reduced funds, budgets for food, hiding or sharing our fears and anxieties from each other and maybe not laughing as much.

It's starting to feel like a pressure cooker in this house. Today my husband of 28 years said something hurtful. Then I said something mean back. It's definitely way too much togetherness.

My wife is nine months pregnant and we're expecting the baby any day now. A few nights ago I woke up to find her in a worry spiral: "What if we get the virus?"

I'm 77, my wife 82. She has severe dementia and is in a memory care nursing home about 75 miles away. I used to go see her every Monday. Now she is locked away from me.

As illustrated in these quotes from a recent *New York Times* article (Harris & Tarchak, 2020), couples coping with

 Paula R. Pietromonaco, Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, University of Massachusetts, Amherst;  Nickola C. Overall, School of Psychology, University of Auckland.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Paula R. Pietromonaco, Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 135 Hicks Way, Tobin Hall, Amherst, MA 01003. E-mail: [monaco@umass.edu](mailto:monaco@umass.edu)

the coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic face a variety of external stressors that have disrupted how they function under normal circumstances. Although the precise impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on couples' relationship functioning and stability is not yet known, a recent survey (American Psychological Association, 2020) indicates that many individuals in the United States are experiencing heightened levels of stress as a result of the pandemic, which are closely tied to economic and employment concerns. Mental health experts also expect an increase in mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide (Holmes et al., 2020). Understanding how the current pandemic may impact couples' relationships is especially important given that these disruptions in economic, employment, and mental health domains are all closely interconnected with couples' relationship functioning (Beach, Fincham, & Katz, 1998; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Karney, Story, & Bradbury, 2005). Furthermore, close relationships in which partners provide comfort, security, and support to each other are vital sources of both emotional and physical well-being (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017), and therefore especially important as people navigate the current crisis.

The current article draws on a large body of theory and research on the effects of external stress on romantic relationships (marital, cohabiting, dating relationships) to identify ways in which the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic may impact couple functioning. A key model of stress and relationship processes (the vulnerability-stress-adaptation [VSA] model; Karney & Bradbury, 1995) suggests that the effects of the pandemic on couples' relationship quality and stability will vary depending on the broader context in which couples are trying to manage their relationships, including couples' preexisting contextual vulnerabilities (e.g., social class, minority status, life stage), the nature of COVID-19-related stressors (e.g., number of life domains affected, severity), and enduring individual vulnerabilities (e.g., emotional health, personality), which all contribute to important dyadic processes (e.g., hostility, withdrawal, poor support) that determine relationship quality. The model and findings from relationship science are applied to identify the different ways relationship well-being may be protected depending on the contexts and vulnerabilities couples have when entering the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of the current article is to provide an in-depth analysis of how the pandemic may shape couples' relationships, which provide a cornerstone for health and well-being across the family network. Prime, Wade, and Browne (2020) recently outlined how some of the difficulties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, including some of those considered in the current article, filter through parents to their children. The current analysis complements and builds

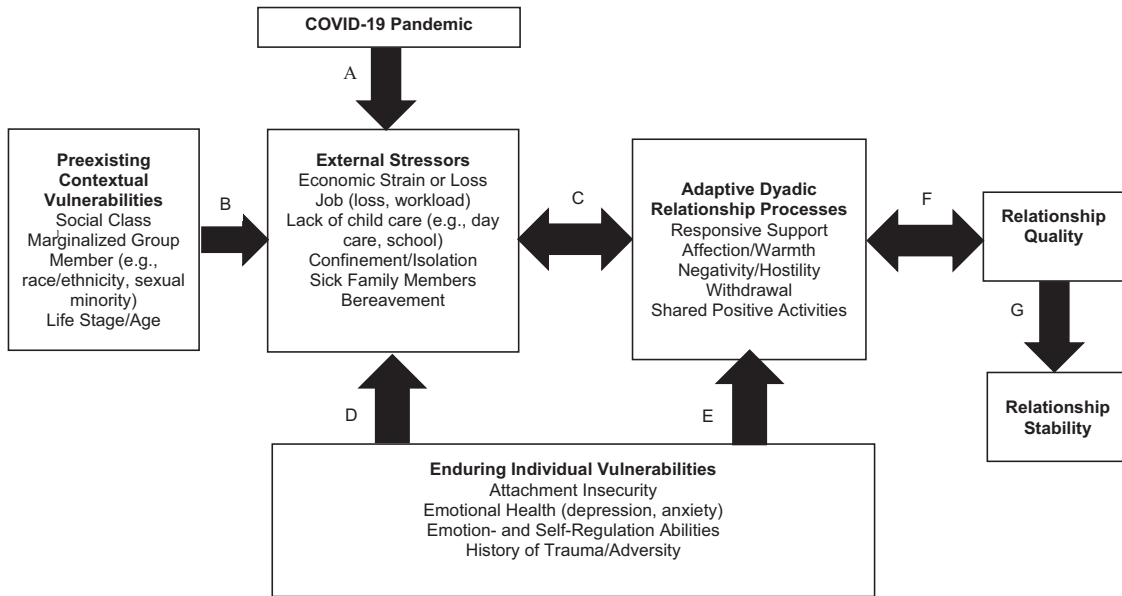
on Prime et al. (2020) by providing a more fine-grained focus on couples' dyadic relationship processes, which are likely to account for many of the ways that parents' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic affect their children. Finally, although the current analysis draws upon the rich set of scientific investigations examining couples' relationships, it also will be informative for understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic may pose risks across a range of close relationships (e.g., family members, friends) that are essential for psychological and physical health.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework, shown in Figure 1, is informed by the VSA model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), which is applicable to marital and nonmarital romantic relationships. Guided by ideas from major theories of relationships and family stress (social-exchange theory, attachment theory, behavioral theory, crisis theory), the VSA emphasizes that three factors interact to jointly shape couples' marital outcomes. External stress (stress from outside the relationship) can disrupt how partners interact with each other. Figure 1 adapts the VSA model to (a) indicate stressors arising specifically from the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., economic loss, being isolated), and (b) separately specify preexisting contextual vulnerabilities, such as social class, minority status, and life stage/age, which are likely to add to the effects of COVID-19-related stressors for both couple members.<sup>1</sup> Enduring vulnerabilities are individual characteristics that can influence how people construe and respond to stressful events and, as a result, exacerbate external stress and affect how couple members interact. Adaptive processes refer to the dyadic relationship processes through which couples interact, such as how couples give and receive support, communicate, and problem solve.

The framework suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic will create a variety of external stressors (Path A) that are likely to interfere with adaptive dyadic relationship processes (Path C), and, in turn, lower relationship quality and threaten relationship stability (Paths F and G). The reciprocal link (Path C) indicates that poorer dyadic relationship processes also can intensify the impact of external stressors (e.g., by impeding job performance and effective parenting, or magnifying the stress of sheltering in place). The impact of pandemic-related stressors will also be exacerbated by preexisting contextual vulnerabilities, such as having a low income or being a member of a marginalized group (Path

<sup>1</sup> Karney and Bradbury's VSA model subsumes demographics such as race and age into the enduring individual vulnerabilities category; however, given the special relevance of these factors for additional stressors arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, we have modified the model to separately specify two categories: preexisting contextual vulnerabilities and enduring individual vulnerabilities.



