Rejection in Romantic Relationships

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Since you've abandoned me, my whole life has crashed,
Won't you pick the pieces up, 'cause it feels just like I'm walking on broken glass.
- *Walking on Broken Glass* (A. Lennox, 1992)

In her hit song, *Walking on Broken Glass* (1992), quoted above, Annie Lennox masterfully captures the emotional essence of romantic rejection. Rejection by a romantic partner is literally painful (MacDonald & Leary, 2005), interferes with the ability to think and self-regulate (Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007), and induces a state of cognitive deconstruction akin to the psychological response to traumatic physical injury (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2003). Thankfully, actual romantic rejection that results in breakup or divorce is a relatively infrequent experience for most people. Yet the threat of possible rejection is an unwelcome guest that accompanies many people throughout their romantic lives. As such, describing and understanding the ways in which people cope with that ever-present threat within their romantic bonds is a highly relatable, and consequential, goal for psychologists. Therefore, in this chapter we explore the many ways in which people attempt to avoid the aversive consequences of rejection by regulating their thoughts, feelings, and behavior during relationship initiation and within their ongoing romantic bonds.

1. The Motivation to Avoid Romantic Rejection

It goes without saying that people are strongly motivated to avoid rejection, and this is especially true in the context of romantic relationships. Human beings are social animals, and nearly all of our greatest achievements as a species have been accomplished because we developed the ability to form and maintain close social bonds with one another (Baumeister &

Leary, 1995). From an evolutionary perspective, perhaps the most essential social bond of all is the romantic relationship. Although people form and maintain romantic bonds for many reasons – pleasure, companionship, or social norms – the primal importance of reproduction for the survival of our species has resulted in deeply-rooted psychobiological mechanisms that function to bind romantic partners to one another. These mechanisms explain why falling love is literally intoxicating (Aron, Fisher, Strong, Acevedo, Reila, & Tsapelas, 2008), why lovers come to rely on one another as attachment figures (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010), and why sex produces a psychological tether that draws partners together (whether they like it or not; Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). But as the song lyrics quoted at the beginning of this chapter poignantly illustrate, these same mechanisms that evolved to bring romantic partners together and keep them together over time also produce intense pain and suffering when the bonds of love are broken.

Rejection by a romantic partner is painful, and not just figuratively – rejection literally causes physical pain (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Moreover, if couples fail to maintain a strong and healthy romantic bond, they experience negative emotional and physical consequences that are highly punishing. For example, unhappily married individuals exhibit higher blood pressure, higher levels of overall stress, and higher rates of depression than their happily married counterparts (Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, & Jones, 2008). They also experience compromised immune functioning at the cellular level (Jaremka, Glaser, Malarkey, & Keicolt-Glaser, 2013), and unhealthy cardiovascular reactivity during conflict – increases in systolic blood pressure, heart rate, and cardiac output accompanied by decreases in peripheral resistance (Nealey-Moore, Smith, Uchino, Hawkins, & Olson-Cerny, 2007). Divorce, which is perhaps the ultimate rejection in romantic relationships, is associated with even more dire outcomes: People who have

been divorced actually have a higher risk of death than their married counterparts (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010).

To avoid these and other aversive consequences of rejection, people also possess psychological mechanisms uniquely dedicated to helping them maintain connections and avoid rejection (or at least minimize its negative consequences) within their social relationships, including their close romantic bonds. These social-regulatory mechanisms are located within *the self* – that unique collection of self-views, beliefs, and personality traits that define each and every one of us. The self functions to provide meaning and coherence to people's experiences, to allow people to predict future experiences, and to regulate their motivation and behavior across situations (e.g., Swann & Schroeder, 1995). In this vein, psychologists have identified a number of social-psychological and personality variables that function to regulate thinking, feeling, and behaving within close relationships, servicing the primary goals of achieving belonging and avoiding rejection: self-esteem (e.g., Stinson et al., 2010), rejection sensitivity (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996), the attachment system (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987), perceived regard and responsiveness (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004), and trust (Holmes & Rempel, 1989) are but a few examples. There are important differences between these psychological constructs, and we encourage interested readers to explore the source materials that we cite for more information. At the same time, each of these constructs tap into a common aspect of the self that we call *relational security*, which reflects one's chronic feelings of being valued by relationship partners.

