



Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.

Review

Autonomy–connection tensions, stress, and attachment: The case of COVID-19

Judith A. Feeney¹ and Jennifer Fitzgerald²

Abstract

The COVID pandemic, and actions taken by governments worldwide to deal with it, have placed stress on couple relationships. Reports from many countries have documented substantial increases in relationship difficulties, conflict, and violence. We propose that issues concerning autonomy and connection are central to these problems, particularly as couples face changing situations with regard to lockdowns, social distancing, and border closures. We further propose that a fruitful approach to understanding these difficulties comes from integrating attachment theory with key concepts of stress and coping theories. Based on these principles and concepts, emotionally focused couples therapy (EFT) offers guidelines to help couples navigate the multiple stressors associated with the pandemic.

Addresses

¹ School of Psychology, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Queensland, 4072, Australia

² Discipline of Psychiatry, University of Queensland, Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital, Herston, 4006, Australia

Corresponding author: Feeney, Judith A (j.feeney@psy.uq.edu.au)

Current Opinion in Psychology 2022, 43:18–23

This review comes from a themed issue on **Separation, Social Isolation, and Loss (2022)**

Edited by **Gery C. Karantzias** and **Jeffrey A. Simpson**

For complete overview about the section, refer [Separation, Social Isolation, and Loss \(2022\)](#)

Available online 9 June 2021

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsy.2021.05.004>

2352-250X/© 2021 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords

Autonomy–connection, Couple dynamics, Attachment, Stress, Emotionally focused couples therapy..

Balancing autonomy and connection: distance regulation in couple relationships

Distance regulation is central to couple dynamics, with research establishing the importance of individuals'

¹ The terms 'closeness–distance' and 'autonomy–connection' are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature. In this article, we favor 'autonomy–connection', except when describing research that has used the other term. In this context, 'closeness' and 'distance' imply both physical and emotional aspects.

needs for closeness and distance and the strategies used to manage these needs within relationships [1]. In a qualitative study, issues of closeness and distance (connection and autonomy)¹ featured prominently in participants' unstructured accounts of their long-term dating relationships [2]. Furthermore, the salience of these issues was supported by the strong and evocative language often used to describe these tensions (e.g. 'smothered'; 'shoved in a corner').

The importance of autonomy–connection is highlighted by relational dialectic theory and research. This body of work suggests that close relationships involve a number of dilemmas, tensions, or 'contradictions', that is, opposing tendencies or forces that operate in dynamic interplay across the life span of relationships [3]. Autonomy–connection has been described as the central relational dilemma [4]: Couple relationships cannot exist unless partners relinquish some autonomy to forge a connection; however, too much connection stifles individual identities and threatens personal and relational growth. This dilemma is never fully resolved: Needs for autonomy and connection evolve and must be managed on an ongoing basis [5].

Distance regulation involves seeking opportunities for both closeness and separateness and manifests in such tensions as approach versus avoidance and association versus privacy [6]. Indeed, this dilemma has been called the 'me-we pull', reflecting individuals' desire to be 'their own person', while also being with the partner [7]. Research demonstrates the relevance of these issues: Couples perceive autonomy–connection tensions as important factors in episodes of marital conflict [8] and in relationship breakups [9,10]. Conversely, the combination of strong relatedness and high autonomy predicts relationship quality and constructive relationship behaviors [11*]. These findings support contemporary dialectical perspectives, which argue that optimal couple outcomes occur when needs for autonomy and connection are balanced in a 'mutual' style [12,13].

Stressors on couples' autonomy–connection patterns during the pandemic

Dialectical tensions such as autonomy-connection shape relationship change and growth and are not inherently

problematic [14]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic (and governments' responses to it) has placed unprecedented pressures on couples' patterns of autonomy and connection, beyond the typical experience of these tensions. In particular, mandated lockdowns and social distancing guidelines have disrupted couple dynamics. In some cases, these changes involve partners facing unexpected separations and a sense of disconnectedness [15]. In others, couples find themselves spending much more time together in relatively confined spaces, often with the added challenge of juggling working from home with increased child-care responsibilities [16].

Given these pressures, it is not surprising that researchers globally have noted increases in relationship conflict and distress since the pandemic began. In a nationally representative sample of American adults [17], just over a third of respondents reported experiencing relationship conflict pertaining to COVID-19 restrictions and subsequent reductions in couple intimacy. Increases in intimate partner violence, often precipitated by social distancing and self-isolation policies, have been reported in other countries [18] and documented by international organizations [19].