*Figure 1.* How the COVID-19 pandemic may shape relationship processes and outcomes. The framework (adapted from Karney & Bradbury, 1995) suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic will create a variety of external stressors such as economic strain or job loss that may interfere with adaptive dyadic relationship processes which, in turn, can intensify the impact of external stressors as well as lower relationship quality and threaten relationship stability. The impact of pandemic-related stressors can be exacerbated by preexisting stressors such as having a low income or being a member of a marginalized group. Couples in which one or both members have enduring vulnerabilities (e.g., attachment insecurity, depression) will be more likely to experience greater negative and fewer positive interactions, and the impact of external stressors may be heightened.

B), and magnified when one or both couple members have enduring vulnerabilities (e.g., depression) that may evoke negatively biased appraisals or greater emotional reactivity to adversity (Path D). Enduring vulnerabilities also undermine adaptive dyadic processes resulting in poorer support, affection and warmth and more negative, hostile interactions at a time in which couples need to lean on each other (Path E).

The current article applies the theoretical framework and associated research to outline how specific stressors, contexts, and vulnerabilities may shape the extent to which couples can adapt to the stressors arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The first section reviews evidence from other major disasters (natural disasters, terrorism) to consider the nature of the stressors accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic and their likely impact on relationship outcomes. The following sections discuss evidence relevant for understanding couples' functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic that demonstrates how external stressors are linked to adaptive dyadic relationships and longer term relationship outcomes. These sections highlight examples of preexisting contextual vulnerabilities and enduring individual vulnerabilities that may harm relationship quality and stability during the COVID-19 crisis. The final sections offer recommendations for mitigating these adverse effects and discuss implications for research.

### Effects of Disasters on Couples' Relationships

Examining the effects of natural disasters and terrorist attacks, as inferred from divorce, marriage and birth rates, offers some insights into how the current COVID-19 pandemic might impact couples. Research examining the consequences of different natural disasters (e.g., tornados, floods, hurricanes) generally indicates no long-term effects on divorce and marriage rates (Aguirre, 1980; Deryugina, Kawano, & Levitt, 2014). Some short-term effects, however, are evident: in the year following Hurricane Hugo, divorce, marriage, and birth rates increased in the most affected areas but then returned to predisaster levels (Cohan & Cole, 2002). In contrast, divorce rates declined immediately after two terrorist attacks (9/11 and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing), and eventually returned to baseline levels (Cohan, Cole, & Schoen, 2009; Nakonezny, Reddick, & Rodgers, 2004). These divergent short-term effects may reflect differences in the two contexts (Cohan et al., 2009). In the terrorist attacks, many deaths (e.g., for 9/11, about 3,000 deaths) occurred, and many people experienced uncertainty about the world, future attacks, and their mortality. When people experience this kind of threat to their existence, they typically seek security and comfort from their closest other (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), which would explain why couples might turn to each other and be less

likely to divorce following the terrorist attacks. In contrast, Hurricane Hugo involved fewer deaths but required a longer time to rebuild communities, potentially placing chronic stress on marriages that likely contributed to the increase in divorce.

These historical examples provide some basis for evaluating and predicting how the COVID-19 pandemic may be linked to relationship stability and, more generally, to relationship quality (Paths F and G in Figure 1). With the COVID-19 situation, couples are facing an event of unknown duration and likely a relatively long rebuilding and recovery process, making it similar to the situations accompanying many natural disasters. Yet, in the current pandemic, just as with the terrorist attacks, many people have lost their lives, and uncertainty and fear are pervasive, including fear of one's own mortality. The degree to which the current pandemic may harm or strengthen relationship stability and quality will depend on the components in Figure 1.

First, pandemic-related stress will vary widely across couples (Path A). Couples will vary in the number and severity of the stressors they face (e.g., multiple financial losses, job loss, increase in child care responsibilities). COVID-19-related stressors also are accompanied by considerable uncertainty, making it hard to know which impacts may be time limited and which will be longer term. Although both acute and chronic stress may lower relationship satisfaction, couples are more likely to have resources to restore their relationship following shorter term, acute stressors, but they may be depleted and have few resources for doing so when stress is longer term and chronic (Karney et al., 2005), as may often be the case in the current situation.

Second, pandemic-triggered stress will occur in the context of other ongoing, preexisting contextual vulnerabilities (e.g., low income), and couples who are already struggling to meet essential needs may have limited cognitive, emotional, and social resources for managing the additional stress (Path B). Moreover, following the conceptual model (Paths C through G), couples who have preexisting contextual vulnerabilities, who experience more significant losses as a result of the pandemic, and who have enduring vulnerabilities are more likely to evidence less adaptive relationship processes (e.g., poorer communication, less support) and, in turn, are more at risk for declines in relationship quality and ultimately dissolution. The key point is that the extent to which relationships are damaged or thrive in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic will depend heavily on the broader context of couples' relationships and the extent to which they can engage in adaptive dyadic relationship processes. This variability in couples' outcomes may account for why disasters generally are only associated with divorce (or marriage) rates within a narrow window of time in only some contexts. Instead, the degree to which any

disaster, including the COVID-19 pandemic, contributes to relationship outcomes, including relationship quality more generally, will depend greatly on the broader context of couples' lives, enduring vulnerabilities, and the degree to which couples are able to adapt together.

### External Stress, Relationship Processes, and Relationship Quality (Paths C and F)

A large body of research examining how external stress affects relationships, and the conditions that exacerbate or mitigate these effects, helps understand how the external stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic may impact relationships. In well-functioning relationships, individuals feel their partners are responsive to their needs (i.e., accepting, concerned with their welfare, understanding, and supportive; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004), and partners' behaviors demonstrate that they are responsive, such as by being supportive, taking their partner's perspective, and engaging constructively to solve problems (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998). External stressors, such as unemployment, economic hardship, and work stress, can spill over to affect the quality of couples' interactions and perceptions of the relationship and partner (Neff & Karney, 2004). Furthermore, external stress can create a context in which it is more difficult for partners to be responsive to each other because they are distracted, fatigued, or overwhelmed. As a result, individuals are more likely to be overly critical or argumentative, blame their partner, provide poorer support and, over time, become less satisfied with their partner and relationship (Barton, Beach, Bryant, Lavner, & Brody, 2018; Barton & Bryant, 2016; Bodenmann, Ledermann, & Bradbury, 2007; Bodenmann, Meuwly, Bradbury, Gmelch, & Ledermann, 2010; Bodenmann et al., 2015; Neff & Karney, 2009).

Several examples of findings illustrate these processes. Even after taking into account the association between external stress and marital satisfaction, greater financial strain and recent stressful events were associated with more hostility, coercion, contempt, and denial as couples discussed relationship problems or tried to support one another (Williamson, Karney, & Bradbury, 2013). Wives who experienced an increase in external stressful events were more likely to blame their partner for negative behaviors and experienced declines in marital satisfaction over time (Neff & Karney, 2004). When newlywed couples were facing greater external stress, downward shifts in problem-solving effectiveness across time were associated with downward shifts in relationship satisfaction (Nguyen, Karney, & Bradbury, 2020). Collectively, these (among many other) findings suggest that couples who experience elevated stress in the current crisis and interact using less adaptive relation-



ship processes are at greater risk for relationship deterioration.

