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## Review

# Responsiveness in romantic partners' interactions

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**Abstract**

Close relationships, such as romantic partner dyads, involve numerous social exchanges in myriad contexts. During these exchanges, when one of the interaction partners discloses information, the other partner typically communicates a response. The discloser then evaluates the extent to which that response conveys that the responder understood their thoughts, goals, and needs, validated their position, and cared for their well-being. The degree to which the discloser believes that the partner showed this understanding, validation, and caring to the disclosure is known as perceived responsiveness. Perceived responsiveness has long been viewed as a fundamental construct in the development and maintenance of intimacy in romantic relationships. Perceived responsiveness is a common currency that lies at the heart of interactions across multiple contexts, such as social support, gratitude, and capitalization interactions. Being a responsive interaction partner starts with understanding what the other is conveying and how they are viewing the information. Thus, a critical step in the ability to convey responsiveness to a partner is listening. While listening is the first step and indicator of the listening motivation of a responder, a responder must also have the ability and motivation to convey their understanding, validation, and caring to the discloser.

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**Keywords**

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Close relationships that are characterized by strong bonds between two people involve a myriad of social exchanges, from the early stages of a relationship to the end of it. During these exchanges, when one of the interaction partners reveals information about their

needs, concerns, or goals, the other partner is expected to attend to and interpret the message, as well as communicate a response to the partner [1,2]. The discloser then evaluates the extent to which the responder recognizes their thoughts, goals, and needs, validates their core values, and cares for their well-being. The degree to which the discloser believes that the partner showed understanding, validation, and caring to the disclosure is known as perceived responsiveness [3]. When one holds a belief that their partner is aware of their internal states, needs, and goals or feels understood by their partner, they become more connected with this person and develop higher trust [4].

While healthy communication patterns established by interaction partners can enhance the quality of their relationship, discrepancies between what is said by Partner A and what is understood by Partner B may lead to disappointment or conflict, indicating the importance of high-quality listening in dynamic interactions [5,6]. Even if a listener is invested and interprets a speaker's utterances accurately, unless the speaker feels understood, continued disclosure is unlikely. Indeed, recent studies revealed that the outcomes of the communication are determined by how the speakers themselves perceive the quality of the listening they received, which is not strongly correlated with the listeners' perception of how well they listened [7,8]. When a reaction is perceived to encompass understanding, validation, and expressions of care, it contributes to a satisfying interaction and, in return, a thriving relationship [2].

**Responsiveness and interpersonal emotion regulation**

Perceived responsiveness when one discloses personal information has long been viewed as a fundamental construct in the development of intimacy in romantic relationships [9,10]. Expressing needs or concerns often signals a call for support in tough times which may lead to interpersonal emotion regulation, a process that occurs when one partner aims and acts to modify the other's emotions [11]. In addition to being an interpersonal coping mechanism itself, when emotional expressions of stress or negative behaviors are met with responsive regulation attempts, it becomes an effective coping mechanism [12,13]. Likewise, a physical touch toward a partner as a way of regulating their emotions was associated with a more positive affective state in the

touched partner as long as the touch was responsive [14]. All in all, when a responder provides support that is perceived as responsive, the revelation of the need results in effective interpersonal regulation, enhances intimacy and closeness in a relationship, and in turn cultivates even higher general perceived partner responsiveness. Perceived partner responsiveness may also be enhanced by displays of concrete responsive behaviors such as giving a hug or sending a supportive text message as a response to the partner's recognized affective state even in the absence of a verbal disclosure [15].

The role of perceived partner responsiveness is not limited to negative disclosures, regulation of negative emotions and receiving social support. On the contrary, people also share good things that happen to them (i.e., capitalization) with their partner to savor or regulate mood [16]. In a study conducted with breast cancer patients and their partners, after a positive disclosure, the discloser experienced decreases in their negative affectivity and increases in intimacy when they perceived their partner as responsive to their capitalization attempts indicated by the level of enthusiasm shown by the responder [17]. Moreover, it has also been suggested that the capitalization process is iterative, with perceptions of the partner's responsiveness playing a major role in determining whether or not a participant will attempt to share a positive event in the future [16]. More recent evidence also revealed that emotional and physiological associations between partners differ based on the individual's own and their partner's capitalization and responsiveness earlier that day. Specifically, couples who engaged in more capitalization and responsive behavior during their daily interactions experienced less shared stress and higher physiological coadaptation as measured by the level of convergence between two partners' behavioral and physiological changes [18]. It has also been established that the experience of the partner's responsiveness during the capitalization of good news contributes to the formation of a sense of couple identity [19].

