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When Negative Emotions Benefit Close Relationships

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## Chapter Overview

People frequently enter close relationships expecting them to be a fountain of positive emotions. Although close relationships do provide people with some of their most positive emotions (Wallbott & Scherer, 1986), even in the best close relationships people will still experience problems (McGonagle, Kessler, & Schilling, 1992) and thus experience negative emotions (Averill, 1983; Schwartz & Shaver, 1987). For example, people commonly experience anger due to a partner's transgressions, fear due to concerns that a partner will abandon them, jealousy due to concerns about a partner's fidelity, and/or loneliness due to a lack of support by the partner (Leary, 2000; Tangney & Salovey, 1999).

Although these and other negative emotions may be unpleasant, they are not inherently harmful and may serve important functions in relationships. One function of negative emotions is to signal that something is wrong (e.g., Klinger, 1996; Nesse & Ellsworth, 2009). In the context of a close relationship, negative emotions may thus signal that something is wrong with the relationship (Davila, Karney, Hall, & Bradbury, 2003; Fisher & McNulty, 2008; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, & Sullivan, 1994; McNulty, 2008). Another function of negative emotions is to motivate people to address their problems (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989; Hiller et al., 2009; McCaul, Branstetter, O'Donnell, Jacobson, & Quinlan, 1998). In the context of a close relationship, negative emotions may thus motivate people to improve the relationship (Baker & McNulty, 2011, in press; Gonzales, Pederson, Manning, & Wetter, 1990). In other words, although negative emotions may be unpleasant, they can benefit relationships by making individuals aware of their relationship problems and by motivating resolutions of those problems.

Of course, just as negative emotions are not inherently harmful, they are not inherently beneficial either. The goal of this chapter is to clarify when negative emotions may benefit close relationships. In pursuit of this goal, the first section describes the ways in which *experiencing* negative emotions can benefit relationships—they can increase individuals' understanding of and motivation to resolve their relationship problems. The second section describes the ways in which *expressing* negative emotions can benefit relationships— they can increase partners' intimacy, elicit support, and regulate partner's behavior to better resolve relationship problems. The third section provides a more in-depth analysis of how three specific negative emotions—anger, romantic jealousy, and guilt —lead to distinct behaviors that help resolve unique relationship problems (see Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994). The last section concludes with a cautionary note about the circumstances in which the benefits of negative emotions for close relationships may not outweigh their negative implications.

### **Experiencing Emotions**

Experiencing negative emotions in the face of a problem can benefit individuals by helping them to recognize and understand, and thus be more likely to address and resolve, that problem (Frijda, 1986; Levenson, 1999; Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). Although the amount and severity of problems can vary across relationships, nearly all people acknowledge experiencing problems that have negatively affected their relationship at some point (e.g., McGonagle et al., 1992). Frequently, these problems emerge when partners have incompatible goals or interests (e.g., Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) or when they encounter external stressors (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995). For example, some of the most common problems that romantic partners experience relate to finances, sex, children, communication, emotional intimacy, household management, decision making, and jealousy (Henry & Miller, 2004; Levenson, Carstensen, &

Gottman, 1993; Miller, Yorgason, Sandberg, & White, 2003). Experiencing negative emotions as a result of a problem should help individuals (a) become more aware of the problem and (b) be more motivated to resolve it.

### **Problem Awareness**

Several theoretical accounts of emotions suggest that people are more aware of problems that elicit greater negative emotional responses than they are of problems that are less distressing. For example, evolutionary theories of emotion (e.g., Nesse & Ellsworth, 2009; Plutchik, 2003; Tooby & Cosmides, 2008) suggest that one function of negative emotions is to shift perception and attention toward potential threats and problems to ensure they are recognized. Similarly, Leary and colleagues' (e.g., Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) sociometer model proposes that the negative emotions that result from decreases in self-esteem function to warn us that others may regard us poorly— a relational problem. Finally, several clinical models, such as Prochaska and DiClemente's (1983) transtheoretical model, Mechanic's (1975) socio-psychological model of help-seeking, and Zwaanswijk and colleagues' (Zwaanswijk, Verhaak, Bensing, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2003) model of help seeking emphasize that individuals must encounter the negative implications of their problems, such as negative emotions, before recognizing that such problems exist.