One key way external stress may undermine effective dyadic relationship processes is by depleting self-regulatory resources (Neff & Karney, 2017). Relationship-promoting behaviors, such as overlooking a partner's insensitivity or providing responsive support, typically take some effort and control (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). Coping with external stressors, however, also requires effort and control, and therefore the competing demands of external stress and relationship maintenance processes may tax individuals' ability to respond to their partners in constructive, relationship-enhancing ways. In line with this idea, newlyweds who experienced an increase in daily stress reported more negative behavior (e.g., criticized their partner) and perceptions of their partner, and these links were partially explained by the extent to which they experienced self-regulatory depletion (Buck & Neff, 2012; see also Tesser & Beach, 1998).

Self-regulatory depletion may be especially likely to arise in relationships occurring within adverse contexts such as economic hardship (Neff & Karney, 2017). Greater financial strain is associated with longitudinal increases in hostile, contemptuous, and coercive behaviors during problem-solving interactions (Masarik et al., 2016), possibly because the demands of external stressors interfere with effortfully controlling destructive responses during relationship interactions. Other stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic may also disrupt adaptive relationship processes. For example, stay-at-home orders reduce connections to wider support networks that are also critical for maintaining psychological and physical health (Cohen, 2004; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010) and help buffer relationships from less healthy physiological responses and relationship conflict (Keneski, Neff, & Loving, 2018). In sum, multiple stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic will make it harder to engage in the constructive behaviors (e.g., responsive support, constructive problem solving, accommodation) that are associated with well-functioning romantic relationships and help people cope in stressful circumstances.

Effective support exchanges will be critical for protecting the quality and stability of couples' relationships while coping with the myriad of stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Even in the face of significant external stress, couples who are able to be supportive and responsive show better emotional and marital outcomes. For example, a longitudinal study of 451 married couples showed that economic strain (e.g., not enough money to pay expenses) was associated with greater emotional distress, which, in turn, was associated with greater marital conflict and marital distress; however, the link between economic strain and emotional distress was weaker for couples who displayed higher quality support (Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999). Similarly, couples living in China who experienced

higher daily stress, on average, showed lower relationship satisfaction, but this association was smaller when perceiving more responsive partner support (Hilpert et al., 2018). Preliminary results from a recent multinational study of over 3,000 individuals in romantic relationships also suggest that COVID-19 stressors (social isolation, financial strain, perceived stress) are associated with poorer relationship functioning (e.g., less satisfaction, more conflict), and that this association is reduced among individuals who perceive their partners as responsive (Balzarini et al., 2020).

External stress clearly can shape relationship processes, but relationship processes, in turn, may alter external stressors (see Figure 1, Path C). For example, unemployed men who received support from a close partner pursued more job-seeking activities (Vinokur & Caplan, 1987), potentially changing their employment situation. Individuals with type 2 diabetes adhered more to their prescribed diet on days when their spouse provided more caring support, but adhered less when their spouse exerted coercive pressure (Stephens et al., 2013), suggesting that support quality may reduce or exacerbate stress related to chronic disease. These findings suggest that, for some couples, external stress initially stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic may be intensified or prolonged by how partners engage with each other.

### Preexisting Contextual Vulnerabilities (Path B)

Several life contexts are likely to include stressors and vulnerabilities that contribute to how couples manage the additional stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Some contexts—such as having a low income or being a member of a racial/ethnic minority—often evoke greater stress, in general. Added stress from the pandemic is apt to further burden couples in these contexts by consuming effort and energy, increasing the potential for conflict, making it harder for couples to take each other's perspective and engage in effective problem-solving, and leaving little time for positive, intimacy-building activities (Neff & Karney, 2017). Other contexts may be particularly affected by the societal changes surrounding the pandemic. For example, parents carry a heavier burden with school and child care closings, and the pandemic raises special concerns for older adults. We briefly discuss four examples of life contexts to illustrate how they may affect couples' risk and/or resilience during the current crisis.

### Social Class

Couples experiencing socioeconomic challenges prior to the COVID-19 pandemic already were at risk for poorer marital outcomes (Neff & Karney, 2017). Established and newlywed couples experiencing greater financial strain evidence lower and more unstable satisfaction (Conger et al.,

1999; Jackson, Krull, Bradbury, & Karney, 2017). As Neff and Karney (2017) point out, couples facing economic hardship must deal with all of the stressors associated with their situation, opening more possibilities for conflict and constraining opportunities for activities that may promote growth and intimacy in the relationship. In the context of the current pandemic, this additional stress may further exhaust couples' resources and impair their ability to interact with their partners in meaningful and constructive ways, potentially eroding relationship quality.

### Race/Ethnicity

Members of racial/ethnic minority groups (e.g., Black, Hispanic, Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native) are at greater risk for contracting COVID-19, more severe symptoms, hospitalization, and mortality (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020a). These heightened risks arise from a variety of factors (often overlapping with those for social class), including greater exposure due to crowded living conditions or service industry jobs, having serious chronic health conditions, lacking adequate health insurance, and exposure to systemic inequality and discrimination. Adults from racial/ethnic minority groups, compared to White adults, are more likely to report feeling stress about contracting the coronavirus (71% vs. 59%), fulfilling basic needs (61% vs. 47%), and being able to utilize health care services (59% vs. 46%; American Psychological Association, 2020). As a result, couples from these groups may experience more severe COVID-19-related stress, placing an even greater burden on their relationships.

### Parenting Status

Parents, compared to nonparents, report feeling much more stressed as a result of the current crisis (American Psychological Association, 2020). Parents who are working need to balance competing demands from work and family. While under quarantine, many parents face simultaneous demands to fulfill work-related responsibilities, ensure that their children complete schoolwork and have other activities available, and manage their household tasks. Dividing household and child care responsibilities may place added stress on couples during the crisis, given that unfairness in dividing responsibilities is associated with greater conflict even under ordinary circumstances (e.g., Newkirk, Perry-Jenkins, & Sayer, 2017). Furthermore, parents with preexisting risks (e.g., young, low income, having children before marriage) may be even more vulnerable to relationship difficulties (Lavner, Williamson, Karney, & Bradbury, 2020).

### Age

Age is a risk factor for more severe symptoms from COVID-19, and in the United States, 80% of deaths from

the disease have occurred among adults age 65 or older (CDC, 2020b). As a result, older adults may experience greater pandemic-related stress for a variety of reasons, including needing to exert greater caution, fear of catching the disease, greater likelihood that they or their partner have ongoing health problems, and being separated (due to social distancing) from family, friends, and other caregivers who may ordinarily provide assistance. At the same time, older adults who are in a relationship have several advantages that may facilitate resilience. In addition to being less socially isolated than those who are single, relationship quality tends to be higher among older couples. Compared to middle-age couples, older couples have more favorable perceptions of their partners, and display more positive affect when discussing problems (Henry, Berg, Smith, & Florsheim, 2007; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994). Yet, considerable variability still exists in the quality of older couples' relationships, with some older couples experiencing significant discord and dissatisfaction (Whisman, Robustelli, Beach, Snyder, & Harper, 2015). Thus, although age is a risk factor for the progression of COVID-19, the degree to which older couples effectively weather the current crisis likely depends more on whether they communicate effectively and provide each other with responsive support, and the presence or absence of other risk factors (e.g., low income, health status, living arrangements, individual vulnerabilities).

