Satisfying and meaningful close relationships

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“The most important potential of relationship science is, of course, to improve our understanding of human behavior. It cannot fail to do so because relationships are both the foundation and the theme of the human condition.” (Berscheid, 1999, p. 261)

There are some things that people just cannot live without—at least for very long—things like air, food, and water. The human body and mind are designed to ensure these necessities are obtained. Hunger is experienced when food is needed, thirst is felt when water is required, panic sets in when air supplies are cut off, and bodies shiver when their temperatures drop. A question that has long pondered songwriters and scholars alike is whether people need close relationships in the same way they need air, food, water, and shelter. Was Janis Joplin right when she said she needed relationships just the same as she needed air to breathe? Can people live without relationships? Can they live well?

Psychologists have considered the existence of a motive for social bonds in one way or another for many years. In 1938 Henry Murray proposed a list of needs, among them was the need for affiliation. This need, along with two others (achievement and power) has been the focus of a good deal of psychological research. Today, few psychologists dispute the fact that humans are social creatures. An early view was that our social nature was a byproduct of other basic needs. For example, Freud saw our need for relationships as a consequence of the ever-present sexual drive. And, behaviorists viewed our fondness for relationships to be a product of learned associations resulting from repeated instances in which other people were paired with rewards, such as parents who provided food. In the 1950s this view began to crumble in the face of contradictory evidence, such as the evidence from laboratories of scientists like Harry Harlow (1958) who reported that during times of stress infant monkeys preferred

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1 “...I need a man to love. I gotta find him, I gotta have him like the air I breathe. One lovin’ man to understand can’t be too much to need” — Janis Joplin, from I need a man to love.
their soft cloth monkey ‘mothers’ that provided no reward except comfort to their wire monkey ‘mother’ that provided food and water.

It is fair to say that current scientific thinking readily acknowledges that the act of forming bonds with people can motivate our behavior, rather than viewing human sociality solely as a derivative of other basic needs. It is also clear from the evolutionary historical record that our species evolved to live in small groups, such that our ancestors’ probability of survival greatly increased when they shared benevolent ties with those around them (e.g., Beckes & Coan, 2011; Tooby & Cosmides, 1994). Other (more recent) historical evidence supports this. Donald Grayson’s (1990) analysis of the ill-fated Donner Party from 1846 revealed that having social connections within the traveling party increased the chance of surviving the winter on the desolate mountain pass. Although the very young, the very old, and men were at greater risk, even in these groups those without family and social ties in the group were the most likely to perish under these harsh conditions. And Durkheim’s (1897) careful observation of church records concluded that lack of social connections was a risk factor for suicide and in doing so helped found the field of empirical sociology.

However, the question of whether people actually need to bond with others in order to survive and thrive was systematically addressed a comprehensive review by Baumeister and Leary (1995). The authors first laid out a list of criteria that would have to be met in order for something to be considered a basic and fundamental need like the needs for air, food, water, and shelter. An important criterion was that we should expect to see negative health and well-being consequences if social needs were not met, especially in the long term. At the time of that review, and during the years since that review, a increasing mountain of evidence that social ties are strongly associated with well-being and physical

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2 The Donner Party was a group of about 90 pioneers who set out to travel west from Illinois to California by covered wagon in 1846. They became snowbound for winter of 1846-47 and ran out of provisions; only half of them survived.
health has been built (e.g., Akerlind, Hörnquist, & Hansson, 1987; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010).

**Social relationships and physical health**

Although the main focus of this chapter is on the role that social relationships play in psychological well-being, clearly one aspect of a good life is the existence of that life (i.e., mortality) and physical health and disease occurrence. On the topic of mortality, it has long been known that having social bonds (versus not having bonds) is near the top of the list of sources of variance in mortality (e.g., Berkman & Syme, 1979). In their early review, House, Landis, and Umberson (1988) found that a lack of strong social ties had a similar sized association with mortality as smoking and high blood pressure. A similar conclusion was reached in a striking recent review of the epidemiological literature by Holt-Lunstad and her colleagues that enumerated the substantial association that social bonds have on mortality (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Specifically, in their meta-analysis they reviewed 148 longitudinal epidemiological studies. The studies included measures of the existence and/or quality of social bonds and measures of mortality (excluding studies that examined death by suicide or injury). Across the studies reviewed, the time between the assessment of relationship predictors and later mortality review ranged from three months to 58 years, with an average of 7.5 years of time between assessments.