Existing research provides support for these ideas. At a perceptual level, humans recognize distressing objects faster and pay greater attention to them than they do to objects that are not distressing (e.g., Eastwood, Smilek, Merikle, 2001; Öhman, Flykt, & Esteves, 2001). For example, Öhman and colleagues (2001) found that people participating in a picture recognition task identified pictures that elicited fear responses (i.e., snakes, spiders) faster than pictures that did not elicit a fear response (i.e., flowers, mushrooms). Similarly, clinical research provides

considerable evidence that greater distress predicts better problem recognition (e.g., Angold et al., 1998; Farmer & Ferraro, 1997; Farmer, Stangl, Burns, Costello, & Angold, 1999; Wu et al., 1999; 2001; Yokopenic, Clark, & Aneshensel, 1983). For example, Yokopenic and colleagues (1983) found that the severity of the negative emotions that people experienced predicted better recognition of their psychological problems. Similarly, Wu and colleagues (1999) demonstrated that children who experienced greater depressive affect were more likely to report needing mental health services, suggesting a greater awareness of their psychological problems, than were children who experienced lower depressive affect.

Given that people appear to be more aware of their problems when they are in greater distress, they should be more aware of their *relationship* problems when such problems cause greater distress. For example, if Lindsay has a greater negative emotional reaction upon finding out that her husband, Tobias, has bounced a check, she should be more aware that Tobias' handling of finances is a problem than if she is not distressed by the news. A few studies provide indirect support for this idea by demonstrating that individuals who tend to experience greater negative emotions within close relationships tend to report recognizing more relationship problems than do individuals who tend to experience less negative emotions (e.g., Baker & McNulty, 2010; McNulty, 2008; Mattson, Frame, & Johnson, 2011; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998). For example, McNulty (2008) demonstrated that intimates high in neuroticism, who tend to experience more negative emotions, viewed their partner's behaviors during a conflict discussion more negatively than did intimates low in neuroticism. Similarly, Mattson and colleagues (1998) demonstrated that intimates' negative affect was positively associated with the severity of their relationship problems. Of course, it is unclear from this research whether negative emotions lead to a better understanding

of relationship problems, an exaggerated view of problems, or are simply a result of more severe problems. Future research may benefit from directly addressing this issue.

## **Motivation**

In addition to helping individuals to be more aware of their interpersonal problems, there is reason to believe that negative emotions should help motivate individuals to directly address those problems. In particular, several theoretical accounts of emotions posit that people are more motivated to resolve problems that cause more negative emotions than problems that cause less negative emotions. For example, Hull (1943) argued that negative emotions lead to aversive drives, which motivate people to avoid or reduce unpleasant situations that cause negative emotions, such as bodily injury or a lack of food. Similarly, Maslow (1955) proposed that people are broadly motivated to diminish negative emotional states. More recent evolutionary explanations of emotion (e.g., Nesse & Ellsworth, 2009; Plutchik, 2003; Tooby & Cosmides, 2008) argue that emotions evolved because they motivate behavior, and that negative emotions in particular aid in motivating people to prevent or resolve problems. Finally, Leary and colleagues' (1995) sociometer model also posits that the negative emotions that result from low self-esteem motivate people to resolve their interpersonal problems.

Empirical evidence supports these ideas as well (e.g., Frijda et al., 1989; Hiller et al., 2009; McCaul et al., 1998; Roseman et al., 1994; Wohl & Thompson, 2011). For example, Frijda and colleagues (1989) found that many negative emotions, such as fear, sadness, and anger, were associated with greater intentions to improve one's emotional state. Anger, for example, was associated with a greater desire to overcome difficulties. Similarly, Hiller and colleagues (2009) found that drug-addicted inmates who reported greater distress were more motivated to be treated for their addiction than were inmates who reported less distress. Finally, McCaul and

colleagues (1998) found that women who were more worried about breast cancer were more likely to take preventative measures against developing cancer, such as requesting screening procedures, than were women who were less worried.

