

Emotion Regulation in Romantic Relationships

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This is a post-acceptance, pre-publication preprint of a chapter to appear in the forthcoming *Handbook of Emotion Regulation (3rd edition)*. To cite this preprint:

Meier, T., Stephens, J.E., & Haase, C.M. (in press). Emotion regulation in romantic relationships. In B.Q. Ford & J.J. Gross (Eds.), *Handbook of emotion regulation(3rd ed)*.

Author Note

This work was supported by a grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation awarded to Tabea Meier (P2ZHP1_199409) and a research venture grant from the School of Education and Social Policy awarded to Claudia M. Haase.

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Romantic relationships are hotbeds of emotions – from the high highs and low lows in the beginning of a new relationship to all the tough and tender moments when navigating life as a couple to the question of how to let go and move on when a relationship ends. How couples regulate emotions has profound consequences, not only for relationship quality and stability, but also for well-being, health, and longevity (e.g., Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Levenson et al., 2014; Wells et al., 2022).

Drawing from functionalist perspectives of emotion (e.g., Levenson, 1999), we propose that each phase in a romantic relationship (i.e., initiation, development, ending) can be characterized by specific challenges and opportunities that give rise to specific emotions and with it, demands for emotion regulation. We do not wish to imply that these challenges and opportunities are universal (although there is evidence that romantic love is a cross-cultural phenomenon, see Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992) or that everyone will navigate these stages in similar ways (in fact, variability is key when it comes to couples' emotion regulation; Levenson et al., 2014). But we hope for this to be a useful organizing framework that can bridge the vast affective and relationship science literatures that speak to couples' emotion regulation.

Emotion Regulation During Relationship Initiation

Romantic relationships can begin in line at the grocery store, in a bar and, increasingly so, online. They may be most likely to progress beyond fleeting attraction if both parties are interested in pursuing a relationship; are more, rather than less, proximal (e.g., living in the same area); and embody what individuals are looking for in a partner (Clark et al., 2019). Many studies have examined (often hypothetical) romantic and sexual attraction. Yet, how individuals fall in love and begin a relationship (which may not necessarily go hand in hand) remains

surprisingly elusive. What we do know is that romantic love is a powerful emotional experience that has long occupied laypeople, artists, and scholars alike.

High highs and low lows. The early stages of romantic love have experiential, behavioral, physiological, and neurobiological qualities that can be almost cocaine-like (Fisher et al., 2006). Newly-in-love individuals may feel excitement, elation, and euphoria. They may be highly focused on their partner and motivated to be around them. They may feel full of energy, lose their appetite, and have trouble sleeping. At the neural level, intense, early-stage romantic love can be associated with activity in brain regions that are also implicated in addiction (Aron et al., 2013). In addition to the high highs, however, individuals may also experience low lows, perhaps because of the enormous uncertainty of this phase. In fact, in a study of young adults, being in love was also associated with depressive and anxiety symptoms (Bajoghli et al., 2014). Fear and anxiety may arise over whether one's feelings are reciprocated and whether a relationship will flourish. Embarrassment, guilt, and shame over real or imaginary shortcomings may come up. Jealousy may rear its head when there are attractive others around.

While individuals are often more motivated to downregulate negative and upregulate positive emotions, the similarities between early romantic love and states of addiction or mania point to an interesting emotion regulation challenge: Individuals (as well as their family members, friends, coworkers, etc.) may want to downregulate some of the positive emotions when they become too much. And while romantic love and sexual desire often overlap, there is evidence that they are distinct from one another (e.g., Diamond, 2009); coupling or decoupling them may pose its own regulatory challenge.

Rules of expression. When people begin a new relationship, they may face another profound emotion regulation challenge. On the one hand, they may want to present the best

version of their self in order to impress their (potential) partner, while on the other hand, they may want to present their “authentic self” and engage in vulnerable self-disclosure to promote closeness and intimacy (e.g., Reis & Shaver, 1988). At the emotional level, presenting the best self can take the form of upregulating prosocial behavior towards others in general (e.g., holding the door open for a stranger) and the new (or potential) partner in particular (e.g., offering support). Individuals may also follow (culture-specific) display rules that govern the appropriateness of a given emotional behavior and are typically more stringent (and perhaps scripted) for budding relationships. Early in a relationship, individuals may seek to amplify the expression of positive emotions and suppress the expression of negative emotions. With time, partners have greater opportunities to reveal themselves across a wider range of situations, making selective self-presentation more difficult or less relevant.