The quantitative meta-analysis results revealed a strong link between having social connections with others, especially high quality connections, and mortality. Although the effect sizes ranged systematically depending upon the indicator of social ties (i.e., whether the study had a rough estimate of social ties such as marital status, or a rich estimate of social ties such as quality of one’s network), there is no doubt that social ties are powerful. To put the effect sizes into context, the average effect sizes were as robust predictors of death (or in most cases, more robust) as other well-established
mortality risks such as excessive alcohol use, obesity, and failure to treat hypertension. Moreover, of the studies that included measures complex measures of social integration (e.g., loneliness), those who perceived a lack of social ties were 40% more likely to be dead at follow-up than those who reported feeling connected to others (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010).

Although the next generation of research questions is focusing on illuminating pathways that link relationship quality to health outcomes, some clues already appear in the literature. For example, Uchino, Cacioppo, and Kiecolt-Glaser (1996) reviewed 81 studies on social support and social integration and found a consistent association between social ties and increased positive physiological functioning of the cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune systems. Dickerson & Kemeny (2004) conducted a meta-analysis showing that physiological reactions to a laboratory stressor via a heightened cortisol response were most pronounced when the individual was socially threatened. Finally, Cole and colleagues (2007) found that chronically lonely individuals had elevated pro-inflammatory activity, a profile associated with increases risk for inflammatory disease.

The picture linking social ties to health and mortality is not all rosy. That is, what is also clear from this work is the realization that only high quality and rewarding social ties predict outcomes. The majority social relationships are rewarding, thankfully; however there are dark sides to our social ties in that there are many potential negative consequences of interpersonal relationships (e.g., Rook, 1984). Potential drawbacks of intimate social ties include abandonment, exploitation, and conflict; and these qualities predict decrements in health (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Miller, Rohleder, & Cole, 2009). For example, hostile conflict and negative emotionality in marriage is associated with increased cardiac death (Eaker et al., 2007; Wilcox, Kasl, & Berkman, 1994); and caustic interaction in dyads are associated with increased dysregulation of immune functioning and unhealthy cardiovascular reactivity (Kiecolt-Glaser, 1999; Uchino, Holt-Lunstad, Uno, & Flinders, 2001). It should also be noted that social relationships can have direct threat on physical health and mortality in the form of abusive relationships.
and intimate partner violence (e.g., Ellsberg, et al., 2008). Thus although the empirical record makes clear that social isolation and a lack of connections bodes poorly for physical health and mortality, that same literature also indicates that low quality, hostile, and caustic social bonds are harmful as well.

**Social relationships and well-being**

More central to the theme of the current volume, the literature has also found that social relationships are a consistent, and often the top, source of psychological health (see Berscheid & Reis, 1998, for a review). In the clinical field, research has consistently documented an association between social isolation/loneliness and mood disturbances (e.g., depression) and disorders such as schizophrenia, personality disorders, and substance abuse (e.g., Akerlind, Hörnquist, & Hansson, 1987; Overholser, 1992; Neeleman & Power, 1994;). Turning from research on clinical disorders and toward work focused more broadly on psychological well-being, there is ample evidence that loneliness and well-being and consistently and strongly negatively correlated (e.g., Helliwell & Putnam, 2009; Vanderweele, Hawkley, Thisted, & Cacioppo, 2011). Studies routinely find that having rewarding social and family relationships to be best predictors of overall life satisfaction compared to other domains of human activity, such as career, financial attainment, etc. (e.g., Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Diener, 2001).