## Enduring Individual Vulnerabilities (Paths D and E)

People's individual characteristics shape their perceptions of stress and how dyadic relationship processes unfold. Vulnerabilities such as attachment insecurity (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Pietromonaco & Beck, 2015), depression (Beach et al., 1998; Davila, Bradbury, Cohan, & Tochluk, 1997), maladaptive emotion regulation strategies (Low, Overall, Cross, & Henderson, 2019), and neuroticism (McNulty, 2008) are associated with key dyadic processes (e.g., communication strategies, support) and relationship outcomes. The presence of these vulnerabilities together with external stress will impede couples' ability to interact effectively and sustain their relationship throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Two examples illustrate the importance of these vulnerabilities.

### Attachment Insecurity

Attachment styles reflect individuals' expectations about whether relationship partners will be consistently responsive (secure attachment), inconsistently responsive (anxious attachment), or low in responsiveness (avoidant attachment; Bowlby, 1973; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Importantly, in the context of COVID-19, each attachment style corresponds with specific affect regulation strategies that are

most likely to emerge under stress or threat (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). Anxious attachment is associated with greater vigilance and distress, and overreliance on partners to cope (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In contrast, avoidant attachment is associated with suppressing emotional expressions, disengagement, and distancing from partners. Attachment security is associated with more flexible strategies, including relying on a partner when needed and the ability to apply other strategies (e.g., reappraisal, constructive problem solving) to reduce distress.

Given these differences, people who are anxiously attached may respond to the COVID-19 pandemic with heightened distress and excessive attempts to solicit support from close others, whereas people who are avoidantly attached may cope by suppressing their distress and withdrawing from others (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Not only do these responses require more effortful responses from partners to enable insecure individuals to adapt, couples including insecure partners already face challenges, including more destructive communication patterns, poorer caregiving, and lower relationship quality (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Pietromonaco & Beck, 2015). The added stressors from the pandemic, along with other preexisting contextual vulnerabilities, are likely to further degrade these relationship processes (Figure 1, Path E). For instance, anxiously attached individuals who feel threatened may require excessive reassurance, burdening partners who also are under stress (Overall, Girme, Lemay, & Hammond, 2014; Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005). Individuals with avoidant partners are likely to receive insufficient or ineffective support and may need to work hard to prevent their withdrawal from relationship problems (Beck, Pietromonaco, DeBuse, Powers, & Sayer, 2013; Girme, Overall, Simpson, & Fletcher, 2015). The interplay between couple members' attachment styles also may exacerbate their difficulty in adapting to the current crisis. For example, couples in which both partners are insecure (e.g., anxious-avoidant pairs) show more problematic physiological and behavioral responses (Beck et al., 2013; Shallcross, Howland, Bemis, Simpson, & Frazier, 2011).

## Depression

Depression can lead to maladaptive interaction patterns and discord in relationships, which also can cause or exacerbate depression (Beach et al., 1998; Davila, Karney, Hall, & Bradbury, 2003; Joiner, Alfano, & Metalsky, 1992). The interactions of couples including a depressed partner evidence more negative (e.g., hostility, withdrawal, blame) and fewer positive (e.g., effective problem solving, smiling) communication strategies (Rehman, Gollan, & Mortimer, 2008). Attempts to solicit and provide support by people who are depressed are also tinged with negativity, and they

typically perceive their partners as unsupportive (e.g., Davila et al., 1997). As outlined in Figure 1, these patterns (Path E) may be more pronounced when couples experience greater external stress (Path C), but the interpersonal behavior of individuals who are depressed also can heighten external stress (Path D; Hammen, 2006). For example, more depressed husbands who disengaged from problem-solving discussions generated additional nonmarital interpersonal stress in the workplace (Trombello, Schoebi, & Bradbury, 2011). Moreover, depression often co-occurs with other individual vulnerabilities, such as attachment insecurity (Beach & Whisman, 2012). In sum, as depicted in Figure 1, couples including a depressed spouse are at greater risk for maladaptive marital processes and marital distress, which are likely to be exacerbated by pandemic-related stress, preexisting contextual stressors, and/or additional vulnerabilities.

## Mitigating the Effects of COVID-19 on Couples' Relationships

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a level of social, economic and personal disruption worldwide that most individuals and couples have not previously experienced, including multiple, simultaneous stressors and considerable uncertainty. Although little is known about the extent to which events like the current pandemic intersect with the contexts, vulnerabilities and adaptive processes reviewed above, our analysis indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic may amplify variability in couples' outcomes. Just as people's psychological distress in response to loss or trauma can range from trajectories of chronic disruption to resilience (i.e., maintaining relatively stable well-being; Bonanno, 2004), couples' functioning over the course of the current crisis also may follow different trajectories depending on the central variables outlined in Figure 1. Similar to some people showing a chronic trajectory of psychological distress in response to trauma (Bonanno, 2004), couples who enter the pandemic with few external resources (e.g., unemployed, insufficient income), greater individual vulnerabilities (e.g., insecure attachment, poor emotional health), and less adaptive dyadic processes (e.g., poorer problem solving) may be particularly likely to experience declines in relationship quality and stability (see also Lavner & Bradbury, 2010). In contrast, similar to people who display a trajectory of well-being resilience (Bonanno, 2004), couples entering with ample resources (e.g., employed, economically stable), enduring strengths (e.g., secure attachment, emotionally healthy), and more adaptive dyadic processes (e.g., more responsive support) are likely to maintain high-quality relationships and may even realize the potential for relationship growth. Other couples may fall in between these two trajectories, such as experiencing an initial decline in relationship functioning but then recover-



ing (a recovery trajectory, Bonanno, 2004), or working well together at first but then experiencing disruptions as the chronic demands or acute stress chip away their resources and resolve (a delayed trajectory, Bonanno, 2004). The conceptual model in Figure 1 provides a framework for understanding the factors that likely contribute to these different trajectories and thus what factors should be addressed to facilitate more harmonious, well-functioning relationships.

### Mitigating the Risk of Chronic Distress

Couples with preexisting contextual vulnerabilities that are magnified by the additional economic strain and external stressors arising from the pandemic (see Figure 1, Path B) simply may not have the personal, social, or economic resources to fare well, even if they are able to engage in adaptive relationship processes. Applying standard relationship interventions that are effective in other samples indicate that enhancing communication (i.e., adaptive processes) does not necessarily enhance relationship quality for low-income couples (Williamson, Altman, Hsueh, & Bradbury, 2016). Instead, recent studies suggest that interventions that directly tackle problems associated with economic hardship (e.g., enhancing opportunities for employment and earning potential) help to improve couples' relationships (Karney, Bradbury, & Lavner, 2018; Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2015). Thus, when couples are struggling to pay their bills, buy food, and meet other basic needs, social policies that provide economic support, jobs, and health care may be a necessary entry point to promote healthy relationships (Neff & Karney, 2017). Addressing the contextual vulnerabilities and substantial stress that prevents couples from leveraging adaptive processes should create a context in which additional efforts to promote adaptive relationship processes will enable couples to enhance relationship well-being.