Qualitative data highlight the specific importance of autonomy—connection tensions at this time. In a Spanish sample [20], over 40% of respondents noted relational deterioration linked to the mandated lockdown; of these, some reported problems of couple distance and reduced couple time (too little connection), whereas others reported lack of personal space and

attention to individual needs (too little autonomy). Similarly, one of the themes emerging from accounts of the impact of COVID-19 among Australian families was the 'push—pull of intimacy' [21]. Again, some respondents reported having too little time with the partner, whereas others struggled with being constantly housebound with the partner.

Many COVID-related stressors have affected couple relationships (see Table 1). First, as already noted, lockdowns and social distancing policies affect the distance between partners (top section of the table). These changes have often been sudden, confusing, of uncertain duration, and beyond partners' control—factors that increase *perceived stress* [22,23]. Second, individuals and couples face other severe pandemic-related stressors that affect their relationships (Table 1, mid-section), including financial losses and health concerns [24]. These multiple stressors can have additive and multiplicative effects on well-being—for example, the combination of high demand and low control predicts particularly high appraisals of stress [25]. Third, pandemic-related stressors affect entire social networks. Friends and family members often play an important role in supporting couple relationships [26]. However, during crises, these individuals may themselves be distant or feeling distressed and overwhelmed [27]. Hence, couples may perceive and receive less support for their relationships generally and for their efforts to renegotiate patterns of connection. In summary, the pandemic has disrupted couples' interaction patterns and engendered major losses, while simultaneously reducing important social connections outside the household [28].

These stressors challenge *coping efforts* and may render traditionally adaptive forms of coping relatively ineffective. Although problem-focused coping is often more effective than emotion-focused coping in reducing stress, many pandemic-related stressors are beyond couples' control, and problem-solving may neither 'fix' them nor reduce levels of worry [29]. Similarly, 'common dyadic coping', in which both partners identify the stressor as a challenge to be shared and managed together [30], may be unrealistic if partners are physically separated, facing multiple stressors, or confronting differing needs for autonomy and connection. Indeed, common dyadic coping may fail to reduce distress if situations are overly stressful or the partner is perceived as not coping responsibly [30].

Autonomy—connection tensions and attachment

Attachment theory is inherently focused on distance regulation (autonomy—connection). Proximity-seeking is the key feature of attachments in childhood [31] and adulthood [32], especially in stressful conditions: Knowing that the other will be available and responsive to one's needs provides a sense of safety. Of course, the goal for safety changes subtly across the years of child

Table 1

Aspects of COVID-19 stressors that may challenge couples' ability to cope.

- Lockdowns, closures, and social distancing guidelines impact directly on physical distance and may alter perceptions of emotional distance (detachment)
 - Disruptive of established interaction patterns
 - Sudden and unexpected changes, giving no time to prepare
 - Sometimes ambiguous and unclear information, creating confusion
 - Ongoing but with sudden periodic changes, requiring adaptability
 - Uncertain timeframe and resolution
 - Largely beyond the control of the individual and couple
- Concomitant pandemic-related stressors affect couple relationships
 - Loss (actual or feared) of the partner
 - Loss of sense of community
 - Financial loss and/or loss of home
 - Health concerns of self and/or the partner
- Pandemic-related factors affect those in couples' support network
 - Physical distance from the couple, enforced by lockdowns and social distancing
 - Stressors, as above (loss of loved ones, sense of community, finances and/or home; health concerns)

development, from caregiver proximity to *accessibility*; adults handle longer separations with the knowledge that the attachment figure will be available *if needed* [33].

Mental representations of attachment figures as being unavailable or rejecting (which underlie insecure attachment) contribute to chronic activation of stress responses [34,35]. Conversely, the capacity to draw on representations of responsive attachment figures diminishes physiological and psychological responses to threat [36] [37**]. Secure attachment is thus a crucial resource promoting more benign stress appraisals and adaptive coping [38,39].

Importantly, the two major dimensions of insecurity entail contrasting attitudes and behaviors regarding autonomy and connection. Attachment anxiety is characterized by fear of rejection, excessive reassurance-seeking, and a desire for extreme closeness. In contrast, attachment avoidance is characterized by discomfort with closeness, avoidance of intimacy, and unwillingness to seek or provide support. When partners differ markedly on these dimensions, autonomy–connection tensions can create persistent and distressing cycles of pursuing–distancing [40].