Similarly, studies have found that a clear characteristic distinguishing those who are very happy (e.g, upper 25%) from those who are less happy (e.g., lowest 25%) is the existence of social ties and the quality of those ties (e.g., Diener & Selignman, 2002; Hawkley, Thisted, & Cacioppo, 2011). What is also remarkable is that the link between social relationships and well-being has been noted at every stage of the human development—children, adolescent, young adults, and older adults (e.g., Yixin & Feeley, 2014; Sherman, Lansford, & Volling, 2006; Rönkä et al., 2014; Bradshaw, Hoelscher, & Richardson, 2007). The ubiquitous evidence of the strong association between relationships and well-being across the life span is reflected in theories of well-being as well. Models of eudomonic of well-being include
social relationship quality or social connectedness as is an integral component (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryff, 1995).

Mirroring the literature on social ties and physical health, the literature on social ties and psychological well-being also makes it clear that quality matters and that there are potential risks to well-being inherent in our relationships. Potential costs such as fears of, and experiences with, rejection and abandonment have well-documented (negative) associations with psychological health (e.g., Baron et al., 2007; Downey, Felman, Ayduck, 2000; Mikulincer, 1998). Hostility and conflict in interactions with relationship partners contributes to psychopathological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (e.g., Davila, Bradbuy, Cohan, & Tochluk, 1997; Whisman, 2001; Whisman, Uebelacker, & Settles, 2010). Similarly, a lack of trust and security in relationships has a profound effect on self-esteem and well-being (e.g., Holmes, 2002).

In summary, a lack of social connections is associated with well-being deficits but the existence of social relationships alone does not automatically coincide with higher well-being; those relationships need be characterized by minimal hostility and insecurity and high warmth. Researchers have argued as to whether overall well-being influences the likelihood that people will form and maintain social relationships or whether high-quality relationships influence well-being. The short conclusion is that there is evidence for both directions of influence. Importantly for the current paper, there is sufficient longitudinal evidence and analogue experimental studies to conclude that high quality social relationships contribute substantially to an individual’s overall well-being (e.g., Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Hawkley et al., 2011). The question of how and through what pathways social ties contribute to well-being is the focus of the remainder of this chapter. To this end, three components of well-being will be examined, reduced negative affective, increased positive affect, and the experience of life as having meaning and purpose. I will consider each potential pathway separately.
**Relationships and reduced negative affect**

Negative emotions are critical for our survival. Feelings such as fear, anger, sadness, and guilt are appropriate reactions to environmental stimuli and social situations. Thus the experience of negative emotions is not antithetical to well-being. However the experience of negative emotions out of proportion in size or time with the situation, or experiencing negative emotion in absence of actual negative stimuli is not conducive to well-being. As such one of the main challenges in life is the regulation emotional experience (e.g., Gross, 1998), especially the regulation of negative emotional experience. As such, one process that has potential for explaining part of the reason that social relationships are linked tightly with well-being is the process known as social support. It is well known that relationship partners (family, friends, and romantic partners) help mitigate the detrimental effect that negative events and stress have on well-being (e.g., Hawkley et al., 2009; McDermott et. al., 2009).

**Social support.** Some of the most consistent findings in the literature are that perceptions of the availability of support are also closely tied to relationship quality and well-being (e.g., Kaul & Lakey, 2003). In fact many theories of relationship health include the importance of perceptions that the partner will respond to needs while under stress (e.g., Reis, Clark & Holmes, 2006). And we also know that people who have feel insecure and dissatisfied in close relationships also perceive that others will be not be reliably available to them in times of need (e.g., Blain, Thompson, Whiffen, 1993; Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich, 2001). Lonely people are also less likely to perceive that others will be there for them in times of stress (Russell, 1996) than people who are not lonely. In short, perceptions of the availability of social support are closely tied to both relationship functioning and well-being.

However the consistency in findings is limited to studies that link perceptions of future available support to well-being and relationship health. When we turn to finding support that is actually enacted by others, called enacted or received support, the findings are more mixed (e.g., Barbee, Derlega,
Sherburne, & Grimshaw, 1998; Dakof & Taylor, 1990). That is, the receipt of support from others is sometimes associated with decreases in negative emotions and other times it is associated with increased negative emotion, and other times there is no association between the two. A striking example of this was a prospective study of mortality in people by Krause (1997) in which greater perceived availability of support was associated with decreased mortality risk, but receiving actual support was associated with increased mortality risk. One difficult confound to tease is that stress and health status are likely linked such that those who are in worse health or under more stress may receive more support. However, studies that are able to tease apart these factors still show that there are possible negative effect of received support goes beyond this explanation (e.g., Forster & Stoller, 1992; Rini, Schetter, Hobel, Glynn, and Sandman; 2006). More central to the current theme is that sometimes receipt of support is associated with reductions in stress and negative emotions and sometimes it is not, and this is independent of the effects of perception of the availability of support (Gleason, Iida, Bolger, & Shrout, 2008).