2. Relational Security and Romantic Rejection

Feelings of relational security develop from experiences within close relationships with parents, friends, and romantic partners during key developmental periods, such as childhood and adolescence (e.g., Harter, 2003). Generally speaking, when these close others view the self

positively, treat the self well, and offer warm and loving support, then such responsive behaviors yield chronic feelings of relational security. For example, Ethan has enjoyed relationships with many responsive close others in his life and so has come to be relationally secure. As such, Ethan feels worthy of love, care, and attention by romantic partners, and trusts that current and future romantic partners have good intentions and will treat him well. In other words, Ethan is not particularly concerned about rejection from his romantic partner. Like everyone, he wants to avoid rejection, but he thinks rejection is unlikely and if it does happen, he knows he can handle it emotionally and socially.

In contrast, if close others are rejecting, hostile, unavailable, self-involved, and generally unable to meet one's needs during childhood and adolescence, such unresponsive behaviors foster feelings of relational insecurity. Ethan's romantic partner, Ruby, has a developmental history of unresponsive parenting and rejection by peers and thus has become relationally insecure. As such, Ruby feels unworthy of love, anxiously anticipates rejection, and is relatively untrusting of her romantic partners, including Ethan. Put another way, Ruby is quite concerned about rejection from her romantic partner. She thinks rejection is quite likely within her close relationships, and she has serious concerns about her ability to cope emotionally and socially with rejection.

Although relational security is quite stable over time and is treated like a personality trait by some psychologists, relational security is also highly context dependent (e.g., Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996). The same individual may feel quite secure with one romantic partner, but feel quite insecure and fearful of rejection with another romantic partner. So although we will refer to relationally secure and relationally insecure partners as if they are distinct groups of individuals, we do so to facilitate the discussion at hand. Throughout

this chapter, always bear in mind that relational security is essentially a dyadic process that results not only from stable aspects of the self, but also from the unique chemistry that happens when two individuals form a romantic bond. For reasons we will describe shortly, Ruby is more secure in her relationship with Ethan than she has been in her past romantic relationships. Yet relative to the entire range of relational security that people may experience, she still falls on the insecure end of the spectrum.

As will become apparent throughout this rest of this chapter, the contrasting feelings and beliefs that characterize relational security and insecurity play an important role in shaping people's rejection experiences during romantic-relationship initiation and within ongoing romantic relationships. Insecure individuals are more attentive to rejection, more sensitive to rejection, and react more strongly to rejection than secure individuals (e.g., Hepper & Carnelley, 2012; Katz, Beach & Joiner, 1998; Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997), and such differences are even evident at the automatic, physiological level. For example, insecure individuals, but not secure individuals, exhibit a startle eye-blink response when presented with paintings that depict scenes of rejection (Gyurak & Ayduk, 2007). Moreover, when rejected by a potential romantic partner in an online dating context, insecure individuals exhibit greater increases in cortisol -- the body's stress hormone -- than their secure counterparts (Ford & Collins, 2010). Therefore, when insecure partners weigh the perceived rewards of pursuing increased connection with a potential or current romantic partner against the perceived costs of rejection, the costs often outweigh the rewards. Consequently, insecure partners tend to adopt a motivational style within their romantic relationships that focuses on avoiding rejection. The same evaluative calculations yield a different result for secure partners, such that rewards usually

outweigh costs. Therefore, secure partners tend to adopt a motivational style that focuses on pursuing greater connection and intimacy.