Helping couples navigate pandemic-related stressors and tensions

Even before the pandemic, couples presenting for therapy have often found themselves grappling not only with ongoing relationship vulnerabilities but also with a range of life stressors. Furthermore, many couples presenting for therapy recently have stated that while they had some relationship problems before pandemic, the stress of the pandemic has certainly exacerbated their problems (personal communication with EFT clinical colleagues). These reports fit with a stress and coping perspective: Pre-existing vulnerabilities, interacting with stressors precipitated by the pandemic, have stretched coping resources. Thus, the crisis has overwhelmed some couples, causing them to feel anxious, angry, and unable to involve the partner in their coping efforts. Faced with multiple stressors, couples report more conflict escalation and unresolved conflicts [41]. Furthermore, longitudinal data confirm both attachment insecurities and stress during lockdown as predictors of relationship difficulties [42*].

Again, autonomy–connection tensions are relevant: some couples have found increased time together difficult and a source of conflict, whereas others have struggled with restrictions that decrease connection [43*]. Researchers and therapists have discussed how couples can manage these tensions. For example, increased time together may indeed signal a loss of autonomy, but can be reframed as an opportunity for partners to reassess their expectations about personal space [43] or to engage in novel, enjoyable activities that nurture relationship growth [16]. Furthermore, pilot

data suggest that structured exercises addressing vulnerability and acceptance can increase a sense of connection for couples facing lockdowns [44].

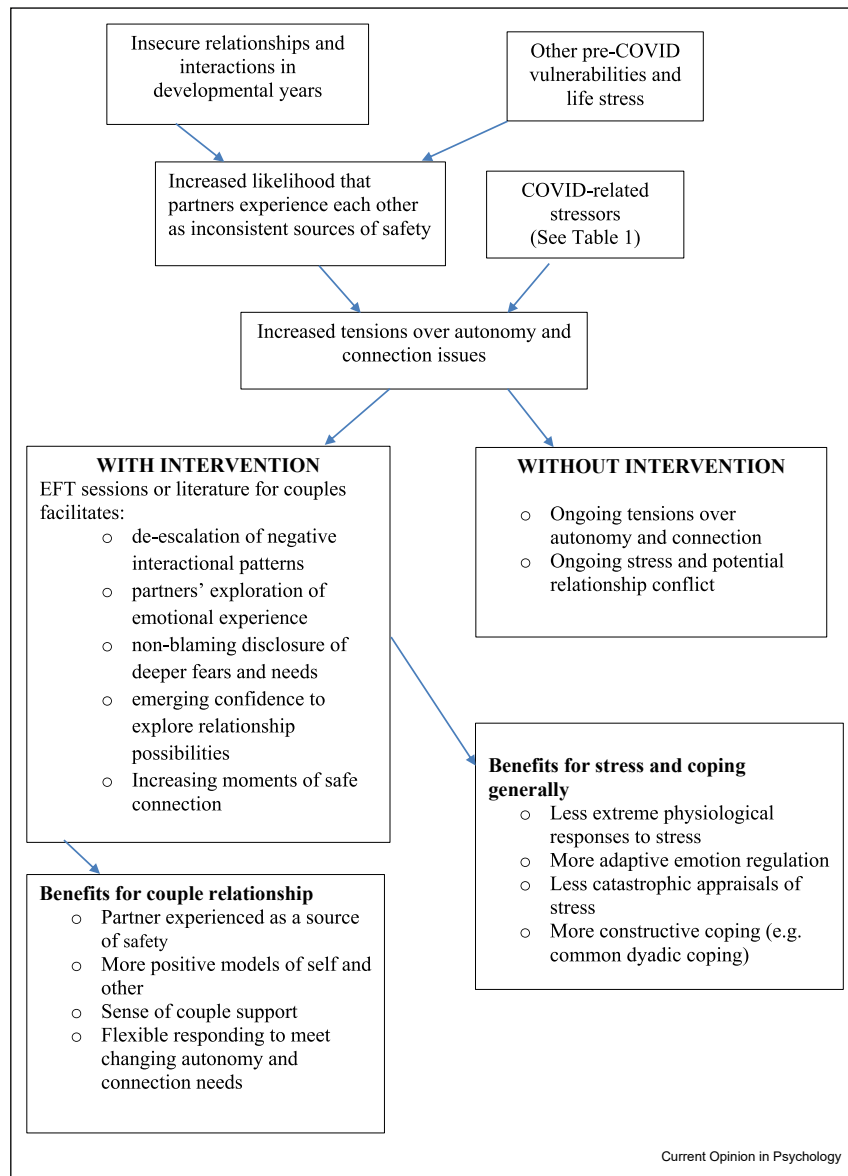
Given the links among attachment, distance regulation, and responses to stress, EFT offers a fruitful approach to handling autonomy–connection tensions. Empirically validated and based on attachment principles, EFT is available in various modes (face-to-face and online therapy, workbooks, etc.). On a related note, clinical reports during COVID-19 restrictions in Switzerland have examined the feasibility (and challenges) of working remotely with individuals and couples from an emotionally focused perspective [45].