Researchers have proposed some possible reasons of the apparent risks of enacted support. One set of explanations revolves around the unintended consequences of received support; receiving support from others can bring costs because it may be a blow to one’s self-esteem because a vulnerability or weakness has been made salient, or it may draw more attention to the problem (e.g., Bolger et al., 2000). Relatedly, receiving support may lead the recipient to feel overly indebted, incompetent, or weak (Gleason, et al., 2003; Shrout, Herman, & Bolger, 2006). So, while receiving support may be helpful for reducing negative emotions (e.g., by helping solve the problem), that same support may also increase negative emotions and insecurities in the recipient.

Evidence for these ideas was found in Bolger and colleagues (2000) work on invisible support. The authors hypothesized that support that is most effective at reducing distress is support that is not recognized as support by the recipient. For example, Bolger and colleagues (2000) conducted a study
examining the effects of actual support interactions. They found that stressed individuals reported better outcomes (e.g., lower anxiety) on days that their partner reported providing support but they did not report receiving support themselves (which the researchers called “invisible support”) compared to days the stressed recipient reported receiving support from the partner (called “visible support”). One explanation for these intriguing findings is that invisible support avoids the unintended risks of support provision while maximizing the potentials gains.

Another reason that received support may not always reduce negative emotions is that it actually very difficult to provide high quality support. A good deal of support that is intended to be helpful can miss the mark, or not be delivered in a skilled manner and as such is unhelpful and perhaps even harmful to the recipient (e.g., Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990; Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986; Rafaeli, & Gleason, 2009). Support that is higher in quality, or responsive to the recipient’s needs is more likely to be associated with a reduction in distress for the recipient. Rini and colleagues (2006) found a linear association between the effectiveness of enacted support and outcomes, essentially indicating that more effective support was associated with lower anxiety and less effective support was associated with greater anxiety and distress (than not receiving support at all). Maisel and Gable (2009) showed that effective support is support that conveys understanding, validation and caring to the recipient. This quality of an interaction is knowns as responsiveness and is discussed in more detail in later sections of this chapter. However, we know that while not always effective at reducing negative emotions and distress, social support from close others has the potential to help regulated negative emotions in the recipient.

Relationships and increased positive emotions.

Although most work on emotion regulation has focused on the reduction of negative affect, there is good reason to examine the experience of positive emotions. It is often in the context of
relationship that we experience positive emotions and social partners can help regulate positive emotions by maintaining or increasing positive affective states in others. In the next sections I consider three processes through which social relationships and positive emotions are intertwined.

**Capitalization.** Alas, negative events occur in everyone’s life. However, positive events happen too. And, similar to the vast literature on social support that has shown that people turn to others to help them cope with negative events, research has also shown that people often turn to others to share their good news. This is research on capitalization, which is the process of sharing positive events with others and gaining additional benefits from this disclosure (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Extending Langston’s (1994) research on the positive consequence of sharing positive experiences, Gable et al. have provided evidence for the importance of considering these positive event disclosures. This work included several studies demonstrating that people derive additional benefits, such as increased daily positive affect and daily well-being, when they share positive events with other people. These increases in positive affect and well-being are significant even when controlling for the benefits produced by the positive event itself. Additionally, this research suggests that capitalization interactions provide an important opportunity for people in relationships to foster intimacy and closeness through supportive exchanges without the drawback of risking one’s self-esteem or self-worth, as one might do when seeking support for a negative event (e.g., Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000). Importantly, positive events are shared almost exclusively with close relationships partners. For example, in one daily experience study of the most positive event of the day, nearly all of the people with whom the positive event was shared were close relationship partners, such as friends, siblings, parents, roommates, or romantic partners; and only a handful of events were shared with non-close others, such as co-workers and acquaintances.