At the same time, individuals may not just want to show their best self but also reveal their “authentic self” early on in a relationship. Building trust and intimacy is a primary goal of relationship initiation according to Reis and Shaver (1988) who described relationship initiation as a dynamic, interactive process of self-disclosure and responsive behaviors that can create *intimacy* between partners. In fact, the most frequently endorsed behaviors for individuals seeking a relationship are activities that boost emotional intimacy (e.g., Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Current directions. Love and desire can be quite fluid (Diamond, 2009). Falling in love is often described as a state beyond one’s control, but individuals may (seek to) regulate love-related feelings more than one might assume. They may seek to upregulate positive emotions to feel more attached to a partner (if they are invested in making the relationship work) or downregulate them to feel less attached (perhaps in order to focus on other goals, protect existing relationships, or because early attachment experiences make them wary of too much

interdependence). More inclusive research on emotion regulation in this phase is needed, including sources (e.g., attachment), strategies (e.g., emotional acceptance), and consequences (e.g., for subsequent relationship development), to better understand how different individuals (across cultures, gender identities, sexual orientations, and other identities) navigate emerging romantic relationships. And we must also recognize and disavow some of the earlier research in this area, which engaged in reprehensible practices that caused violent harm to the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts). Moreover, while romantic love may be (nearly) universal, (Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992), the idea that love is a prerequisite for a committed relationship is not shared across cultures. What emotion regulation looks like when romance is decoupled from relationship formation is an important question ripe for more research.

Emotion Regulation during Relationship Development

Most people will be in a committed relationship at some point in their lives. In the US, for example, more than 93% of all people will have been married at least once by the age of 65. Other forms of committed relationships are common around the world and for some (e.g., same-sex couples) often the only option. **Navigating conflict and beyond.** Disagreements are very common in romantic relationships and potent triggers of negative (but also positive) emotions. This renders couples' conflict discussions a fertile testing ground for emotion regulation. A large body of laboratory-based research has probed how partners generate and regulate emotions during conflict at the level of emotional experiences, behavior, and physiological arousal and reveals tremendous individual differences (e.g., Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Levenson et al., 2014). In our own work (Bloch et al., 2014), for example, we have found that how quickly spouses downregulate negative emotions during conflict is an important correlate of marital

satisfaction (for men and women) and predicts changes in marital satisfaction longitudinally over more than a decade (for women). There is, of course, much more to a relationship than navigating conflict as partners regulate emotions in positive contexts (e.g., Algoe, 2019; Gable & Bedrov, 2022) and everyday life (e.g., Horn et al., 2019; Meier et al., 2022) with the latter often examined through experience sampling methods. Overall, this body of work points to couples' emotion regulation as a key predictor of not just relationship quality and stability but also the well-being and health of both partners, which has origins in early attachment experiences (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and changes across the life span, often for the better (e.g., Levenson et al., 2014).

Dyadic emotion regulation. As partners become increasingly included in each other's selves (Aron et al., 2013), couples' emotion regulation becomes more than the sum of each partner's parts. A growing literature has looked at couples' emotion regulation through a dedicated dyadic lens, examining how individuals regulate their own and their partner's emotions for better or worse in a relationship (e.g., Gable & Bedrov, 2022). Interest in couples' co-regulation (or linkage, synchronization, resonance, which all refer to phenomena of emotional coordination; see also Butler, this volume) especially has been on the rise. Fredrickson (2016), for example, presents an account of love as emotional coordination that occurs during moments of *shared* positive emotions (for an overview see, for example, Wells et al., 2022). This positivity resonance between spouses (especially at the behavioral level) predicts physical health and longevity over more than 30 years over and above individual positive emotions (Wells et al., 2022). In addition, couples do not only co-regulate their own emotions, their emotions also affect (dare we say, regulate) close others outside the dyad. For example, when a baby arrives, many

couples struggle emotionally and this, in turn, can have consequences not just for the relationship but also the child's emotional development (Gottman & Gottman, 2017).