### Responsiveness and romantic relationship quality

When one partner feels thankful for the responsiveness of their partner and appreciates it, they become more motivated to maintain their relationship especially if they acknowledge that the responder is responsive [3]. Moreover, conveying gratitude to the partner increases the feelings of responsibility to reciprocate partner's behavior and maintenance of prosocial behavior in relationships [20,21]. In other words, it has been shown that gratitude is positively associated with high-quality social bonds since it indicates that a partner considers the other as responsive to their needs and that they are motivated to provide similar support in return [21,22]. Moreover, emphasizing the responsiveness of benefactor's act to the beneficiary's needs makes the

greatest contribution to the benefactor's perception of relationship quality rather than expressing the cost of the act for the benefactor [23].

The more intimate a person feels in a relationship, the more likely they are to make self-disclosures to their partner, strengthening the bidirectional link between perceived responsiveness and intimacy [24,3]. Over the course of interactions, people form more global perceptions of a partner's general responsiveness. For example, a study conducted with newlywed couples found that perceived understanding as a general partner belief was linked to perceived relationship well-being, trust, and closeness [25]. In addition to feeling understood, validation of someone's core values by their romantic partner fulfills the need for belonging, and being accepted and fosters personal well-being [26]. The final piece of perceived responsiveness, feeling cared for and supported by their partner, enables one to feel secure in a thriving relationship [27,28].

In addition to cultivating intimacy in romantic couples, converging evidence indicates that perceived responsiveness heavily influences the quality of romantic relationships [e.g.,29,30]. For example, perceptions of partners as responsive are linked to higher sexual desire and satisfaction [31]. In a daily-diary study conducted with newlywed couples, the findings revealed that sexually satisfied partners reported higher perceived partner responsiveness, and this perception mediated the association between sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction. Additionally, on days in which sexual satisfaction was higher, perceptions of responsiveness were also higher and were associated with increased marital satisfaction [31]. A similar association between sexual satisfaction and perceived partner responsiveness was observed for first-time mothers, who are known to experience a decline in sexual fulfillment as well [32].

Perceived partner responsiveness also promotes feelings of attachment security in romantic relationships. Higher levels of perceived partner responsiveness are associated with lower levels of partner-specific attachment anxiety and partner-specific avoidance, especially for those who are generally insecure [33]. Similarly, individuals who perceived more responsiveness from their partner were found to be more emotionally expressive and reported higher support-seeking tendencies toward their intimate partners [34]. When levels of perceived partner responsiveness were experimentally manipulated to be high, people were more likely to express both positive and negative feelings to their partner with the expectation of lower risk related to emotional expressivity [34]. Moreover, when a hurtful event takes place in a romantic relationship, the perceived responsiveness of the partner who caused this event determined whether their apologies and compensations led to the forgiveness of the other partner [35].

The investment model [36] posits that when people are satisfied with a relationship and perceive many investments in, and few alternatives to, that relationship, they tend to be more committed to, and in return, stay in this relationship rather than dissolving it. Although the three components of the investment model of commitment-satisfaction, investment and absence of alternatives-do not seem to be related at the first glance, they go hand in hand in the context of a committed relationship. Segal and Fraley (2016) have proposed that the level of perceived partner responsiveness by romantic partners is the underlying mechanism driving the covariation of these three variables. In other words, people with high perceived partner responsiveness feel more satisfied with their relationships, value their investments in this relationship, and evaluate alternative romantic mates as less appealing, thus, are more committed to their relationships [37]. Supporting evidence for the association between perceived partner responsiveness and commitment emphasizes trust between romantic partners. Wieselquist and colleagues (1999) described “mutual cyclical growth,” as a process which is originated when romantic partners foster trust in each other by engaging in pro-relationship behaviors that lead to higher perceived responsiveness. Perceived partner responsiveness, in turn, increases the desire to commit to a partner and committed partners display more responsive behaviors, thus initiating a new cycle [38,39].