### Mitigating the Risks of Disruption and Increasing Recovery

Many other couples who are not so economically and socially vulnerable may not require practical assistance or policy intervention. Rather, to prevent immediate and long-term damage to their relationship, these couples can focus on managing the increased stress arising from the pandemic and overcoming enduring individual vulnerabilities by focusing on adaptive dyadic relationship processes (see Figure 1, Paths C, D and E). Two adaptive relationship processes are particularly important, as shown by the research reviewed above and summarized in Figure 1.

**Effective communication.** Effectively navigating the stress and relationship problems that couples might face as a result of COVID-19 will require effective communication

and problem solving. Good communication entails more than simply being nicer and less hostile. Ample evidence shows that criticism and hostility can damage relationships, and so reducing heated hostile exchanges is likely important for couples to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 stressors (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Yet, avoiding conflict and withdrawing from partners is equally or even more damaging because it eliminates the opportunity for couples to be responsive to each other's needs and improve problems (Gottman, 1998). Rather than minimizing conflict, direct engagement in problem solving that expresses investment and motivates partners to improve the situation may be generally most effective in helping to ensure existing or new problems do not damage relationships (Overall, 2018; Overall & McNulty, 2017).

However, consistent with the themes outlined in Figure 1, the most effective communication will vary according to couples' contexts and enduring vulnerabilities (McNulty, 2016). For example, withdrawal may be less damaging for couples who are facing ongoing external stressors that cannot be solved (e.g., economic disadvantage) and when conflict engagement might do more harm than good (Ross, Karney, Nguyen, & Bradbury, 2019). Similarly, direct engagement will often activate enduring vulnerabilities, such as withdrawal and anger by avoidantly attached people, and thus softer, more indirect communication is needed to ensure defensive reactions are overcome to engage partners to help maintain relationships (e.g., Overall, Simpson, & Struthers, 2013). In short, effective communication involves understanding and responding to the varying contexts and vulnerabilities relevant to the relationship and situation (Overall, 2020).

Of course, flexibly responding to the demands and vulnerabilities in Figure 1 will not be easy. Couples will need to try to understand each other's perspective (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998), recognize that hurtful behaviors may result from the situation rather than internal stable traits (e.g., my partner is uncaring; Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996), and they may benefit by focusing on salient, uncontrollable, external factors (i.e., the pandemic) as a primary cause of their problems (Diamond & Hicks, 2012). Couples also will need to remain invested to engage in problem solving while also expressing care and affection to reduce the impact of negative behaviors (Johnson et al., 2005; Overall, 2018). Effective communication will be best achieved if couples can create situations that help facilitate this constructive approach, such as working through problems when partners are not depleted (e.g., not fatigued; Buck & Neff, 2012), approaching conflicts with openness and recognition of their partners' efforts (Gottman, 1979; Overall et al., 2013), and taking a break if partners become overwhelmed or defensive (Gottman, 1979). Managing these challenges also will be easier if couples view them-

selves as a team, protecting each other from adversity (Karantzas & Cole, 2011).

**Responsive support.** The risks of the pandemic on health and well-being will be best mitigated when people feel connected and supported by responsive partners who are concerned with their welfare (Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017; Reis et al., 2004). Responsive support in the face of adversity not only helps to relieve distress and enhance well-being, it can also lead to relationship growth (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Yet, support that is responsive to recipients' needs is not easy, even without the added challenges of the pandemic. Too much comfort and support can be intrusive, make the stress of the situation more salient, and leave people feeling that they do not have the capability to deal with the challenges of the pandemic (Zee & Bolger, 2019). Providing too little support or the wrong type of support, however, can risk leaving people feeling unloved and uncared for, especially when people are highly distressed or require clear evidence that their partners are there for them (Girme et al., 2015).

Just as effective communication when addressing relationship problems involves taking into account the contexts and vulnerabilities outlined in Figure 1, responsive support needs to be tailored to partners' contextual and dispositional needs (e.g., Pietromonaco, Uchino, & Dunkel Schetter, 2013). In a stressful situation, emotional comfort can help calm secure partners, but practical help may better aid avoidant partners (Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, & Oriña, 2007). Similarly, depressed individuals may benefit from support that encourages active responses that build individuals' own capability rather than overprotection that reinforces feelings of helplessness (Bodenmann et al., 2008). However, the stress of the pandemic may interfere with providing responsive support, and needing to provide support to distressed partners also magnifies the stress of the situation. The added burden of support will be minimized when couples reciprocate with mutual support, which helps both partners feel more capable and connected (Ryon & Gleason, 2018), and when couples are connected to wider social networks that diversify the burden of support (Keneski et al., 2018).

### Leveraging Opportunities for Growth

Couples with more resources, fewer vulnerabilities, and stronger adaptive dyadic processes may be relatively resilient and experience stable levels of high relationship quality because they will be able to more flexibly respond to changes in their situation and more easily address pandemic-related challenges. Furthermore, the constraints imposed by the pandemic (working at home, fewer social demands) may open opportunities for resilient couples to strengthen their relationship. Couples may capitalize on having more time together by participating in enjoyable,

novel activities (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000; Girme, Overall, & Faingataa, 2014), sharing positive experiences (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006), and engaging in thoughtful behaviors that elicit gratitude (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010), all of which nurture relationship growth and expansion. Lower external stressors and enduring strengths will enable couples to concentrate on expanding their repertoire of adaptive relationship processes (Figure 1, Paths C, D and E). For example, individuals who are securely attached are more likely to be flexible in taking on new roles to address changes in the home and more open to taking advantage of the opportunities for growth (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). When feasible, building these positive foundations will make it that much easier for couples to be responsive to each other when the stress of the pandemic creates relationship problems or personal difficulties, and may even result in couples exiting the current crisis with stronger, more adaptable relationships.

### Implications and Conclusions

The presented framework emphasizes that addressing each aspect in Figure 1 is needed to mitigate risks and promote relationship health for couples who enter the pandemic with different external contexts, individual vulnerabilities, and adaptive relationship processes. For couples at risk for chronic distress, policymakers need to focus on addressing the constraints of couples' external situations (e.g., support for jobs, child care, health care) and removing barriers to accessible and affordable care for enduring individual vulnerabilities (e.g., depression, anxiety). Practitioners working with low-income couples also need to pay even more attention to the broader context of couples' lives, for example, by providing guidance on outside resources such as job training, education, or health care (Lavner et al., 2015), as well as specific pandemic-related assistance. By addressing the first element of the model in Figure 1 (Path B), this important step will help to create a context in which couples can benefit from relationship-focused interventions that address individual vulnerabilities and problematic relationship processes, which are apt to be exacerbated by stress from the current crisis.