Given that people should be more motivated to resolve their problems when they are more distressed, people should be more motivated to resolve their *relationship* problems when such problems cause greater distress. For example, the more upset Tobias is about bouncing the check, the more likely he is to monitor the balance of his checking account in the future. Empirical evidence supports this idea as well (e.g., Baker & McNulty, 2011, in press; Gonzales et al., 1990). For example, Baker and McNulty (2011) demonstrated that self-criticism, which frequently causes negative emotions (e.g., Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007), was associated with greater motivation to resolve relationship problems among men who lacked other dispositional sources of motivation—i.e., conscientiousness. Similarly, Baker and McNulty (in press) demonstrated that intimates with low self-esteem, who tend to experience greater negative emotions (e.g., Leary et al., 1995), are more likely to engage in interdependence-promoting behaviors that can repair relationships when such relationships are an important aspect of their self-concept. Finally, Gonzales and colleagues (1990) led people to believe that they had committed either small or large interpersonal offenses and found that those who believed they had committed large offenses felt more negatively about the offenses and, in turn, made more reparative efforts (e.g., apologies, attempts to resolve the problem) than did those who committed smaller offenses.

### **Expressing Emotions**

Negative emotions do not only affect the person experiencing them. That is, negative emotions are routinely expressed to others, especially in the context of close relationships (e.g.,

Clark & Finkel, 2004; Pennebaker, Zech, Rimé, 2001), and the expression of negative emotions frequently affects partners' thoughts and behaviors (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Graham, Huang, Clark, & Helgeson, 2008). One of the most common ways that people communicate emotions is through non-verbal behaviors (e.g., Coulson, 2004; de Meijer, 1989; Matsumoto, Keltner, Shiota, O'Sullivan, & Frank, 2008). For example, facial expressions effectively communicate negative emotions; people across most cultures, and nonhuman primates, easily recognize the facial expressions of basic emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness (for review, see Matsumoto et al., 2008). Other non-verbal cues, such as postures, hand gestures, and touch, also communicate emotions (Coulson, 2004; de Meijer, 1989). Of course, verbal communication conveys emotions as well. Content-free features of vocal communication, such as pitch, volume, and rate of speech, express emotion (Bachorowski & Owren, 2008; Frick, 1985). For example, faster speech signals anxiety and louder speech signals anger. And the content of verbal communication can certainly signal a communicator's emotional state (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 1989). For example, blaming a romantic partner for a problem or demanding that he or she change can signal anger. Through these different modes of expression, negative emotions may benefit relationships by (a) leading to a better understanding by the partner, (b) eliciting support from the partner, and (c) regulating the partner's behavior.

### **Understanding**

Honesty and open communication are central to any quality close relationship (Noller & Ruzzene, 1991). Indeed, people value being able to accurately recognize their partner's thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behavioral intentions (Collins & Miller, 1994; Ickes, 1993; Regan, Levin, Sprecher, Christopher, & Cate, 2000; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Several theories account for why expressing even negative emotions may be beneficial. For

example, theories of emotional self-disclosure (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994) suggest that emotional self-disclosures tend to increase intimacy for both the person expressing the emotion and the person receiving the disclosure. Similarly, Ickes (1993) theoretical descriptions of empathic accuracy suggests that people are motivated to understand other's emotional states because such understanding leads to greater insight about them and the issues that they face. Furthermore, such emotional understanding often results in greater trust and closeness, assuming that such emotions are not threatening to the relationship (Simpson, Oriña & Ickes, 2003). Of course, expressing even relationship-threatening negative emotions may have long-term positive implications if they motivate resolution behaviors (see later section on Partner-Regulation). Finally, theories of emotional suppression (e.g., John & Gross, 2004) and associated research (Butler et al., 2003; Impett et al., 2012) suggest that inhibiting emotional expressions hinders the development of intimacy because people who inhibit their emotional expressions (a) are not disclosing important information and (b) appear avoidant to their partners. In sum, these theories suggest that although expressing negative emotions can be unpleasant, it can increase understanding and intimacy between partners.

