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When Positive Processes Hurt Relationships

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Abstract

Based on a robust literature indicating that happy couples tend to think and behave more positively in their relationships than less happy couples do, most interventions designed to treat and prevent marital distress tend to encourage couples to engage in more-positive cognitive and behavioral processes and avoid more-negative ones. Consistent with the limited effectiveness of such interventions, however, findings from four independent longitudinal studies of newlyweds indicate that positive processes may not only fail to help distressed couples, they may hurt them. Specifically, although more-positive expectations, more-positive attributions, less-negative behavior, and more forgiveness most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses facing infrequent and minor problems, less-positive expectations, less-positive attributions, more-negative behavior, and less forgiveness most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses facing more-frequent and more-severe problems, partly because those processes helped spouses acknowledge, address, and resolve those problems. Accordingly, distressed and at-risk couples may benefit from interventions that teach them to think and behave in ways that motivate them to resolve their problems, even if those thoughts and behaviors are associated with negative emotions in the moment.

Keywords

marriage, relationships, cognition, behavior, context

How do some couples remain satisfied over the course of their long-term relationships whereas other couples experience declines in satisfaction and eventual disruption? Traditional theoretical perspectives have addressed this question by highlighting the importance of cognitive and behavioral processes that are linked to momentary positive feelings about the relationship. For example, behavioral perspectives (e.g., Wills, Weiss, & Patterson, 1974) posit that behaviors that make people feel good about their relationships in the moment should promote better relationship functioning over time. Likewise, cognitive perspectives (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990) posit that perceptions linked to immediate positive evaluations of a partner should promote better relationship functioning over time, even if those perceptions are inaccurate (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Based on those perspectives, interventions to treat and prevent marital distress tend to promote thoughts and behaviors associated with more-positive emotions and to discourage thoughts and behaviors associated with more-negative emotions (e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990).

Nevertheless, approximately half of all couples who seek such treatments do not experience any long-lasting benefits (e.g., Jacobson & Addis, 1993). New research based on four independent longitudinal studies of newlywed couples suggests one reason for the limited success of existing treatments: The associations demonstrated in research on well-functioning couples may not generalize to couples experiencing distress.

Specifically, data from all four studies demonstrate that, although positive processes tend to effectively maintain satisfaction among partners in relationships that are relatively healthy at the outset, these same processes appear to be associated with greater declines in satisfaction among partners who face more-frequent and more-severe problems. In fact, couples who face frequent and severe problems appear to benefit most from more-negative processes even though such processes are associated with lower levels of satisfaction initially.

Expectancies

One of the oldest and most documented findings regarding the evaluative effects of cognition is that holding more-positive expectations for various experiences promotes more-positive evaluations of those experiences (for a review, see Roese & Sherman, 2007). Accordingly, holding more-positive expectations for relationship experiences should lead to more-positive evaluations of those experiences and higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Indeed, McNulty and Karney (2002)

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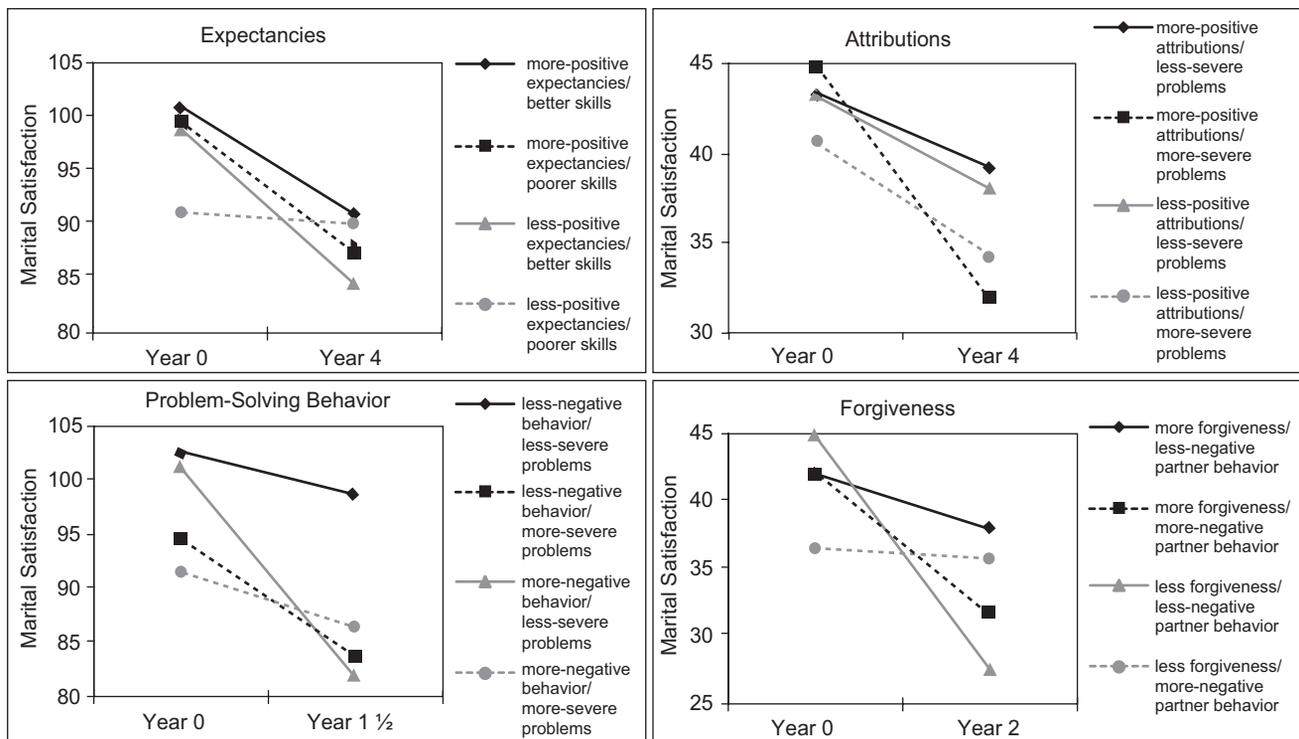