The near exclusive involvement of close others in capitalization disclosures suggests that capitalization may be an important interpersonal process. Indeed, this work has found that supportive responses to a
close relationship partner’s positive event is associated with a host of positive relationship outcomes such as increased liking, intimacy, love, and trust. It is important to understand what constitutes a supportive or unsupportive response to a capitalization attempt. There are four types of responses to capitalization attempts: active–constructive responses, passive–constructive responses, active–destructive responses, and passive–destructive responses. Active-constructive responses have the expression of excitement or enthusiasm about the positive event and the responder is actively involved in the interaction. He or she likely asks questions about the event, elaborates on the implication of the event for the discloser, and talks about the meaning of the event to the discloser in particular. The emotions of interest, happiness, and pride are common. A prototypical active-constructive response to the sharing of event such as a job promotion would be “That is fantastic! You worked so hard for this and being able to move onto the next level is an important step for your goals.”

Passive-constructive responses are also positive reactions to the event, but these reactions are subdued. The responder says little about the event but conveys positive support during the exchange. A prototypical passive-constructive response to the same hypothetical scenario would be “That’s nice, dear.”. An active-destructive response is similar to active-constructive responding in terms of its level of involvement on the part of the responder but the feedback is predominantly negative. The responder may point out possible negative implications of the event, or interpret the event less favorably than the discloser, or minimizes the significance of the event. A prototypical active-destructive response to this hypothetical scenario would be “Wow, are you sure you are ready for this? Will you have to work longer hours or travel more? Doesn’t sound like a good deal to me.”. Finally, a passive-destructive response simply fails to acknowledge the event disclosed at all. This can be done in one of two general ways. The responder can change the subject to discuss something completely different or the responder can direct the conversation to an event that occurred to him or her. Prototypical passive-destructive responses to
this scenario would be “Hey, where is the checkbook?” or “Wait until you hear what happened to me at work today!”.

Studies have shown that capitalization is a common occurrence; Gable et al. (2004) found that people reported sharing positive events with others on approximately 70-80% of days out of a 14-day period. Thus, the way that people respond to these positive event disclosures in everyday life is an important area of research. Overall several studies show that active-constructive and not passive or destructive responses to capitalization attempts are associated with enhanced personal outcomes and increases in relationship quality on a variety of indicators. An active constructive response provides a signal that the responder understands the discloser and values his or her abilities, talents, motivation, or even luck associated with the positive event. Second, the active-constructive response conveys caring for the well-being of the discloser. Passive or destructive responses signal a lack of understanding, valuing, and concern for the discloser. The combination of understanding, validation, and caring is referred to as responsiveness to the self (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004) and is elaborated on more in following section. In terms of the research on capitalization, responsiveness to the self has been shown to emerged as a consistent mediator of the interpersonal and intrapersonal outcomes associated with capitalization (e.g., Gable et al., 2006; Maisel & Gable, 2009; Maisel, Gable, & Strachman, 2008).

Gratitude. An area of research which has received a great deal of attention in the last decade is work on gratitude. The earliest work on gratitude concentrated largely on gratitude as a solitary emotion and was focused on the personal consequences of gratitude (see McCullough et al., 2001 for review). A good deal of this work fell in the “counting blessings” research tradition (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003) and emphasized an individual taking to time to reflect on and to be grateful for life’s gifts. However, Algoe and colleagues (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010; Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013) examined gratitude in the context of interpersonal relationships. This line of work examines gratitude from a social-functional perspective as asks what is
the social function of the emotion of gratitude. In this work there is a recognition that for most instances of gratitude there is a benefactor and recipient of the benefit, and there is often some type of relationship between them.

Algoe and colleagues have argued that gratitude promotes relationship formation and maintenance. In one study by Algoe and Haidt (2009), participants recalled events that had happened to them; either when another person evoked feelings of gratitude or happiness. Participants who were in the gratitude condition were more likely to report that they noticed new positive qualities about the person who provided the benefit (i.e., the benefactor) and that they wanted to spend more time with their benefactors in the future than those in the happiness condition.