Empirical evidence supports these ideas (Graham et al., 2008; Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Noller & Venardos, 1986). For example, Graham and colleagues (2008) found that people who were more willing to express their negative emotions developed more intimate friendships than did people who were less willing to express their negative emotions. Similarly, Laurenceau and colleagues (1998) found that emotional self-disclosures led to greater intimacy between romantic partners, and that intimates experienced greater intimacy to the extent that their partners disclosed negative emotions. Finally, Noller and

Venardos (1986) demonstrated that people who were more accurate at reading their spouse's emotions were more satisfied with their marriage than were people who were less accurate.

### **Eliciting Support**

Expressing distress may also serve the valuable function of signaling to a relationship partner that one's needs are not being met (Levenson, 1994). For example, Mike might express to his friend the sadness he is experiencing over the death of a relative because he needs to be consoled, Tiara might express to her husband her fear that she will not be successful in her new job because she needs to be reassured of her competence, and Andre might express to his boyfriend his anxiety about being unable to afford his rent and thus be more likely to receive financial assistance. Although it can be disconcerting for individuals to realize that their partners' needs are not being met, expressing distress may benefit close relationships by increasing provisions of support. Indeed, according to Clark and Mills' (1979) notion of communal relationships, partners genuinely care about fulfilling each other's needs. Accordingly, expressing negative emotions should be beneficial within close relationships because it likely motivates partners to provide support (see Clark & Finkel, 2004).

Extensive research demonstrates that expressions of distress do indeed elicit support from close others (Clark, Oullette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987; Graham et al., 2008; Shimanoff, 1987; for review, see Batson & Shaw, 1991). For example, Shimanoff (1987) found that the extent to which people express negative emotions to their partner is positively associated with the quality of emotional support their partner provides. Similarly, Clark and colleagues (1987) demonstrated that people who were primed by a communal orientation were more likely to help individuals who expressed sadness than people who did not. Finally, Graham and colleagues (2008)

demonstrated that people provided more help to others who appeared nervous while preparing to give a speech than to others who appeared calm.

Such provisions of support can benefit both recipients' and their partners' relationship well-being (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Rovine, 2005; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010). For example, Sullivan and colleagues (2010) demonstrated that better quality partner support predicted less subsequent distress in the recipient and, consequently, less steep declines in marital satisfaction over time. Similarly, Laurenceau and colleagues (2005) found that the partner's responsiveness was positively associated with subsequent intimacy.

### **Partner-Regulation**

Beyond promoting understanding and eliciting support, expressing negative emotions can also provide another benefit for close relationships— helping people resolve their relationship problems. Specifically, many relationship problems require change in one or both partners (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 1999; Margolin, Talovic, & Weinstein, 1983), and partners often attempt to regulate one another's behavior to resolve such problems (Oriña, Wood, & Simpson, 2002; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009; Tucker & Mueller, 2000). One way individuals try to regulate one another is by expressing their negative emotions (Cohen & Lichtenstein, 1990; Overall et al., 2009). For example, Melissa might angrily demand that Joan take out the trash before she leaves for work and Mike might blame his wife for spending too much time writing academic manuscripts in an attempt to increase the amount of time they spend together.

Expressions of negative emotions, although unpleasant, may benefit relationships by helping with several aspects of the problem resolution process. First, expressing negative

emotions to a partner should make that partner more aware of the problem. This idea is consistent with evolutionary perspectives of emotional expression (e.g., Levenson, 1994), which suggest that expressions of negative emotions developed as a way to communicate to others that one's needs are not being met. An infant's cry, for example, signals to her parents that she is facing a problem. Likewise, if Eduardo expresses anger over Chantel's excessive alcohol use, Chantel may be more likely to recognize that her alcohol use is a problem. Overall and colleagues (2006) illustrated the benefits of expressing negative emotions in romantic relationships by demonstrating that the partners of intimates who expressed more negative emotions were more aware that they did not match those intimates' ideals and viewed their relationships as more problematic compared to the partners of intimates who expressed less negative emotions.