Fig. 1. Effects of cognitive and behavioral processes on changes in relationship satisfaction as moderated by qualities of the relationship. Each graph presents the predicted trajectories of satisfaction for spouses (± 1 standard deviation, SD) on a particular marital process and ± 1 SD on a particular marital context for one specific analysis: The y-axis of each graph is marital satisfaction and the x-axis of each graph is the number of years of marriage (the number of years varies across graphs because the timing of data analysis differed across the studies and analyses; the scale of marital satisfaction varies across graphs because the measure of marital satisfaction differed across studies and analyses). The top left panel shows that although more-positive expectancies most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses who possessed the cognitive and behavioral skills necessary to confirm them, less-positive expectancies most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses who lacked those skills. The top right panel shows that although more-positive attributions most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses facing relatively minor problems, less-positive attributions most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses who faced more-severe problems. The bottom left panel shows that although less-negative problem-solving behaviors most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses facing rather minor problems, more-negative problem-solving behaviors most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses facing more severe marital problems. The bottom right panel shows that although spouses' tendencies to feel and express forgiveness toward their partners most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses married to partners who rarely engaged in negative behaviors, tendencies to be less forgiving most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses married to partners who more frequently engaged in negative behaviors.

demonstrated that spouses who expected to be more satisfied with an upcoming problem-solving discussion evaluated that discussion more positively, controlling for the behaviors they actually exchanged during the discussion. Consistent with this and other findings, interventions to treat and prevent relationship distress tend to recommend that partners avoid holding low expectations for their relationships (e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990).

Nevertheless, there are theoretical reasons to question whether more-positive expectations for the partner and relationship are universally beneficial. Specifically, norm theory (Kahneman & Miller, 1986) posits that when positive expectations are disconfirmed, they serve as contrasts that make actual outcomes look worse by comparison. Accordingly, if they get disconfirmed, more-positive expectations for the partner and relationship may lead intimates to feel less satisfied, not more satisfied, with their partners and relationships.

McNulty and Karney (2004) reconciled this apparent inconsistency by demonstrating that the implications of intimates' expectations for their relationships depend on qualities of those relationships. Specifically, using a sample of 82 newlywed couples who reported their marital satisfaction eight times over the course of 4 years, the authors demonstrated that the effects of spouses' expectations on changes in their marital satisfaction depend on those spouses' abilities to confirm them. As can be seen in the top left panel of Figure 1, although more-positive expectations (e.g., expecting the relationship to become even more satisfying over time) most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses who possessed the cognitive and behavioral skills necessary to confirm them (e.g., effective problem-solving strategies), less-positive expectations (expecting the relationship to experience rough patches along the way) most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses who lacked those skills.

Attributions

Another broad theoretical perspective posits that people also benefit from making positive interpretations of their experiences (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). According to that perspective, people should be happier with their relationships to the extent that they make more-positive interpretations of their interpersonal experiences. Indeed, Bradbury and Fincham (1990) reviewed a robust literature indicating that happy couples tend to make more-external attributions for their partners' negative behaviors. Consistent with this and other research, cognitively-oriented interventions tend to help distressed partners focus on the external reasons for one another's negative behaviors (e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990).