For better or for worse, due to these differing motivational styles, relational security or insecurity can be self-fulfilling, causing partners to behave in ways that bring about the actual acceptance or rejection they anticipate. Thus, the recurring theme in the rest of this chapter concerns the ways in which romantic partners perceive, think, feel, and behave in ways that actively influence their rejection experiences, both during relationship initiation and during the maintenance of ongoing relationships.

3. Relational Insecurity and Rejection During Relationship Initiation

When they met for the first time, Ethan was smitten by Ruby's feisty personality and glowing smile. However, these same qualities were attractive to a lot of men, meaning Ethan could face competition for Ruby's affections. Furthermore, Ruby might not have reciprocated his feelings. While contemplating these dismaying possibilities, Ethan was reminded of an age-old truism of romance: By actively pursuing the object of his affections, he would make himself vulnerable to the possibility of rejection. Indeed, overcoming the motivation to avoid rejection in favor of the desire to pursue connection (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 2011) is a necessary first step towards successful relationship initiation.

Yet this process is more easily said than done for some people. For example, whereas the threat of rejection causes secure individuals to optimistically over-detect acceptance during relationship initiation (a perceptual bias that ensures that secure would-be lovers will work hard to achieve the connection they prize), the same threat of rejection causes insecure individuals to self-protectively under-detect acceptance (Cameron, Stinson, Gaetz, & Balchen, 2010). Under-detecting acceptance from a potential romantic partner is self-protective because it avoids the

possibility of incorrectly detecting acceptance when none is present, a mistake that increases the chances of being rejected by one's love interest. By under-detecting acceptance, insecure suitors make sure that they will only risk relationship initiation when acceptance is virtually guaranteed, and rejection is highly unlikely. Such biased under-detection of acceptance cues may achieve insecure individuals' goal of avoiding a humiliating rejection in the short term. But in the long term, this perceptual bias may contribute to insecure individuals' rejection concerns by causing them to perceive their social worlds in a manner consistent with their relational insecurity. Thus, the biasing influence of relational security or insecurity on perceived acceptance during relationship initiation is a good example of a self-fulfilling prophecy in action. Secure individuals expect to be accepted so they perceive lots of acceptance from potential romantic partners (Cameron et al., 2010). In contrast, insecure individuals expect to be rejected, so they perceive less acceptance from potential romantic partners.

The self-fulfilling nature of relational security is also evident in people's relationship-initiation behavior. For example, secure men use more direct relationship-initiation tactics than insecure men, like flirting and smiling and making one's romantic interest obvious to one's partner (Cameron, Stinson, & Wood, 2013). Because direct initiation tactics tend to be more successful than indirect tactics, like passive proximity-seeking, secure men may experience more success during relationship initiation than insecure men (at least when initiating relationships with strangers; see Cameron et al., 2013 for a discussion). A similar self-fulfilling prophecy is evident in people's use of warm and friendly behaviors during relationship initiation (Stinson, Cameron, Wood, Gaucher, & Holmes, 2009). Secure individuals respond to the threat of rejection with heightened warmth and friendly interpersonal behaviors. In turn, such warmth encourages others to be accepting, thus affirming secure individuals' self-views. In contrast,

insecure individuals respond to the threat of rejection by inhibiting their interpersonal warmth as a self-protective strategy (e.g., "You won't like me, so I am not going to let you think I like you!"), remaining aloof from the social interaction to minimize the hurt they would feel should rejection occur (e.g., Wood & Forest, 2011; Gaucher, Wood, Stinson, Forest, Holmes, & Logel, 2012). Unfortunately, this social freezing strategy results in the very rejection that insecure individuals are trying to avoid, thus affirming their self-doubts.