Couples who are less economically and socially vulnerable will be in less need of policy interventions, although their relationships will still benefit from policies that address increased external stressors arising from the pandemic (e.g., employment assistance, child care, health care). Moreover, many couples will be susceptible to pandemic-related stress due to individual vulnerabilities and resulting maladaptive relationship process (see Figure 1, Paths C, D, and E). These couples may benefit from working with practitioners in order to establish or strengthen adaptive relationship processes including learning how to communicate and support each other effectively given the characteristics and

circumstance of both partners. As Figure 1 and the research reviewed above illustrates, the most effective interventions will be those that identify couples' pressing contexts and enduring vulnerabilities and then tailor treatment to promote the dyadic processes that are adaptive in those circumstances. Finally, many couples who are experiencing low to moderate stress, have individual strengths (e.g., attachment security), and have some relationship skills may have the capacity to work on their own. Figure 1 and the research reviewed provides a guide for how couples may best be able to flexibly respond by focusing on important adaptive dyadic processes and incorporating growth-related activities.

The multifaceted approach shown in Figure 1 also is needed to investigate how the extraordinary upheaval from COVID-19 may impact relationships. The current framework calls for relationship scientists to integrate the main components presented in Figure 1 to capture how couples who entered the pandemic with different external contexts, vulnerabilities, and adaptive dyadic processes will navigate the crisis. Key questions following from this integrative approach are whether the current crisis will amplify differences among couples entering at different points, whether couples cluster into distinctly different trajectories depending on these entry points, and what kinds of policies and interventions will be most effective for promoting resilience for these different couples. The framework also underscores that, to understand how the pandemic impacts relationships and address these new questions, researchers will need to (a) examine diverse samples (e.g., diversity in race/ethnicity, income, culture, country) to capture experiences across the important contextual vulnerabilities and external stressors identified; (b) include assessments of preexisting contextual and individual vulnerabilities, particularly within longitudinal designs assessing couples prior to and during/following the pandemic; (c) examine how the key components of the model interact, such as the combined effects of stress and enduring individual vulnerabilities, on the most relevant dyadic relationship processes; and (d) identify the dyadic processes that are most likely to harm versus help couples given the contexts and vulnerabilities they confront as the pandemic unfolds.

By applying the VSA framework to integrate findings from relationship science, the current analysis suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic may amplify differences between couples with different contextual stressors, individual vulnerabilities, and relationship skills. This analysis emphasizes the importance of taking into account couples' entry points for policy, practice, and research. For couples with lower initial risks, interactions that capitalize on adaptive relationship processes (e.g., engaging in problem solving, striving to provide sensitive and responsive support, maintaining or adding positive relationship-building activities) may not only protect but enhance relationship quality. Yet, the potential for couples to mitigate the risks of the pan-

dem and leverage potential opportunities for growth depends on adapting strategies to couples' unique contexts and vulnerabilities. This task is much more challenging when preexisting contextual vulnerabilities create, what might feel like, insurmountable barriers. In the wake of the current pandemic, couples experiencing the most severe stress and economic devastation may benefit most from policies designed to provide economic support (e.g., financial, job training, child care, health care) that will broaden their options and resources and, as a result, provide a context that allows couples to benefit from interventions to enhance adaptive processes that promote relationship well-being and growth (Neff & Karney, 2017). Integrating established effects in relationship science, the presented framework illuminates the essential factors to target in order to create relationship contexts and address vulnerabilities that enhance adaptive processes and enrich couples' relationships and, as a consequence, to support emotional and physical well-being in this time of crisis.

## References

- Aguirre, B. E. (1980). The long term effects of major natural disasters on marriage and divorce: An ecological study. *Victimology*, *5*, 298–307.
- Algoe, S. B., Gable, S. L., & Maisel, N. C. (2010). It's the little things: Everyday gratitude as a booster shot for romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships*, *17*, 217–233. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2010.01273.x>
- American Psychological Association. (2020, May). *Stress in the time of COVID-19*. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/stress-in-america-covid.pdf>
- Aron, A., Norman, C. C., Aron, E. N., McKenna, C., & Heyman, R. E. (2000). Couples' shared participation in novel and arousing activities and experienced relationship quality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *78*, 273–284. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.78.2.273>
- Arriaga, X. B., & Rusbult, C. E. (1998). Standing in my partner's shoes: Partner perspective taking and reactions to accommodative dilemmas. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *24*, 927–948. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167298249002>
- Balzarini, R. N., Muise, A., Zoppolat, G., Di Bartolomeo, A., Rodrigues, D. L., Alonso-Ferres, M., . . . Slatcher, R. B. (2020). Love in the time of covid: Perceived partner responsiveness buffers people from lower relationship quality associated with covid-related stressors. *PsyArXiv*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/e3fh4>
- Barton, A. W., Beach, S. R. H., Bryant, C. M., Lavner, J. A., & Brody, G. H. (2018). Stress spillover, African Americans' couple and health outcomes, and the stress-buffering effect of family-centered prevention. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *32*, 186–196. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000376>
- Barton, A. W., & Bryant, C. M. (2016). Financial strain, trajectories of marital processes, and African American newlyweds' marital instability. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *30*, 657–664. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000190>
- Beach, S. R. H., Fincham, F. D., & Katz, J. (1998). Marital therapy in the treatment of depression: Toward a third generation of therapy and research. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *18*, 635–661. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0272-7358\(98\)00023-3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0272-7358(98)00023-3)
- Beach, S. R. H., & Whisman, M. A. (2012). Affective disorders. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *38*, 201–219. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00243.x>