Current directions. Existing couples research has provided important insights. At the same time, the field needs more inclusive research that puts couples' emotion regulation in context to interrogate the roles of culture, racism, sex, gender, socioeconomic status, and relationship norms, among others. Moreover, we note that in a recent analysis of self-report measures from 47 longitudinal couples studies (Joel et al., 2020), several emotion-related constructs (e.g., appreciation towards their partner) emerged as important correlates of relationship quality. Yet, none of these constructs predicted *changes* in relationship quality over time. From this, some might conclude that couples' emotions matter little for relationship development. Yet, studies that have included dedicated measures of couples' emotional functioning, especially measures of couples' objectively-coded emotional behaviors, provide a different perspective – both positive and negative emotional behaviors independently predict marital satisfaction and stability (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995) – converging with emotion-focused couples therapy approaches, which have proven successful (e.g., Gottman & Gottman, 2017). We suspect that future couples research will benefit enormously from more cross-talk with couples' therapists (and, hopefully, the reverse will also apply).

Emotion Regulation during Relationship Dissolution

All good – and bad – relationships come to an end. Whether through amicable “conscious uncoupling,” a messy divorce, or the death of a partner, relationship dissolution is considered one of the most stressful life events (e.g., Knöpfli et al., 2016). Relationship dissolution is a longer-term process and profound changes in individuals' emotions and thoughts may surface months before the official end of a relationship (Seraj et al., 2021).

Letting go. The end of a relationship often elicits intense emotions. Individuals may experience anger when infidelity was involved, craving for the former partner, or relief when the relationship was a burden. Yet, sadness and depression-like states are perhaps most common after relationship dissolution (Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006), consistent with the notion that irrevocable loss is a prototypical sadness antecedent (Levenson, 1999). Some of the strategies that individuals use to regulate emotions after a break-up may be more maladaptive, for example, continued contact with an ex-partner (O'Hara et al., 2020). Other strategies appear to be more helpful, for example, sharing emotions with other people which may help build connection and support (Reis & Shaver, 1988; see also Rimé, this volume) or expressive writing which may help construct a coherent narrative and meaning out of what has happened (Pennebaker, 1997). Functionalist perspectives remind us that sadness in response to loss is adaptive as it helps individuals disengage and elicit social support, suggesting an important role for emotional acceptance as a regulation strategy (Ford et al., 2018). And while many people seem to adapt well to relationship dissolution over time (Knöpfli et al., 2016), there is considerable heterogeneity in trajectories and some have questioned how common resilience after spousal divorce or loss really is (Infurna & Luthar, 2016).

Moving on. When a relationship ends, individuals need to let go *and* move on. They may (re-) discover who they are and who they want to be, what gives them pleasure and meaning in life, and whether to stay single or look for a new relationship. In this process, positive emotions are candidate emotions to upregulate as they may help individuals broaden and build action repertoires (Fredrickson, 2001) and reengage with new goals (Haase et al., 2021). One emotional system that could be particularly useful is play or playfulness (Panksepp, 1998), which is an inclination to engage in intrinsically motivating behaviors for fun (Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015).

Playfulness has an important role in relationships (e.g., inside jokes), but it could also be critical in navigating relationship dissolution as it promotes self-expansion (Aron et al., 2013) and may help individuals explore and engage in new behaviors, goals, and relationships. After all, the former partner may have been a main source of support in good and in bad times (Gable & Bedrov, 2022) and playfulness may help individuals (re-)connect with other people.

Current directions. Relationship endings seem especially well-suited for studying mixed emotions as individuals go through intense negative emotions (which sometimes may not or cannot be downregulated) while also wanting to upregulate positive emotions. For many, this process may not be linear, and moments of joy or playfulness may be interwoven or co-occur with moments of sadness (Bonanno, 2009). Moreover, although grief can be very isolating, the end of a romantic relationship is a deeply interpersonal experience that may affect other people, including children (whose lives may be profoundly altered by parental separation or loss), friends (who may feel the need to choose sides), other family members or co-workers (who may be more or less supportive), and communities. Research on emotion regulation has rarely adopted a systemic perspective that accounts for regulation not just within individuals (or within a couple). The dissolution of a relationship could provide a meaningful context for developing frameworks that carefully consider sources and consequences of emotion regulation across multiple relationships.

Conclusion

Almost all of our emotion regulation episodes occur in social contexts (Gross et al., 2006); yet, emotion regulation research has often relied on single-subjects paradigms. Romantic relationships are hotbeds of emotion and their beginnings, development, and endings offer ample

opportunities and challenges for emotion regulation that we hope more emotion researchers will explore.

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