### Responsiveness and well-being

Perceived responsiveness has also been shown to provide a wide variety of personal benefits to romantic partners as well as their family members, among which are increasing hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, enhanced motivation for personal growth, and more efficient coping with stress; and thereby, long-term thriving [27,40,41]. A longitudinal study conducted with married couples over the course of 20 years demonstrated that alterations in perceived partner responsiveness predicts longevity, after controlling for physical and mental health [42]. Moreover, perceived partner responsiveness predicts increased observed benefits of social support [43]. Indeed, the beneficial effects of social support are contingent on the extent to which the recipient considers the received support as responsive [43]. When participants shared a negative event with their partner, it was revealed that the extent to which the received support was seen as responsive by the discloser determined whether the support was beneficial in reducing the sad and anxious affectivity of the discloser regardless of whether the support was visible or invisible [43].

### Responsiveness and listening

Being a responsive interaction partner seems to be only possible through understanding and interpreting the other’s needs, desires, and goals. Yet, how can one

understand another’s (often) invisible needs, desires, and goals? If they are expressed verbally by the discloser, the most straightforward way to understand is listening, which starts with paying attention to the content of one’s words, involves interpreting the content and responding accordingly [44–46]. From the perspective of a listener, to act responsively, understanding what a speaker is communicating plays a crucial role [47]. Listening, however, requires cognitive effort on the part of the listener; eliminating background noise or competing speech and choosing the channel to attend more carefully, and having the motivation to listen to the speaker [48]. A way of listening that is found to be associated with positive interaction outcomes is called active listening, which involves taking the other person’s perspective as well as showing interest in it [49]. Although it is a cognitively challenging task, active listening seems to be the first step to initiate perceived responsiveness in an interaction.

For example, active listeners are perceived to be more understanding; and this helps in establishing rewarding communication patterns between interaction partners [44]. A study investigating the differential outcomes of active listening demonstrated that participants who were provided with active listening responses felt more understood than those who were provided with advice or simple acknowledgment [50].

However, listening alone is not sufficient to convey responsiveness. The responder needs to express interest in speakers’ words and create the feelings of being heard and understood in a speaker. Displaying some signs indicating interest, such as paraphrasing the words of the speaker, backchannel responses such as “mm-h,” body gestures (e.g., nodding head for approval) and directing questions to the speaker are signs of active listening [46]. Indeed, verbal paraphrases, eye contact, and questions are associated with the attentiveness and responsiveness of the listener [43,44]. Although there is evidence showing that speakers can distinguish high quality listening, it has been also found that conversation partners tend to think that more attention and processing has taken place than is actually true [44,45] indicating the importance of perceptions of speakers over the actual attention displayed by the listener toward the speaker, similar to the difference between perceived responsiveness and enacted responsiveness of a response by a responder. The impact of listening on perceived responsiveness is through perceived understanding rather than actual understanding of the listener. Thus, a responder must listen *and* have the ability and motivation to convey their understanding to the discloser.

### Conclusion

Perceived partner responsiveness, as a crucial component of close relationships, has a broad impact on various

dimensions of relationships such as intimacy, expressivity, sexual satisfaction to individual well-being through modifying emotional experiences in a close relationship. Yet, it unfolds gradually over the course of a relationship, and is shaped by many other characteristics resulting in a cycle in which perceived partner responsiveness both leads to and is caused by several characteristics discussed above. Nevertheless, the first step of perceived partner responsiveness is when a person listens to their partner. Still, expressors may or may not feel listened to and understood by the listener. In addition to feeling listened to, in order to perceive their partner as responsive, one also should hold a belief that their partner values their needs and cares for them. Although cultivating perceived partner responsiveness is a complicated dyadic process which involves partners' capabilities, intentions and perceptions; close relationship partners enjoy the beneficial effects of perceived partner responsiveness on their relational and personal well-being.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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- \* of special interest
- \*\* of outstanding interest

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