Before this current crisis, Johnson and Wittenborn described the role of EFT in shaping attuned and resonant conversations that promote attachment security. “It appears that if we can create this safe connection, almost any difference or problem is workable. If we cannot, every difference and problem is a *potential abyss*” [[46], p. 21, emphasis added]. Undoubtedly, the stresses and strains of the pandemic have tested this clinical observation for thousands of couples. Even relatively secure couples may have struggled to resolve conflict and achieve flexible shifts in closeness and autonomy.

Couples presenting for therapy (whether in good times or bad) frequently begin with complaints that reflect autonomy–connection tensions. For example, one partner complains that the other does not make enough time for the relationship, which often elicits a reply such as, “If I was not criticized so much, I might be more interested in spending time with you!” In these complaints, the therapist glimpses an underlying and often well-entrenched pattern of communication, called pursuing–distancing or demand–withdraw [47,48]: The more one partner stridently pursues connection, the more the other seeks autonomy; the more one partner defensively seeks autonomy, the more the other protests that distancing. This destructive cycle of interaction tends to erode relationship satisfaction, an effect that may be stronger among socially advantaged couples who have more resources to address partner demands and may harbor higher expectations that those demands will be accommodated [49].

Conceptualizing relationship distress through an attachment lens helps therapists understand and address tensions around autonomy–connection (Figure 1). Typically, distressed couples respond to stresses and challenges with self-protective strategies, such as protest and relentless support-seeking or withdrawal and fierce self-reliance [50]. These behaviors create ineffective patterns of emotional engagement [51], in which fear is the *organizing element* [52]. The pursuing partner may fear being rejected or abandoned;

Figure 1



Autonomy–connection, stress, and attachment through the COVID-crisis.

the avoidant partner may fear not feeling valued or having space to be ‘one’s own person’ [53].

To facilitate a move from these insecure ‘push–pull’ struggles to a sense of being accessible and responsive resources for each other, the therapist intervenes to expand partners’ awareness of their emotional experience and the impact of their behaviors (Figure 1). Partners then begin to shift from blaming or avoiding to seeing each other as victims of interaction patterns that have kept them stuck and dissatisfied. In the next stage of intervention, aimed at ‘restructuring’ the attachment, partners are supported to access and disclose their

deeper fears and longings in vulnerable conversations [54]. Typically, the more withdrawing partner is first supported to ‘re-engage’, through disclosing fears and needs, often regarding safety and independence. Hearing these needs expressed coherently and assertively is usually experienced by the listening partner as surprising but welcome; this partner is then encouraged to explore and share their fears, typically about self-worth and lovability, and to express needs for closeness in softer ways that invite a supportive response.

In this way, a more flexible and positive sense of self and other emerges for each partner [55], benefiting couple

interactions and partners' responses to stress. In the context of COVID-19, secure attachment is a *particularly* vital resource, allowing partners to label and discuss their relational desires and their fears of loss and separation and reducing the sense of overwhelming threat [56,57]. Autonomy–connection needs can then be further explored and negotiated, even in the face of situational demands that are complex, highly stressful, and frequently changing. As mutual constructive dependency builds, more effective responses to stress and crisis follow [58*]. Stressful tasks, losses, uncertainties, and changing routines can then be folded into the bigger picture of mutual accessibility and responsiveness, promoting more adaptive coping and couple well-being. Finally, although this article focuses on COVID-related pressures on autonomy and connection, it is clear that many other crises (e.g. evacuations and deployments during emergencies) may also disrupt couples' patterns of connection; the current integrative framework could be usefully applied to studying adjustment in these contexts.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