Under-detecting acceptance and social-freezing behavior are perceptual and behavioral mechanisms, respectively, to explain the self-fulfilling nature of relational security or insecurity during relationship-initiation. But there also exist cognitive mechanisms to explain the perpetuation of relational security, including low standards and lack of selectivity. In one field study of relationship initiation, feelings of loneliness prompted insecure individuals to attend a speed-dating event (McClure, Lydon, Baccus, & Baldwin, 2010). Unfortunately, the outcomes of the event probably exacerbated their loneliness: Insecure individuals were relatively unpopular with potential romantic partners. Insecure individuals were also unselective, meaning that they were romantically interested in more people than were secure individuals. As it turns out, unselectivity is unattractive to potential dates because it may signal that one has low standards, and by extension, low mate value (Eastwick, Finkel, Mochon, & Ariely, 2007). This perceived low mate value may ultimately explain why insecure individuals were more likely to be rejected by potential dates than their secure counterparts. It is possible that insecure individuals' history of rejection is partially responsible for their lack of selectivity, because rejection by potential romantic partners causes relational insecurity, which in turn lowers people's mating aspirations (Kavanagh, Robins, & Ellis, 2010). Once again, we can see a self-fulfilling prophecy in action:

Rejection leads to relational insecurity prompting low mating standards, which in turn leads to unselectivity and actual rejection.

Fear of rejection can also cause suitors to misinterpret the meaning behind their love-interest's behaviors, which may also result in rejection. Specifically, potential suitors experience *pluralistic ignorance* during relationship initiation, and thus assume that fears of rejection influence their own behavior but not their partner's behavior (Vorauer & Ratner, 1996). For example, when Ethan met Ruby for the first time, he was hesitant to make a first move because he feared rejection. Consistent with the social-freezing phenomenon we described earlier, Ethan was timid and reserved during his first conversations with Ruby as a means of disguising his romantic interest while he attempted to determine whether his attraction was reciprocated. Moreover, Ethan was aware that he was behaving in a reserved manner and he correctly attributed his behavior to his fears of rejection. However, when Ethan observed the same hesitation and timidity in Ruby, he incorrectly assumed that her behavior was due to lack of interest.

Although everyone exhibits this type of pluralistic ignorance during relationship initiation, we suspect that insecure individuals are more prone to this bias than secure individuals. For example, when experimenters informed single male participants that their attractive, single, female interaction partner (actually a confederate) was feeling anxious and nervous about an upcoming face-to-face meeting with the male participant – information that would serve to reduce the men's pluralistic ignorance concerning the cause of the woman's subsequent behavior – insecure men dramatically increased their warm and friendly behaviors during the face-to-face meeting (Stinson et al., 2009, Study 2). In contrast, secure men's behavior was unaffected by the disclosure. This pattern of results suggests that insecure men, but

not secure men, were basing their own social behavior on incorrect assumptions about the causes of their female partners' behavior.

The preceding discussion paints a rather gloomy picture of relationship initiation for insecure individuals. However, it is essential to understand that <u>none</u> of the differences between secure and insecure individuals that we described above reflect individual differences in social abilities. When the threat of rejection is reduced or eliminated during relationship initiation (e.g., in a one-time social interaction), insecure and secure individuals perceive the same level of acceptance from potential romantic partners (Cameron et al., 2010), use similar levels of warmth (Stinson et al., 2009), and are equally direct in their initiation tactics (Cameron et al., 2013). Taken together, this research suggests that insecure individuals are perfectly capable of detecting acceptance and behaving warmly and directly with potential romantic partners, but their fears of rejection motivate them to cautiously suppress these abilities. Thus, although we consistently observe in our research that secure and insecure individuals are just as likely to successfully form romantic relationships, we suspect that the road to relationship formation is more fraught with failed attempts, anxiety, and self-doubts for insecure than secure individuals.

However, it is possible that buffering insecure individuals against the threat of rejection, and thereby decreasing their use of self-protective behaviors, could smooth the path to relationship formation for insecure individuals. One promising intervention that has been identified is called *self-affirmation*, whereby participants write about an important personal value they hold (e.g., family) as a means of buffering the self against threats like rejection (for a review, see McQueen & Klein, 2006; see also Sherman & Cohen, 2006). In one longitudinal experiment, insecure participants who completed a one-time self-affirmation task in the lab experienced increases in their relational security and behaved more warmly during a social

interaction with a stranger up to eight weeks later (Stinson, Logel, Shepherd, & Zanna, 2011). This and other promising experimental research suggests that it is possible to buffer insecure individuals against the threat of rejection during relationship initiation, and that such buffering may have important benefits for their social experiences and feelings of relational value over time (e.g., Jaremka, Bunyan, Collins, & Sherman, 2011).