Second, expressions of negative emotions can also communicate a solution to the problem. For example, if Angela is upset that her husband, Justin, is gambling too much, she might communicate her frustration by demanding that he stop gambling. Although her commands might bother Justin, she is effectively communicating the solution to the problem—Justin stop gambling. Ample research demonstrates that partners can influence each other's behavioral intentions in order to resolve problems (Oriña, et al., 2002; Overall, et al., 2006; Tucker & Mueller, 2000). For example, Tucker and Mueller (2000) demonstrated that requesting partners change their health-related behaviors is an effective way to get them to do so.

Third, expressing negative emotions to a partner might increase that partner's motivation to resolve the problem. Expressing negative emotions to a partner tends to increase that partner's negative emotions (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977), and, as noted in the first section of this chapter, experiencing negative emotions can

increase motivation to resolve relationship problems (Baker & McNulty, 2010, in press; Frijda, 1986; Hiller et al., 2009; McCaul et al., 1998; Roseman et al., 1994). This idea is consistent with partner regulation theory (Overall et al., 2006, 2009), which posits that "negative communication behavior motivates partners to bring about desired change" (Overall et al., 2009, p. 621). For example, if Lindsay expresses her anger at Tobias for bouncing the check, Tobias should be more likely to feel guilty about his mistake and should be more motivated to make sure it does not happen again than if Lindsay appeared unbothered by Tobias' behavior.

Empirical evidence supports the idea that, although expressing negative emotions may be immediately distressing, it can help individuals resolve their relationship problems and strengthen the relationship in the long-term (e.g., Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall et al., 2009). For example, Overall and colleagues (2009) demonstrated that although expressions of negative emotions, such as anger, derogation, and blaming, were perceived to be less successful and were associated with greater distress immediately after the behaviors took place, they were associated with a greater reduction of problems over the course of a year. Similarly, Heavey and colleagues (1993) demonstrated that although the extent that husbands demanded changes from their wives was initially negatively associated with lower marital satisfaction, it was associated with increases in marital satisfaction over time. Recent research demonstrates that expressing negative emotions can even help partners accomplish their personal goals. Meltzer, McNulty, and Karney (2012) demonstrated that husbands who displayed a lack of motivation while discussing a personal goal, such as personal health, gained less weight over time to the extent that their wives directly expressed negative emotions.

### **Specific Negative Emotions**

Until now, we have discussed the general implications of experiencing and expressing negative emotions for close relationships. Nevertheless, humans likely evolved to experience specific negative emotions that uniquely affect attention, perception, goal choice, motivation, communication, and behavioral intentions (Tooby & Cosmides, 2008) to meet the specific challenges that humans faced in the evolutionary environment (Nesse & Ellsworth, 2009; Plutchik, 2003). For example, fear is often experienced in response to physical threats and prevents physical harm by causing adaptive responses, including increased perceptual alertness and behavioral responses that prevent harm, such as hiding, fleeing, or defending (Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). In contrast, disgust is often experienced in response to offensive objects, such as spoiled food, corpses, or insects, and triggers adaptive responses, such as nausea and distancing from disgust-inducing objects (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2008). Accordingly, specific negative emotions should have unique implications for close relationships. The remainder of this section discusses how three of these specific negative emotions— anger, romantic jealousy, and guilt— should uniquely affect close relationships.

### **Anger**

People experience anger when they believe that others are neglecting their well-being (Sell, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2009). One function of experiencing anger is that it can motivate individuals to attempt to regulate a partner to behave in a way that is more beneficial for the angry individual (e.g., Fischer & Roseman, 2007; Lemay, Overall, & Clark, 2012; for review, see Canary, Spitzberg, Semic, 1998). For example, Lemay and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that experiencing anger in response to a transgression was associated with greater motivation to change the perpetrator's behavior and with engaging in greater regulation behaviors, such as blaming, criticizing, and yelling. Similarly, Fischer and Roseman (2007) had participants recall a

time when they felt angry toward another person and found that the extent of their anger was associated with greater regulatory goals (i.e., wanting the partner to understand the extent of the transgression, apologize, avoid future transgressions) and regulatory behaviors (i.e., criticizing and confronting the partner). As noted in the previous section, such partner regulation behaviors can effectively motivate the partner to change