References

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

* of special interest

** of outstanding interest

- Birtchnell J: *How humans relate: a new interpersonal theory*. London: Praeger; 1993.
- Feeney JA: **Issues of closeness and distance in dating relationships: effects of sex and attachment style**. *J Soc Pers Relatsh* 1999, **16**:571–590.
- Baxter LA, Scharp KM: **Dialectical tensions in relationships**. In *International encyclopedia of interpersonal communication*. Edited by Berger CR, Roloff ME, Hoboken NJ: Wiley Blackwell; 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118540190.wbeic017>.
- Baxter LA, Simon E: **Relationship maintenance strategies and dialectical contradictions in personal relationships**. *J Soc Pers Relatsh* 1993, **10**:225–242.
- Baxter LA, Montgomery BM: **Rethinking communication in personal relationships from a dialectical perspective**. In *Handbook of personal relationships*. Edited by Duck S, New York: Wiley; 1997:325–349.
- VanLear CA: **Dialectic empiricism: science and relationship metaphors**. In *Dialectical approaches to studying personal relationships*. Edited by Montgomery BM, Baxter LA, Mahwah NJ, Erlbaum; 1998:109–136.
- Baxter LA: **Dialectical contradictions in relationship development**. *J Soc Pers Relatsh* 1990, **7**:69–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407590071004>.
- Erbert LA: **Conflict and dialectics: perceptions of dialectical contradictions in marital conflict**. *J Soc Pers Relatsh* 2000, **17**:638–659, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407500174009>.
- Baxter LA: **Gender differences in the heterosexual relationship rules embedded in break-up accounts**. *J Soc Pers Relatsh* 1986, **3**:289–306.
- Sahlstein E, Dun T: **"I wanted time to myself and he wanted to be together all the time": constructing breakups as managing autonomy-connection**. *Qual Res Rep in Commun* 2008, **9**:37–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17459430802400340>.
- Kluwer ES, Karremans JC, Riedijk L, Knee CR: **Autonomy in Relatedness: how need fulfillment interacts in close relationships**. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2020, **46**:603–616, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167219867964>.
Consistent with earlier research guided by relational dialectics theory, this study demonstrates the importance of the combination of strong relatedness and high autonomy in predicting relationship quality and constructive relationship behaviors.
- Lloyd R: **A temporal approach to communicating relationship styles in romantic relationships**. *Qual Res Rep in Commun* 2020, **21**:36–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17459435.2020.1737189>.
- Neff KD, Harter S: **The role of power and authenticity in relationship styles emphasizing autonomy, connectedness, or mutuality among adult couples**. *J Soc Pers Relatsh* 2002, **19**:835–857, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407502196006>.
- Canary DJ, Yum YO: **Relationship maintenance strategies**. In *International encyclopedia of interpersonal communication*. Edited by Berger CR, Roloff ME, New York: John Wiley & Sons; 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118540190.wbeic248>.
- Walsh F: **Loss and resilience in the time of COVID-19: meaning making, hope, and transcendence**. *Fam Process* 2020, **59**:898–911, <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12588>.
- Pietromonaco PR, Overall NC: **Applying relationship science to evaluate how the COVID-19 pandemic may impact couples' relationships**. *Amer Psychol* 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000714>. Advance online publication.
- Luetke M, Hensel D, Herbenick D, Rosenberg M: **Romantic relationship conflict due to the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in intimate and sexual behaviors in a nationally representative sample of American adults**. *J Sex Mar Ther* 2020, **46**:747–762, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2020.1810185>.
- Donato S: **Gender-based violence against women in intimate and couple relationships. The case of Spain and Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown**. *Italian Soc Rev* 2020, **10**:869–887, <https://doi.org/10.13136/isr.v10i3S.402>.
- Moreira DN: **Pinto da Costa M: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the precipitation of intimate partner violence**. *Int J Law and Psychiatr* 2020, **71**, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jljp.2020.101606>.
- Gunter-Bel C, Vilaregut A, Carratala E, Torras-Garat S, Perez-Testor C: **A mixed-method study of individual, couple, and parental functioning during the state-regulated COVID-19 lockdown in Spain**. *Fam Process* 2020, **59**:1060–1079, <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12585>.
- Evans S, Mikocka-Walus A, Klas A, Olive L, Sciberras E, Karantzas G, Westrupp EM: **From "It has stopped our lives" to "Spending more time together has strengthened bonds": the varied experiences of Australian Families during COVID-19**. *Front Psychol* 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.588667>.
- Fassett-Carman A, Hankin BL, Snyder HR: **Appraisals of dependent stressor controllability and severity are associated with depression and anxiety symptoms in youth**. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping: An Int J* 2019, **32**:32–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2018.1532504>.
- Schneiderman N, Ironson G, Siegel SD: **Stress and health: psychological, behavioral and biological determinants**. *Annu Rev Clin Psychol* 2005, **1**:607–628, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.1.102803.144141>.
- Karantzas GC, Feeney JA, Agnew CR, Christensen A, Cutrona CE, Doss BD, Eckhardt CI, Russell DW, Simpson JA: **Dealing with loss in the face of COVID-19: integrating interpersonal theories of couple adaptation and functioning**. *Curr Opin Psychol* 2022, **43**.
- Vassos M, Nankervis K, Skerry T, Lante K: **Can the job demand-control-(support) model predict disability support worker burnout and work engagement?** *J Intellect Dev Disabil* 2019, **44**:139–149, <https://doi.org/10.3109/13668250.2017.1310818>.
- Felmlee D, Sinclair HC: **Social networks and personal relationships**. In *The Cambridge handbook of personal*