4. Relational Insecurity and Rejection in Ongoing Relationships

Relationally insecure partners are less likely to find happiness in their romantic bonds (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a/1996b), and are more likely to experience break-ups than their relationally secure counterparts (e.g., Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). Once again, self-fulfilling prophecy may be an important explanation for these outcomes, whereby relationally insecure partners cope with the threat of rejection in maladaptive ways that can undermine the quality of their romantic bonds.

As we described previously, relationally insecure individuals respond to the threat of rejection with self-protective motivations and behaviors aimed at minimizing the pain of rejection, should it occur. Unfortunately, as with relationship initiation, self-protective responses to the threat of rejection can backfire within ongoing romantic relationships and actually bring about the very rejection that one is trying to avoid (Murray, Griffin, Rose, & Bellavia, 2003). Such outcomes are especially likely to occur when people use self-protective strategies in the absence of a real threat of rejection (Murray et al., 2013). For example, because Ruby is relationally insecure and prone to aggression and hostility when she is upset (as we will detail shortly), Ethan's use of self-protective behaviors like emotional disengagement during conflict may successfully protect him from the emotional fall-out of Ruby's negative behavior. However,

because Ethan is relationally secure and remains open and vulnerable when he is upset, Ruby's use of self-protective behaviors like guilt-induction during conflict may backfire and push Ethan away (Overall, Girme, Lemay, & Hammond, 2014).

To illustrate the ways in which feelings of security or insecurity regulate relationship processes when the threat of rejection is present, consider a common situation within romantic relationships: Ethan comes home from work in a bad mood. A secure romantic partner who is confident of Ethan's love and positive regard will (correctly) attribute Ethan's bad mood to his hard day at the office and will work to build him up and brighten his mood. Such support may even be offered "invisibly," so that Ethan benefits from the social support without being aware the support is being given (e.g., Howland & Simpson, 2010). Such a subtle approach to social support increases closeness between romantic partners in part because it protects Ethan's feelings of autonomy and competence, two essential components of relationship quality (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). In turn, the added closeness would serve to reinforce the support-giver's relational security.

In the same situation, a relationally insecure partner like Ruby will assume that Ethan's grouchiness is a sign that his affection and commitment is waning (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes & Kusche, 2002). In turn, such perceived rejection can cause insecure partners to become hostile and aggressive towards their romantic partner (e.g., Collins, Ford, Guichard, & Allard, 2006; Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk, & Kang, 2010), perhaps because rejection causes people to ascribe hostile intentions to their loved one's ambiguous behavior (DeWall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009). So when Ruby perceives that Ethan is being grouchy and sullen, she will assume that he is trying to hurt her by ignoring her, because he knows how much his sulky silence bothers her. Therefore, she will fight his perceived relational

"fire" with fire of her own, and start criticizing him and rolling her eyes when he speaks, two hostile behaviors that are particularly damaging to intimacy within romantic relationships (e.g., Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998).

Sometimes, negative behaviors that communicate rejection to one's spouse can have a positive influence on relationship processes (e.g., Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009). Ruby's anger and criticism may sometimes motivate Ethan to "shape up" and pick up after himself more often, for example. A victim's rejection and a lack of forgiveness towards a chronic perpetrator can also decrease the prevalence of psychological and physical aggression within romantic relationships over time (McNulty, 2011). However, Ruby's hostile response to the rejection and hostility she (incorrectly) perceives from Ethan reflects an antagonistic, tit-for-tat style of conflict that is generally negative within relationships (Gottman et al., 1998). Hostility within marriage undermines marital quality over time, particularly wives' hostility and anger (Baron et al., 2007). Wives' hostility during conflicts effectively pushes their male partner away and undermines his commitment to the bond (Ayduk, Downey, Testa, Yen, & Shoda, 1999).