- Beck, L. A., Pietromonaco, P. R., DeBuse, C. J., Powers, S. I., & Sayer, A. G. (2013). Spouses' attachment pairings predict neuroendocrine, behavioral, and psychological responses to marital conflict. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 105*, 388–424. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0033056>
- Bodenmann, G., Ledermann, T., & Bradbury, T. N. (2007). Stress, sex, and satisfaction in marriage. *Personal Relationships, 14*, 551–569. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2007.00171.x>
- Bodenmann, G., Meuwly, N., Bradbury, T. N., Gmelch, S., & Ledermann, T. (2010). Stress, anger, and verbal aggression in intimate relationships: Moderating effects of individual and dyadic coping. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 27*, 408–424. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0265407510361616>
- Bodenmann, G., Meuwly, N., Germann, J., Nussbeck, F. W., Heinrichs, M., & Bradbury, T. N. (2015). Effects of stress on the social support provided by men and women in intimate relationships. *Psychological Science, 26*, 1584–1594. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0956797615594616>
- Bodenmann, G., Plancherel, B., Beach, S. R. H., Widmer, K., Gabriel, B., Meuwly, N., . . . Schramm, E. (2008). Effects of coping-oriented couples therapy on depression: A randomized clinical trial. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 76*, 944–954. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0013467>
- Bonanno, G. A. (2004). Loss, trauma, and human resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events? *American Psychologist, 59*, 20–28. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.1.20>
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and anger*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bradbury, T. N., Beach, S. R. H., Fincham, F. D., & Nelson, G. M. (1996). Attributions and behavior in functional and dysfunctional marriages. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 64*, 569–576. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.64.3.569>
- Buck, A. A., & Neff, L. A. (2012). Stress spillover in early marriage: The role of self-regulatory depletion. *Journal of Family Psychology, 26*, 698–708. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0029260>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020a, February 11). *Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020b, February 11). *Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>
- Cohan, C. L., & Cole, S. W. (2002). Life course transitions and natural disaster: Marriage, birth, and divorce following Hurricane Hugo. *Journal of Family Psychology, 16*, 14–25. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.16.1.14>
- Cohan, C. L., Cole, S. W., & Schoen, R. (2009). Divorce following the September 11 terrorist attacks. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 26*, 512–530. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0265407509351043>
- Cohen, S. (2004). Social relationships and health. *American Psychologist, 59*, 676–684. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.8.676>
- Collins, N. L., & Feeney, B. C. (2000). A safe haven: An attachment theory perspective on support seeking and caregiving in intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78*, 1053–1073. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.78.6.1053>
- Conger, R. D., Rueter, M. A., & Elder, G. H., Jr. (1999). Couple resilience to economic pressure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 76*, 54–71. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.76.1.54>
- Davila, J., Bradbury, T. N., Cohan, C. L., & Tochluk, S. (1997). Marital functioning and depressive symptoms: Evidence for a stress generation model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*, 849–861. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.4.849>
- Davila, J., Karney, B. R., Hall, T. W., & Bradbury, T. N. (2003). Depressive symptoms and marital satisfaction: Within-subject associations and the moderating effects of gender and neuroticism. *Journal of Family Psychology, 17*, 557–570. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.17.4.557>
- Deryugina, T., Kawano, L., & Levitt, S. (2014). *The economic impact of Hurricane Katrina on its victims: Evidence from individual tax returns* (Working Paper No. 20713). Retrieved from National Bureau of Economic Research website: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3386/w20713>
- Diamond, L. M., & Hicks, A. M. (2012). “It’s the economy, honey!” couples’ blame attributions during the 2007–2009 economic crisis. *Personal Relationships, 19*, 586–600. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2011.01380.x>
- Feeney, B. C., & Collins, N. L. (2015). A new look at social support: A theoretical perspective on thriving through relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 19*, 113–147. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1088868314544222>
- Finkel, E. J., & Campbell, W. K. (2001). Self-control and accommodation in close relationships: An interdependence analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81*, 263–277. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.81.2.263>
- Gable, S. L., Gonzaga, G. C., & Strachman, A. (2006). Will you be there for me when things go right? Supportive responses to positive event disclosures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 91*, 904–917. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.5.904>
- Girme, Y. U., Overall, N. C., & Faingataa, S. (2014). “Date nights” take two: The maintenance function of shared relationship activities. *Personal Relationships, 21*, 125–149. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/pere.12020>
- Girme, Y. U., Overall, N. C., Simpson, J. A., & Fletcher, G. J. O. (2015). “All or nothing”: Attachment avoidance and the curvilinear effects of partner support. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 108*, 450–475. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0038866>
- Gottman, J. M. (1979). *Marital interaction: Experimental investigations*. Cambridge, MA: Academic Press.
- Gottman, J. M. (1998). Psychology and the study of the marital processes. *Annual Review of Psychology, 49*, 169–197. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.49.1.169>
- Hammen, C. (2006). Stress generation in depression: Reflections on origins, research, and future directions. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 62*, 1065–1082. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20293>
- Harris, R. L., & Tarchak, L. (2020, March 30). Opinion: ‘It’s starting to feel like a pressure cooker in this house.’ *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/opinion/coronavirus-isolation-relationships.html>
- Henry, N. J., Berg, C. A., Smith, T. W., & Florsheim, P. (2007). Positive and negative characteristics of marital interaction and their association with marital satisfaction in middle-aged and older couples. *Psychology and Aging, 22*, 428–441.
- Hilpert, P., Xu, F., Milek, A., Atkins, D. C., Bodenmann, G., & Bradbury, T. N. (2018). Couples coping with stress: Between-person differences and within-person processes. *Journal of Family Psychology, 32*, 366–374. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000380>
- Holmes, E. A., O’Connor, R. C., Perry, V. H., Tracey, I., Wessely, S., Arseneault, L., . . . Bullmore, E. (2020). Multidisciplinary research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic: A call for action for mental health science. *The Lancet Psychiatry, 7*, 547–560. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30168-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30168-1)
- Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. *PLoS Medicine, 7*, 1–20. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>
- Jackson, G. L., Krull, J. L., Bradbury, T. N., & Karney, B. R. (2017). Household income and trajectories of marital satisfaction in early marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 79*, 690–704. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12394>
- Johnson, M. D., Cohan, C. L., Davila, J., Lawrence, E., Rogge, R. D., Karney, B. R., . . . Bradbury, T. N. (2005). Problem-solving skills and affective expressions as predictors of change in marital satisfaction.



- Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 73, 15–27. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.73.1.15>
- Joiner, T. E., Alfano, M. S., & Metalsky, G. I. (1992). When depression breeds contempt: Reassurance seeking, self-esteem, and rejection of depressed college students by their roommates. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 101, 165–173. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0021-843X.101.1.165>
- Karantzas, G. C., & Cole, S. F. (2011). Arthritis and support seeking tendencies: The role of attachment. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 30, 404–440. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2011.30.4.404>
- Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (1995). The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: A review of theory, methods, and research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 118, 3–34. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.118.1.3>
- Karney, B. R., Bradbury, T. N., & Lavner, J. A. (2018). Supporting healthy relationships in low-income couples: Lessons learned and policy implications. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 5, 33–39. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2372732217747890>
- Karney, B. R., Story, L. B., & Bradbury, T. N. (2005). Marriages in context: Interactions between chronic and acute stress among newlyweds. In T. A. Revenson, K. Kayser, & G. Bodenmann (Eds.), *Couples coping with stress: Emerging perspectives on dyadic coping* (pp. 13–32). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/11031-001>
- Keneski, E., Neff, L. A., & Loving, T. J. (2018). The importance of a few good friends: Perceived network support moderates the association between daily marital conflict and diurnal cortisol. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 9, 962–971. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1948550617731499>
- Lavner, J. A., & Bradbury, T. N. (2010). Patterns of change in marital satisfaction over the newlywed years. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 1171–1187. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00757.x>
- Lavner, J. A., Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (2015). New directions for policies aimed at strengthening low-income couples. *Behavioral Science and Policy*, 1, 13–24. Retrieved from [https://issuu.com/behavioralsciencepolicyassociation/docs/bsp\\_vol1is2\\_lavner/1](https://issuu.com/behavioralsciencepolicyassociation/docs/bsp_vol1is2_lavner/1)
- Lavner, J. A., Williamson, H. C., Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (2020). Premarital parenthood and newlyweds' marital trajectories. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 34, 279–290. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000596>
- Levenson, R. W., Carstensen, L. L., & Gottman, J. M. (1994). Influence of age and gender on affect, physiology, and their interrelations: A study of long-term marriages. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 56–68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.67.1.56>
- Low, R. S. T., Overall, N. C., Cross, E. J., & Henderson, A. M. E. (2019). Emotion regulation, conflict resolution, and spillover on subsequent family functioning. *Emotion*, 19, 1162–1182. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/emo0000519>
- Masarik, A. S., Martin, M. J., Ferrer, E., Lorenz, F. O., Conger, K. J., & Conger, R. D. (2016). Couple resilience to economic pressure over time and across generations. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78, 326–345. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12284>
- McNulty, J. K. (2008). Neuroticism and interpersonal negativity: The independent contributions of perceptions and behaviors. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34, 1439–1450. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167208322558>
- McNulty, J. K. (2016). Should spouses be demanding less from marriage? A contextual perspective on the implications of interpersonal standards. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 42, 444–457. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167216634050>
- Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2007). *Attachment in adulthood: Structure, dynamics, and change*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Nakonezny, P. A., Reddick, R., & Rodgers, J. L. (2004). Did divorces decline after the Oklahoma City bombing? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, 90–100. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2004.00007.x>
- Neff, L. A., & Karney, B. R. (2004). How does context affect intimate relationships? Linking external stress and cognitive processes within marriage. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30, 134–148. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167203255984>
- Neff, L. A., & Karney, B. R. (2009). Stress and reactivity to daily relationship experiences: How stress hinders adaptive processes in marriage. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97, 435–450. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0015663>
- Neff, L. A., & Karney, B. R. (2017). Acknowledging the elephant in the room: How stressful environmental contexts shape relationship dynamics. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 13, 107–110. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.05.013>
- Newkirk, K., Perry-Jenkins, M., & Sayer, A. G. (2017). Division of household and childcare labor and relationship conflict among low-income new parents. *Sex Roles*, 76, 319–333. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0604-3>
- Nguyen, T. P., Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (2020). When poor communication does and does not matter: The moderating role of stress. *Journal of Family Psychology*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000643>
- Overall, N. C. (2018). Does partners' negative-direct communication during conflict help sustain perceived commitment and relationship quality across time? *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 9, 481–492. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1948550617712030>
- Overall, N. C. (2020). Behavioral variability reduces the harmful longitudinal effects of partners' negative-direct behavior on relationship problems. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000231>
- Overall, N. C., Girme, Y. U., Lemay, E. P. Jr., & Hammond, M. D. (2014). Attachment anxiety and reactions to relationship threat: The benefits and costs of inducing guilt in romantic partners. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106, 235–256. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0034371>
- Overall, N. C., & McNulty, J. K. (2017). What type of communication during conflict is beneficial for intimate relationships? *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 13, 1–5. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.03.002>
- Overall, N. C., Simpson, J. A., & Struthers, H. (2013). Buffering attachment-related avoidance: Softening emotional and behavioral defenses during conflict discussions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104, 854–871. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0031798>
- Pietromonaco, P. R., & Beck, L. A. (2015). Attachment processes in adult romantic relationships. In M. Mikulincer, P. R. Shaver, J. A. Simpson, J. F. Dovidio, *APA handbook of personality and social psychology, Vol. 3: Interpersonal relations* (pp. 33–64). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/14344-002>
- Pietromonaco, P. R., & Collins, N. L. (2017). Interpersonal mechanisms linking close relationships to health. *American Psychologist*, 72, 531–542. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000129>
- Pietromonaco, P. R., Uchino, B. N., & Dunkel Schetter, C. (2013). Close relationship processes and health: Implications of attachment theory for health and disease. *Health Psychology*, 32, 499–513. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0029349>
- Prime, H., Wade, M., & Browne, D. T. (2020). Risk and resilience in family well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. *American Psychologist*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000660>
- Rehman, U. S., Gollan, J., & Mortimer, A. R. (2008). The marital context of depression: Research, limitations, and new directions. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 28, 179–198. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2007.04.007>
- Reis, H. T., Clark, M. S., & Holmes, J. G. (2004). Perceived partner responsiveness as an organizing construct in the study of intimacy and

- closeness. In D. J. Mashek & A. P. Aron (Eds.), *Handbook of closeness and intimacy* (pp. 201–225). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ross, J. M., Karney, B. R., Nguyen, T. P., & Bradbury, T. N. (2019). Communication that is maladaptive for middle-class couples is adaptive for socioeconomically disadvantaged couples. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 116*, 582–597. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000158>
- Rusbult, C. E., Bissonnette, V. L., Arriaga, X. B., & Cox, C. L. (1998). Accommodation processes during the early years of marriage. In T. N. Bradbury (Ed.), *The developmental course of marital dysfunction* (pp. 74–113). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511527814.005>
- Ryon, H. S., & Gleason, M. E. J. (2018). Reciprocal support and daily perceived control: Developing a better understanding of daily support transactions across a major life transition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 115*, 1034–1053. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000141>
- Shallcross, S. L., Howland, M., Bemis, J., Simpson, J. A., & Frazier, P. (2011). Not “capitalizing” on social capitalization interactions: The role of attachment insecurity. *Journal of Family Psychology, 25*, 77–85. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0021876>
- Shaver, P. R., Schachner, D. A., & Mikulincer, M. (2005). Attachment style, excessive reassurance seeking, relationship processes, and depression. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 31*, 343–359. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0146167204271709>
- Simpson, J. A., & Rholes, W. S. (2017). Adult attachment, stress, and romantic relationships. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 13*, 19–24. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.04.006>
- Simpson, J. A., Winterheld, H. A., Rholes, W. S., & Oriña, M. M. (2007). Working models of attachment and reactions to different forms of caregiving from romantic partners. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 93*, 466–477. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.93.3.466>
- Stephens, M. A. P., Franks, M. M., Rook, K. S., Iida, M., Hemphill, R. C., & Salem, J. K. (2013). Spouses' attempts to regulate day-to-day dietary adherence among patients with type 2 diabetes. *Health Psychology, 32*, 1029–1037. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0030018>
- Tesser, A., & Beach, S. R. H. (1998). Life events, relationship quality, and depression: An investigation of judgment discontinuity in vivo. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74*, 36–52. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.1.36>
- Trombello, J. M., Schoebi, D., & Bradbury, T. N. (2011). Relationship functioning moderates the association between depressive symptoms and life stressors. *Journal of Family Psychology, 25*, 58–67. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0022138>
- Vinokur, A., & Caplan, R. D. (1987). Attitudes and social support: Determinants of Job-seeking behavior and well-being among the unemployed. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 17*, 1007–1024. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1987.tb02345.x>
- Whisman, M. A., Robustelli, B. L., Beach, S. R. H., Snyder, D. K., & Harper, J. M. (2015). Marital discord and depression in middle-aged and older couples. *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships, 32*, 967–973. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0265407514554519>
- Williamson, H. C., Altman, N., Hsueh, J., & Bradbury, T. N. (2016). Effects of relationship education on couple communication and satisfaction: A randomized controlled trial with low-income couples. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 84*, 156–166. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000056>
- Williamson, H. C., Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (2013). Financial strain and stressful events predict newlyweds' negative communication independent of relationship satisfaction. *Journal of Family Psychology, 27*, 65–75. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0031104>
- Zee, K. S., & Bolger, N. (2019). Visible and invisible social support: How, why, and when. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 28*, 314–320. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0963721419835214>

Received June 10, 2020

Revision received June 23, 2020

Accepted June 28, 2020 ■