Furthermore, *expressing* anger signals to the partner that the expresser is unhappy with the partner's behavior and gives the partner the opportunity to rectify the situation and can be an effective form of partner regulation itself (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). Empirical evidence is consistent with this idea (Averill, 1983; Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Tiedens, 2001; van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004). For example, Averill (1983) had people recall a time when they expressed anger and found that most people reported that such expressions led to a change in another's behavior. Similarly, van Kleef and colleagues (2004) found that people made larger concessions to an angry opponent than to a happy opponent during a negotiation task.

### **Romantic Jealousy**

Most people in close relationships are motivated to secure their partner's romantic and sexual fidelity (Greeley, 1991), and doing so can have benefits. From an evolutionary perspective, men who could secure a partner's fidelity could be certain that they would not commit resources to an offspring that was not theirs (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). For women, securing a partner's fidelity decreased the likelihood that their partner diverted resources to an alternative mate, increasing their offspring's chance of survival (Buss, 1988; Trivers, 1972). Indeed, infidelity is associated with decreased relationship satisfaction (Spanier & Margolis, 1983) and stability (Amato & Rogers, 1997), decreased self-esteem (Shackelford, 2001), and increased risk of mental health problems (e.g., Cano & O'Leary, 2000).

Romantic jealousy is a negative social emotion that frequently arises from the belief that a romantic partner has engaged in or might engage in romantic infidelity (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2000). Emotionally, romantic jealousy often involves a combination of fear over a relational loss and anger over betrayal (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Although unpleasant, romantic jealousy serves an adaptive function: it motivates behaviors that reduce the likelihood that a partner will engage in infidelity (Buss, Larsen, Westen, Semmelroth, 1992). For example, jealous intimates often attempt to prove their commitment to romantic partners, confront potential rivals, prevent their partners from seeing potential rivals, and closely monitor and demand explanations for their partners' behavior (Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, & Eloy, 1995; Kasian & Painter, 1992). Furthermore, there is evidence that the behaviors that arise from romantic jealousy assist with mate retention (Buss, 1988; Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Sheets, Fredendall, & Claypool, 1997). For example, Sheets and colleagues (1997) found that although expressing romantic jealousy led to more initial relationship conflict, it led to greater relationship stability over time. In short, although romantic jealousy may be distressing, it can be beneficial to the extent that it reduces infidelity, a behavior that harms relationship well-being.

### **Guilt**

Guilt arises from the recognition that one has behaved in an unacceptable manner (Guerrero & Andersen, 2000). Within close relationships, people can feel guilty for various transgressions, such as neglecting household duties, insulting a partner, or engaging in an extra-dyadic relationship. Like other negative emotions, experiencing guilt can be distressing; however, it can also serve a beneficial function by motivating behaviors that correct transgressions, such as expressing apologies or remorse, making amends, and by avoiding future transgressions (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995; for review, see Baumeister, Stillwell,

& Heatherton, 1994). For example, Baumeister and colleagues (1995) found that participants responded to their guilt by engaging in behaviors that compensate for transgressions, including apologizing and changing their subsequent behavior. Similarly, when people feel guilty, they demonstrate greater perspective taking, generate higher quality solutions to relationship problems, and report more constructive intentions (Covert, Tangnery, Maddux, & Heleno, 2003; Leith & Baumeister, 1998; Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996). Such tendencies also produce lower aggressive responses, more constructive problem solving, and greater efforts to make amends (Covert et al., 2003; Lopez, et al., 1997; Tangney et al., 1996). Consistent with extensive research demonstrating that these type of reparative efforts improve relationship well-being (Hannon, Rusbult, Finkel, & Kamashiro, 2010; Silk, 1998), people who experience greater guilt in response to specific transgressions or conflict episodes also report better long-term outcomes, such as problem resolution and relationship improvement (Baumeister et al., 1994; Leith & Baumeister, 1998).