As with relationship initiation, psychologists have identified a number of promising methods for buffering insecure partners against the threat of rejection within their romantic bonds by targeting specific maladaptive ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. One intervention targets relationally-insecure partners' biased perception of their partner's love. Relationally insecure partners fail to appreciate the love and regard that they actually receive from their romantic partner, a bias that serves to exacerbate insecure partners' rejection concerns over time (Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001). One reason that insecure partners seem to overlook their partner's regard is because they fail to generalize from specific instances

of positive regard to a more global perception of their partner's love and affection (Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2007). For example, if Ruby complimented Ethan's cooking, his relational security would cause him to abstract a broader meaning from the compliment, leading him to perceive the praise as evidence of Ruby's love. Insecure partners do not naturally abstract global regard from specific, concrete compliments. Because insecure partners often experience and express emotional vulnerabilities within their romantic relationships, insecure partners come to believe that their romantic partners view them as insecure and needy (Lemay & Clark, 2008). Therefore, if Ethan is treating Ruby with kindness and expressing his fondness for her, or complimenting her appearance, insecure Ruby may conclude that Ethan's behaviors are not truly motivated by positive regard and love, but instead are motivated by his perception that she is delicate and in need of careful handling. In other words, Ethan is "just being nice." Unfortunately, such attributions only serve to exacerbate insecure partners' relational anxieties, and once again demonstrate the influence of self-fulfilling prophecy within romantic bonds.

Fortunately, insecure partners can be prompted to think like their secure counterparts. If insecure partners are subtly guided to reframe a specific compliment from their partner as reflecting their partner's global admiration, then insecure partners experience increases in relational security that are maintained over time (Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2010). Because they feel more secure, insecure partners actually behave better in their relationships in the weeks following the reframing task. In turn, their partners are happier and more committed to the relationship, which further supports the (formerly) insecure partner's ability to respond adaptively to rejection threats. Thus, simple psychological interventions to improve relational security can have "legs" beyond the lab through a recursive process that snowballs over time (e.g., Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

Fortunately, couples do not have to rely on interventions to enjoy similar improvements in relational security over time. Being loved by a romantic partner who has *positive illusions* about one's qualities, and thus perceives one's qualities in an idealized way, increases one's relational security over time (Murray, et al., 1996a), and also buffers couples against normative declines in satisfaction over time (Murray, Griffin, Derrick, Harris, Aloni, & Leder, 2011). One way that these transformations may occur is via the process of *partner buffering*, whereby one partner will subtly regulate the emotions and behavior of the insecure partner in the relationship (Simpson & Overall, 2014).

Why would this buffering be necessary? Relationally insecure partners become overwhelmed by their fears and anxieties when the threat of rejection is present within their romantic bonds. As such, they do not have the regulatory energy to engage in *accommodation*, whereby partners replace their self-interested motives with relationship- and partner-benefitting motives, and suppress hostile reactions to their partner's (real or perceived) bad behavior. Accommodation is essential to optimal relationship functioning, and increases trust and commitment within close relationships (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Therefore, insecure partners' inability to engage in accommodation in the face of rejection threats may underlie many of the bad behaviors and outcomes we described previously. For example, Ruby's hostile reaction to Ethan's bad mood at the end of a long work day reflects a failure to accommodate.

However, within the interdependent context of a romantic relationship, partners often help one another to regulate their emotions and behaviors in adaptive ways, and this includes helping an insecure partner to calm down when rejection threats come to the fore (Simpson & Overall, 2014). For example, when Ruby is feeling anxious about rejection and behaving in a

hostile and critical manner, Ethan will engage in positive accommodation behaviors to help her cool down and feel more secure: He might bite back a hostile retort, express high levels of love and affection, and comply with her wishes and needs. Each of these accommodation behaviors will soothe Ruby's rejection anxieties and thus downregulate (i.e., reduce) her distress and allow her to behave more constructively.