Nevertheless, another line of research suggests that focusing on external causes of negative events can lead people to overlook and thus fail to address important problems (e.g., Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Even partners in the happiest relationships will inevitably encounter problems they must resolve, and resolving those problems requires noticing, acknowledging, and addressing them. Accordingly, to the extent that positive perceptions of the partner and/or relationship prevent intimates from noticing, acknowledging, and thus addressing the problems that emerge in their relationships, such thoughts may allow problems to grow worse and thus satisfaction to decline.

McNulty, O'Mara, and Karney (2008) reconciled this apparent inconsistency by demonstrating that the effects of benevolent cognitions on relationship development also depend on qualities of those relationships. Specifically, using data drawn from the same longitudinal study described earlier and data drawn from a second longitudinal study of 169 couples who also reported their marital satisfaction up to eight times over the course of 4 years, the authors demonstrated that the effects of positive attributions on changes in marital satisfaction depend on the severity of the problems partners face in their marriages. As can be seen in the top right panel of Figure 1, although more-positive attributions (e.g., believing the partner was not responsible for a negative behavior) most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses facing relatively minor problems, less-positive attributions (e.g., believing the partner was responsible for a negative behavior) most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses who faced more-severe problems. Further, consistent with the idea that spouses who make more benevolent attributions for their partners' behavior are less likely to make necessary efforts to resolve those problems, the authors also demonstrated that the interactive effects of attributions and initial problem severity were mediated by changes in the severity of the problems themselves. Whereas more-positive attributions were associated with rather stable problem severity among spouses facing rather minor problems, those same attributions were associated with growing problems among partners facing more-severe problems.

Problem-Solving Behavior

If intimates do notice, acknowledge, and attempt to resolve the problems that arise in their relationships, how should they

behave while discussing those problems? Social learning theory (Wills et al., 1974) posits that intimates evaluate their relationships based on the nature of their behavioral exchanges with one another, such that positive exchanges lead to positive evaluations of the relationship and negative exchanges lead to negative evaluations of the relationship. Accordingly, intimates should be happier to the extent that they avoid any urges they may feel to blame, reject, and command one another to change. Consistent with these ideas, numerous cross-sectional studies demonstrate that happy couples behave more positively than less happy couples do (for a review, see Heyman, 2001). Based on such findings, behaviorally focused interventions tend to promote more-positive problem-solving behaviors over more-negative ones (e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990).

Nevertheless, as suggested by the findings of the McNulty et al. (2008) study described earlier, couples' behaviors must effectively resolve their relationship problems. Recent research by Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, and Sibley (2009) indicates that negative behaviors can be a particularly effective way to motivate change in the partner, change that may be necessary to resolve certain problems. Accordingly, in contrast to the implication of social learning theory that more-positive exchanges should promote more-positive evaluations of the relationship, intimates may sometimes benefit by exchanging more-negative behaviors during problem-solving discussions.

McNulty and Russell (2010) reconciled this apparent inconsistency by demonstrating that the effects of negative problem-solving behaviors on changes in relationship satisfaction also depend on characteristics of the relationships in which they are exchanged. Specifically, using a sample of 72 newlywed couples who reported their marital satisfaction up to eight times over the course of 5 years and a second sample of 135 newlywed couples who reported their marital satisfaction up to three times over the course of 1 year, McNulty and Russell demonstrated that the association between spouses' direct negative behaviors and changes in their marital satisfaction depend on the severity of the problems they face in their marriages. As can be seen in the bottom left panel of Figure 1, although observations of fewer blames, commands, and rejections most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses facing rather minor problems, observations of more blames, commands, and rejections most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses facing more-severe marital problems. Further, as was the case regarding attributions in the McNulty et al. (2008) study described earlier, the interactive effects of negative behavior were mediated by changes in the severity of the problems themselves. Whereas the tendency to engage in direct negative behaviors in relationships characterized by more-minor problems was associated with growing problems over time, those same behaviors were associated with more stable problems over time among partners facing more-severe problems initially.

Notably, consistent with theory and prior research, tendencies to exhibit *indirect* negative behaviors (e.g., sarcasm) were associated with lower levels of satisfaction and more-severe problems regardless of the severity of the problems couples faced in their relationships initially. As argued by Overall

et al. (2009), whereas confronting problems negatively but directly can motivate change in the partner and provide concrete information regarding what changes need to be made, confronting problems negatively but indirectly provides ambiguous information regarding the necessary course of action and thus tends to be ineffective at resolving problems.