### **The Importance of Context**

The evidence presented here indicates that negative emotions help individuals resolve their relationship problems. Why, then, are negative emotions frequently considered harmful for close relationships (e.g., Bell, 1978; Sommers, 1984)? As previously noted, negative emotions do have costs, including immediate negative evaluations of the relationship (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; for review, see Heyman, 2001). Although these short-term costs may be offset by the potential benefits of negative emotions described throughout this chapter, there are situations in which negative emotions may not produce benefits or the benefits are inconsequential compared to the costs incurred. In the remainder of this section, we describe

several contexts in which negative emotions may be more costly to relationships than they are beneficial.

### **Infrequent or Mild Relationship Problems**

For negative emotions to benefit close relationships, they need to help individuals resolve relationship problems that negatively affect their relationships. Experiencing and expressing negative emotions that result from minor problems may help to resolve such problems, but the benefits from resolving inconsequential problems may not outweigh the immediate relationship distress such negative emotions can cause. For example, if Margaret frequently yells at Latoya for minor transgressions, such as chewing too loudly, Latoya is likely to change her behavior (i.e., chew less loudly), but the resulting improvement of such minor problems is unlikely to counterbalance the costs of Latoya's feelings of rejection and anger.

Research is consistent with this idea (Baker & McNulty, 2010; Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Fisher, Benson, & Tessler, 1990; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). For example, people appear to be less responsive to negative emotions they perceive as unjustified (Fisher et al., 1990; Rusbult et al., 1991). Similarly, McNulty and Russell (2010) demonstrated that reacting too negatively to minor relationship problems can decrease relationship satisfaction and increase the severity of those problems. Specifically, they found that although expressions of negative emotions, such as blaming one's partner for a problem and commanding one's partner to change their behavior, were associated with more stable marital satisfaction and decreases in marital problems among newlyweds facing more-severe problems, those same behaviors were associated with sharper decreases in satisfaction and increases in marital problems among newlyweds facing less-severe problems.

### **Unsolvable Relationship Problems**

Likewise, given that the ultimate benefit of negative emotions is that they help individuals resolve their relationship problems, they may not benefit close relationships if they are in response to problems that cannot be resolved. For example, although a husband may experience frustration and express anger at his wife if the couple finds out that she is unable to have children due to medical reasons, such negative emotions can do nothing to resolve this problem and thus are likely to lead to costs that are not offset by any benefits. Consistent with this idea, Ickes and Simpson (1997) argue that an accurate understanding of a partner's emotions may not be beneficial when they involve disputes that cannot be resolved. Further, the assumption that confrontational attempts to change irreconcilable differences is ultimately damaging to the relationship is central to Jacobson and Christensen's (1998) integrative behavioral couples therapy. They argue that improving relationships involves promoting accepting and tolerance of differences in personalities, views, values and communication styles that cannot be altered. Nevertheless, we are unaware of research that has directly examined how the solvability of relationship problems affects the implications of negative emotions for close relationships. Future research examining this possibility may prove fruitful.

### **Indirect Expression of Negative Emotions**

Although we noted that expressing negative emotions can help resolve relationship problems by signaling to a partner that something is wrong, by suggesting a solution, and by motivating behavior that helps resolve the problem, not all expressions of negative emotions effectively communicate the problem or solution. Specifically, indirect expressions, which are passive or covert means for resolving problems (Overall et al., 2009), are a less effective strategy for resolving relationship problems. For example, sulking, refusing to talk to a partner, reminding a partner of unrelated previous transgressions, and making fun of a partner does not

help that partner to understand what he or she is doing wrong or how to fix it. Similarly, indirect expressions of distress, such as whining and sighing, do not effectively communicate one's needs to a partner. For example, McNulty and Russell (2010) demonstrated that indirect emotional expressions such as sarcasm, asking hostile questions, and exaggerating were associated with greater increases in relationship problems, regardless of the severity of the problems couples faced in their relationships. Similarly, Overall and colleagues (2009) demonstrated that direct emotional expressions such as criticizing partners' behavior, demanding they change their behavior, and suggesting negative consequences for noncompliance, were more successful at changing partners' problematic behavior than were indirect strategies such as sulking, making partners feel guilty, and debasing one's self. Finally, a similar pattern also emerges within contexts of supportive discussions. Indirect emotional expressions when seeking support, such as sighing, sulking or whining, are less effective at gaining responsive partner support than direct expressions of sadness and anger (Barbee & Cunningham, 1997).