The relationship function of the emotion of gratitude has been empirically studied in both newly formed relationships and longer term relationships. In a study of emerging friendships, Algoe, and colleagues (2008) examined the role of gratitude during a week of gift-giving in a sorority. New sorority members (the gift recipients) recorded their reactions to the benefits received from the member assigned to be their anonymous gift-giver during this special week. Feelings of gratitude for the gifts (independent of the cost of the gift) positively predicted future relationship outcomes (e.g., closeness, liking). In a daily experience study of cohabiting couples, participants reported on their emotions and behaviors (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010) and the receipt of thoughtful benefits predicted gratitude in both men and women. Importantly, participants’ gratitude on one day predicted an increase in relationship satisfaction the following day, for both the recipient of the thoughtful benefit and his or her partner. Algoe et al. (2013) found evidence that the cross-partner effects were attributable to the expression of gratitude. Algoe (2012) refers to the function of gratitude in relationships as find, remind, and bind.
Love. The emotion of love has been of primary interest to poets, musicians, and playwrights for as long as there have been poems, songs, and plays. Similarly, love has been a topic of study in empirical psychology for quite some time as well, although interest in the topic has waxed and waned over the years. Harlow’s (1958) demonstration that maternal love was something far more interesting than secondary reinforcement in his famous cloth and wire monkey experiments was an early milestone in the field. Theorists such as John Bowlby (1969) also proposed that love and attachment bonds were part of the mind’s architecture and critical to human development.

Researchers have argued that there are several different types of love, but the bulk of the empirical work has centered on just two kinds: passionate love and companionate love (e.g., Bercheid & Walster, 1978). The intense excitement and attraction we feel for someone else is referred to as passionate love. The affection and liking we have for someone else is referred to as companionate love. Both companionate and passionate love play a role in close relationships. Several theorists have argued that the ultimate function of passionate love, in evolutionary terms, is to foster attraction and relationship initiation (e.g., Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Specifically, researchers have labeled this state desire and argue that its primary role is to disrupt one from her current activities to direct energies to initiate a new relationship. On the other hand, the function of companionate love is to motivate the maintenance of an existing relationship (e.g. Gonzaga et al., 2001).

The experience of intense passionate love, such as that experienced in the beginning of a new relationship (e.g., Aron, Fisher, & Strong, 2006) has been associated with noted changes in the self-concept and self-esteem (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995). Moreover, fMRI studies on passionate love show that this type of love is associated with activity in systems thought to be primarily associated with reward motivation (Aron et al., 2006). Companionate love has been associated with commitment and intimacy and is a central feature of communal relationships—relationships characterized by mutual expectations that each will respond to the other’s needs (Clark & Mills, 1993). Companionate love has
also been found to be highly predictive of long term romantic relationship satisfaction and maintenance (e.g., Huston & Evangelisti, 1991). In short, both passionate love and companionate love are important appetitive components of close relationships.

**Relationships and meaning and purpose in life.**

Recent work on meaning has shown that people who feel that their lives have a sense of meaning (purpose, significance, and coherence; King, Heintziman, & Ward, 2016) also have feel that they are connected to others, feel as if they belong, and feel supported by others in their social networks sufor relatedness is met (Hicks & King, 2009; Lambert et al., 2010) whereas when people are ostracized or socially excluded they feel their lives lack meaning (e.g., Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). This recent work on the concept of meaning dovetails nicely with earlier findings such in which people have routinely cited close relationships among their most important life goals and aspirations (e.g., Emmons, 1999; Little, 1989). When describing the factors that give life meaning, most people mention close relationships more than other domains of activity (e.g., Klinger, 1977). One mechanism that close relationship scholars have investigated that may contribute to a sense of meaning is the processes through which close relationships contribute to personal growth.

**Self-growth.** Two well-developed lines of research have focused on the implication of positive processes for the self-concept: Self-expansion theory and the Michelangelo Phenomenon. Self-expansion in relationships (e.g., Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991), refers to the process of including a close other in one’s conception of the self. This self-expansion process can include taking in a close other’s “resources, perspectives and characteristics” (Aron et al., 1991, p. 243). The theory of self-expansion is supported by empirical evidence such that in close relationships, mental models of the self and other are close tied and seem to overlap with one other. Moreover, the closer the relationship the
greater this degree of overlap, making a partner’s personal qualities and resources less distinguishable from the personal qualities and resources of the self.