- relationships*. Edited by Vangelisti AL, Perlman D. second ed., Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2018: 467–352.
27. Kaniasty K: **Social support, interpersonal, and community dynamics following disasters caused by natural hazards.** *Curr Opin Psychol* 2020, **32**:105–109, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2019.07.026>.
 28. Brock RL, Laifer LM: **Family science in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: solutions and new directions.** *Fam Process* 2020, **59**:1007–1017, <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12582>.
 29. Sebri V, Cincidda C, Saviono L, Ongaro G, Pravettoni G: **Worry during the initial height of the COVID-19 crisis in an Italian sample.** *J Gen Psychol* 2021 Jan 22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221309.2021.1878485>. no pagination specified.
 30. Cutrona C, Bodenmann G, Randall AK, Clavel FD, Johnson M: **Stress, dyadic coping, and social support.** In *The Cambridge handbook of personal relationships*. Edited by Vangelisti AL, Perlman D. second ed., Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2018:341–352.
 31. Bowlby J: *A secure base*. New York: Basic Books; 1988.
 32. Weiss RS: **The attachment bond in childhood and adulthood.** In *Attachment across the life cycle*. Edited by Parkes CM, Stevenson-Hinde J, Marris P, London: Tavistock/Routledge; 1991:66–76.
 33. Shaver PR, Mikulincer M, Gross J, Stern J, Cassidy J: **A lifespan perspective on attachment and care for others: empathy, altruism and prosocial behavior.** In *Handbook of attachment*. Edited by Cassidy J, Shaver P. 3rd Edn, New York London: Guilford Press; 2016:878–916.
 34. Cassidy J, Jones JD, Shaver PR: **Contributions of attachment theory and research: a framework for future research, translation, and policy.** *Dev Psychopath* 2013, **25**:1415–1434, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579413000692>.
 35. Mikulincer M, Shaver PR: **Attachment orientations and emotion regulation.** *Curr Opin Psychol* 2019, **25**:6–10, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.02.006>.
 36. Bryant RA, Datta S: **Reconsolidating intrusive distressing memories by thinking of attachment figures.** *Clin Psychol Sci* 2019, **7**:1249–1256, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702619866387>.
 37. Mikulincer M, Shaver PR: **Broaden-and-build effects of contextually boosting the sense of attachment security in adulthood.** *Curr Dir in Psychol Sci* 2020, **29**:22–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721419885997>.
- This article provides an overview of attachment theory and a comprehensive review of laboratory experiments demonstrating the beneficial effects of boosting attachment security on emotional regulation, psychological functioning and prosocial behavior.
38. Mikulincer M, Shaver PR: **An attachment perspective on loss and grief.** *Curr Opin Psychol* 2021, **45**:101283.
 39. Romero DH, Riggs SA, Raiche E, MuGuffin J, Captari LE: **Attachment, coping, and psychological symptoms among military veterans and active duty personnel.** *Anxiety, Stress Coping: An Inter J* 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2020.1723008>. No pagination specified.
 40. Feeney JA, Fitzgerald J: **Attachment, conflict and relationship quality: laboratory-based and clinical insights.** *Curr Opin Psychol* 2018, **25**:127–131.
 41. Whitton SW, James-Kangal N, Rhoades GK, Markman HJ: **Understanding couple conflict.** In *The Cambridge handbook of personal relationships*. Edited by Vangelisti AL, Perlman D. third ed., Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2018:297–310.
 42. Overall N, Chang V, Pietromonaco P, Low R, Henderson A: **Partners' attachment insecurity and stress predict poorer relationship functioning during COVID-19 quarantines.** *Soc Psychol Pers Sci* 2020. in press.
- This longitudinal study of New Zealand couples demonstrates the main and interactive effects of attachment insecurity and stress experienced during mandated COVID-19 lockdown on relationship outcomes, including the reported severity of relationship problems.