### **Interpersonal Violence**

Although experiencing and expressing negative emotions such as anger and jealousy may sometimes have the advantage of motivating people to resolve their problems in constructive manner, at times such negative emotions may cause people to behave aggressively toward their partners. In particular, theoretical models of interpersonal violence, such as I<sup>3</sup> theory (Finkel, 2007, Slotter & Finkel, 2011) and supporting research (e.g., Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, McNulty, Pond, & Atkins, 2012; Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009), posit that impelling forces are most likely to lead people to behave violently when those people (a) experience an instigating force (e.g., being the recipient of expressed negative emotions) and (b) are unable to inhibit their resultant aggressive impulses (e.g., experience self-regulatory depletion). For

example, Finkel and colleagues (2012; Study 4) demonstrated that intimates who experienced more anger across the course of a week, an impeller, were more likely to behave aggressively when they also experienced the depleting forces of stress and had partners who tended to express negative emotions. Consequently, experiencing negative emotions and being the target of expressions of negative emotions may be dangerous when individuals possess a tendency to behave in an aggressive manner and are in situations where they are unable to inhibit such impulses.

### **Sustained Depressive Mood**

Although negative emotions typically motivate people to resolve their problems, there is reason to expect that sustained depressive mood may have an opposite effect. Evolutionary theories of depression (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1990; Nesse, 2000; Nesse & Ellsworth, 2009; Tooby & Cosmides, 2008), for example, argue that although negative emotions, such as sadness, should initially increase motivation because individuals who invested time and effort into resolving distressing problems should have had a distinct advantage over those who did not attempt to resolve them, prolonged depressive affect should eventually decrease motivation because it is costly to continue investing time and effort into a problem that is unsolvable. Similarly, theories of learned helplessness argue that people experience depressive affect if they believe that their problems are unsolvable, which leads them to disengage effort (see Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978).

Research is consistent with the idea that prolonged depressive mood may inhibit motivation (Layne, Merry, Christian, & Ginn, 1982; Miller & Markman, 2007; Reinecke, DuBois, & Schultz, 2001; for review, see Nestler & Carlezon, 2006; Trew, 2011). For example, Reinecke and colleagues (2001) demonstrated that dysphoria was positively associated with an

avoidant problem-solving style. Similarly, Miller and Markman (2007) found that people with more severe depressive mood focused less on promotion goals and were consequently less motivated to improve their academic performance than were people with less severe depressive mood. Finally, Layne and colleagues (1982) found that people high in depressive mood were less motivated to avoid punishing stimuli, such as criticism, than were people low in depressive mood. Consistent with these lines of research, clinical depression is strongly negatively related to relationships satisfaction in both partners (e.g., Coyne, Thompson, & Palmer, 2002; Davila et al., 2003).

### **Conclusions**

Although experiencing and expressing negative emotions may be unpleasant, negative emotions serve a valuable function by making people more aware of their problems and motivating behaviors that help them resolve such problems. Indeed, people who underreact to serious relationship problems are unlikely to notice their problems and thus be unmotivated to resolve them. Nevertheless, emotional responses that are not justified by the severity of relationship problems should do more harm than good. Indeed, when people overreact to minor relationship problems, the benefit of resolving minor issues is likely to be overshadowed by the harmful effects of those negative emotions for both the self and the partner. The research covered in this chapter, therefore, suggests that for negative emotions to be beneficial, people need to accurately assess the severity of their problems, experience emotions that match the severity of such problems, and directly communicate those emotions to ensure problems are effectively resolved.

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