Aron and colleagues have argued that people are motivated to expand the self and this motivation is at the core of the formation and maintenance of relationships. Importantly, the theory also argues that the act of self-expansion is, in itself, rewarding and creates positive emotions. Experimental studies have demonstrated that creating opportunities for self-expansion in the lab by having couples participate in a novel and physiologically arousing task together leads to increases in relationship satisfaction (Aron et al., 2000). Moreover, it is the high positive affect (and not decreased negative affect) that links these tasks to increased relationship satisfaction (see Strong & Aron, 2006). Aron and colleagues have argued that there is a rapid expansion of the self that is naturally occurring at the beginning of relationships, which at least partially accounts for the intense positive emotions experienced when falling in love (Aron et al., 1991). Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, and Heyman (2000) have also demonstrated that established partners’ participation in novel, arousing experiences together in their day to day life can increase relationship satisfaction, presumably because these experiences offer opportunities for continued expansion. The importance of considering appetitive processes in relationships is especially clear in this body of research – partners who are motivated to engage in fun and exciting activities together, such as outdoor sports and travel, also tend to have high levels of marital satisfaction (e.g., Hill, 1988).

The self-expansion process is a basic interpersonal process and not just evident in romantic couples. For example, Fraley and Aron (2004) found that closeness between strangers was increased through a shared humorous experience. Interestingly, other work has shown the that self-expansion processes also can work in the reverse temporal order. Specifically, Slotter and Gardner (2009) found that when people are motivated to be close to another they can employ self-expansion. Their work showed that when people anticipate (or desire) closeness with another person they integrate aspects of
the other person into their own self-concept. In one study participants incorporated a novel attribute into their self-concept only when motivated to be closer to that other person; Slotter & Garder, 2009; Study 2). In another study, participants incorporated attributes another person into their self-concepts only when the other person was presented as a potential dating partner and not when presented as a potential job applicant (Slotter & Gardner, 2009; Study 3). It remains to be seen if and how the desire for closeness in established relationships may facilitate self-expansion.

Another line of research focusing on an appetitive relationship process with implication for the self-concept is research on The Michelangelo Phenomenon (e.g., Drigotas, Rusbult, Weiselquist, & Whitton, 1999, Drigotas, 2002; Rusbult, Kumashiro, M., Kubacka, K. E., & Finkel, E. J., 2009). This work recognizes that close relationship partners can be active participants in each other's personal development and has shown that close partners can promote (or hinder) one's pursuit of the ideal self. Rusbult and colleagues used the term Michelangelo Phenomenon to invoke Michelangelo Buonarroti’s description of the sculptor’s release of an ideal figure from a block of stone (Rusbult et al., 2009). For people, this ideal figure is the ideal self and it could be an explicit, clearly defined set of goals, or a vaguer collection of dreams or aspirations. Empirical work on Michelangelo Phenomenon has found evidence that partners help (or hinder) the growth toward the ideal self though partner affirmations. That is, partners who see their partners as already possessing the attributes of their ideal self and treat their partners as if they are (already) that ideal self, elicit aspects of the ideal self from the partner through these interactions (Rusbult et al., 2009). Partner affirmations are associated with the partner feeling more similar to his or her ideal self and higher personal well-being and relationship quality (Drigotas, 2002; Drigotas, et al., 1999; Rusbult, et al., 2009).

Conclusions.
Social relationships are closely linked to our social connections. When people have abundant and satisfying social ties they report higher well-being. Indeed, many theories of well-being contain social relationships as a necessary ingredient for well-being. In this chapter I reviewed evidence in support of this link. In addition, I reviewed the likely reasons for this. Social bonds can help regulate stress. They are also a primary vehicle for the experience of positive emotions. Finally, social relationships are part of meaning and purpose, and relationships role in personal growth may be a large part of this link. In sum, you cannot live the good life without good relationships.
References (incomplete)