43. Stanley SM, Markman HJ: **Helping couples in the shadow of COVID-19.** *Family Process* 2020, **59**:937–955, <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12575>.
- This paper presents a variety of strategies that therapists and relationship educators can use to help couples protect and nurture their relationships in the face of COVID-19 stressors, focusing in particular on the crucial role of a sense of safety.
44. Tsai M, Hardebeck E, Pinheiro Ramos F, Turlove H, Nordal-Jonsson K, Vongdala A, Zhang W, Kohlenberg RJ: **Helping couples connect during the COVID-19 pandemic: a pilot randomised controlled trial of an awareness, courage and love intervention.** *Appl Psychol* 2020, **12**:1140–1156, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12241>.
 45. Thompson-de Benoit A, Kramer U: **Work with emotions in remote psychotherapy in the time of COVID-19: a clinical experience.** *Coun Psychol Quarterly* 2020 May 31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2020.1770696>. no pagination specified.
 46. Johnson S, Wittenborn A: **New research findings on emotionally focused therapy: introduction to special section.** *J Mar and Fam Ther* 2012, **38**:18–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2012.00292>.
 47. Eldridge K, Cencurilo J, Edwards E: **Demand-withdraw patterns of communication in couple relationships.** In *Foundations for Couples' therapy: research for the real world*. Edited by Fitzgerald J, New York London: Routledge; 2017:112–122.
 48. Eldridge KA, Christensen A: **Demand-withdraw communication during couple conflict: a review and analysis.** In *Understanding marriage: developments in the study of couple interaction*. Edited by Noller P, Feeney JA, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2002:289–322, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511500077.016>.
 49. Ross JM, Karney BR, Nguyen TP, Bradbury TN, Hensel D, Herbenick D, Rosenberg M: **Communication that is maladaptive for middle-class couples is adaptive for socioeconomically disadvantaged couples.** *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2019, **116**:582–597, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000158>.
 50. Mikulincer M, Shaver PR: *Attachment in adulthood: structure, dynamic and change*. second ed. New York London: Guilford Press; 2016.
 51. Brubacher L, Johnson S: **Romantic love as an attachment process.** In *Foundations for Couples' therapy: research for the real world*. Edited by Fitzgerald J, New York: Routledge; 2017:8–19.
 52. von Bertalanffy L: *General system theory: foundations, development, applications*. New York: George Braziller; 1968.
 53. Furrow J, Johnson S, Bradley B, Brubacher L, Kallos-Lilly V, Campbell L, Palmer G, Rheem K, Woolley S: *Becoming an emotionally focused therapist: the workbook*. second ed. New York London: Routledge (in press).
 54. Johnson SM, Greenberg LR: **Emotionally focused therapy: restructuring attachment.** In *The first session in brief therapy*. Edited by Budman S, Hoyt M, Friedman S, New York London: Guilford Press; 1992:204–224.
 55. Burgess-Moses M, Johnson SM, Dalglish TL, Lafontaine M-F, Weibe SA, Tasca GA: **Changes in relationship-specific attachment in emotionally focused couple therapy.** *J Marital Fam Ther* 2016, **42**:231–245, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12139>.
 56. Greenman P, Johnson S: **Emotionally focused therapy (EFT): attachment, connection and health.** *Curr Opin Psychol* 2022:43 (xx-xx).
 57. Steele H: **COVID-19, fear and the future: an attachment perspective.** *Clin Neuropsychiatr* 2020, **17**:97–99, <https://doi.org/10.36131/CN20200213>.
 58. Johnson S: *Attachment theory in practice: emotionally focused therapy (EFT) with individuals, couples, and families*. New York London: Guilford Press; 2019.
- This book is a distillation of Susan Johnson's long and influential career as a researcher, therapist and educator. Readers will find a clear link between attachment theory and the practice of EFT with individuals, couples and families.