Forgiveness

Whereas expectations, attributions, and behavior have received theoretical and empirical attention for several decades, the implications of forgiveness have received attention only recently—but the majority of that research has focused on the likely benefits of forgiveness (see McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Indeed, numerous cross-sectional studies indicate that more-forgiving people tend to be happier in their relationships (for a review, see Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006). Consistent with such findings, several authors have incorporated forgiveness into existing relationship interventions (e.g., Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2000).

Nevertheless, there is theoretical reason to expect that forgiveness may also be detrimental to relationships in some circumstances. Specifically, theories of operant learning (e.g., Skinner, 1969) posit that people are less likely to repeat behaviors that are followed by unwanted consequences. Given that forgiveness may assuage feelings of guilt or remorse in forgiven partners that would otherwise motivate those partners to avoid transgressing again in the future, intimates who are quicker to forgive their partners' transgressions may experience more negativity in those partners over time.

McNulty (2008) demonstrated that whether forgiveness benefits or harms a relationship depends on specific qualities of the relationship partners. Specifically, using a sample of 72 newlywed couples who reported their marital satisfaction up to four times over the course of 2 years, McNulty demonstrated that the association between spouses' forgiveness and changes in their marital satisfaction depends on the frequency with which their partners engage in negative behaviors (e.g., sarcasm, insulting). As can be seen in the bottom right panel of Figure 1, although spouses' tendencies to be more forgiving of their partners most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses married to partners who rarely engaged in negative behaviors, tendencies to be less forgiving most effectively maintained satisfaction among spouses married to partners who more frequently engaged in negative behaviors. Further, consistent with the idea that forgiveness may increase the likelihood that partners will behave negatively again in the future, spouses' tendencies to forgive also interacted with the frequency of partners' negative behavior to predict changes in the severity of problems over time. Whereas the tendency to be more forgiving to partners who rarely behaved negatively was associated with more stable problems over time, the tendency to be more forgiving to partners who more frequently behaved negatively was associated with growing problems over time.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings from these four longitudinal studies challenge traditional models of relationship maintenance that suggest that cognitions and behaviors directly linked to momentary positive emotions should benefit relationships over time. As can be seen in all four panels of Figure 1, despite being associated with lower levels of satisfaction initially, less-positive expectancies, less-positive attributions, more-negative behavior, and less forgiveness were all more effective than more-positive processes at helping couples who faced more-frequent and more-severe problems maintain their initial levels of satisfaction over time. Notably, the benefits of these processes appeared to emerge because they helped couples resolve their relatively frequent and severe problems. Accordingly, theoretical models of relationships may be more complete to the extent that they incorporate the idea that whether processes lead to positive versus negative outcomes over time depends not only on how they make couples feel in the moment but on how well they help couples resolve the challenges that will inevitably arise over the course of their relationships.

The findings of these four longitudinal studies also challenge traditional models of treatment. The finding that the internal context of the relationship determines the implications of these cognitive and behavioral processes indicates that interventions designed to treat and prevent marital distress may be most effective to the extent that they use targeted rather than one-size-fits-all approaches. Although therapies that promote more-positive cognitions and behaviors may be effective for couples facing infrequent or minor problems, those same treatments may not only fail to benefit couples facing more severe problems, they may hurt them. Indeed, recent research suggests the couples least likely to benefit from existing therapies are those who face the most severe problems at the outset of therapy (Baucom, Atkins, Simpson, & Christensen, 2009). Accordingly, couples experiencing frequent and/or severe problems may benefit from treatments that encourage the types of cognitions and behaviors that will motivate them to directly address and resolve those problems, such as internal attributions for own and partner negative behavior, behaviors that directly (but not indirectly) blame and command the partner, and less forgiveness.

Recommended Reading

- Bradbury, T.N., & Fincham, F.D. (1991). A contextual model for advancing the study of marital interaction. In G.J.O. Fletcher & F.D. Fincham (Eds.), *Cognition in close relationships* (pp. 127–147). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. A historical classic; one of the first papers to raise attention to the role of the context in shaping relationships.
- McNulty, J.K., O'Mara, E.M., & Karney, B.R. (2008). (See References). A representative study that illustrates original research about the interactive effects of cognition and problem severity.
- McNulty, J.K., & Russell, V.M. (2010). (See References). A representative study that illustrates original research about the interactive effects of problem-solving behavior and problem severity.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared that he had no conflicts of interest with respect to his authorship or the publication of this article.

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