Furthermore, insecure partners may also compensate their partners for the costs of their over-reactions to rejection. In a daily-diary study of newlyweds, Murray and colleagues (2009) observed that an individual's feelings of inferiority to his or her partner (i.e., rejection concerns) on one day predicted increases in behaviors like cleaning up after one's partner, packing their lunch, and running errands on their behalf the next day. These type of *dependence-promoting* behaviors benefit the partner at the individual's own expense and also serve to make the individual more indispensable to the partner. In the daily-diary study, such dependence-promoting acts also increased the partner's commitment to the relationship. All partners, regardless of the level of relational insecurity, engage in dependence-promoting behaviors on days following acute rejection concerns. However, because insecure partners experience rejection concerns more often than secure partners, it is likely that insecure partners are more likely to use dependence-promoting behaviors as a method of buffering their partner against the costs of their own rejection concerns. In each of these ways – accommodation and the use of dependence-promoting behaviors – partners can regulate the costs of relational insecurity within their bond, and maintain their commitment to one another over time.

5. **Conclusions: Insights from Close Relationships Research for Coping with Rejection**

One of the questions we are asked most often in our undergraduate classes on close relationships is, "How can I avoid being rejected by a romantic partner?" Sometimes students are

concerned with avoiding infidelity, divorce, or conflict, but their concerns all reflect the fundamental human drive to avoid the pain of rejection. This drive is understandable. Rejection by a romantic partner can have devastating emotional and physical consequences, both in the short and long term. These consequences are especially worrisome for insecure individuals, whose history of rejection in their close relationships causes them to anxiously anticipate rejection and react strongly when rejection occurs. Unfortunately, completely avoiding rejection in romantic relationships is virtually impossible. The very same behaviors that open one up to the possibility of rejection – like pursuing a love interest or being vulnerable with a romantic partner – are also necessary to achieve the belongingness that is essential for one's well-being. Thus, as our discussion of self-fulfilling prophecy in this chapter illustrates, trying too hard to avoid rejection usually results in missed opportunities for connection, and even rejection.

So if it cannot be avoided completely, how can people cope with romantic rejection when it does occur? Learning about the science of close relationships by reading chapters like this one can provide important insight that allows individuals to understand their experiences of rejection within the broader context of their intimate bonds, and to learn and grow from those experiences (see Miller, 2012, for an accessible and engaging overview of the field). Some important insights from the literature on close relationships deserve special mention here. First, the statistics concerning the negative health correlates of divorce – perhaps the ultimate rejection within close relationships – can be quite frightening, especially given the fact that almost half of the population will experience divorce at one point in their lives. However, as any student of psychology will remember, even the best correlational research does not allow us to draw causal conclusions. It is possible that divorce causes negative health and mortality outcomes because the stress of martial rejection and loss undermine the functioning of essential cardiovascular,

endocrine, and immune systems (Uchino, Uno, & Holt-Lunstad, 1999). But it is also possible

that the social stigma that accompanies divorce (e.g., Booth & Amato, 1991; Gerstel, 1987), not

the divorce itself, is responsible for such negative health outcomes. Research has established that

social stigma concerning one's social identity (e.g., race, weight) can severely undermine

physical health and well-being (e.g., Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Major &

O'Brien, 2005), and the same ill-effects may result from the stigma of divorce. We hope that

future researchers will consider such mechanisms as they continue to explore the effects of

divorce on long-term health and survival.

Second, it is important to remember that the anticipated hurt of romantic rejection is

usually much greater than the actual hurt people experience following a break-up (Eastwick,

Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008). Humans possess a remarkably powerful

psychological immune system that allows them to rebound from even the most traumatic

experiences, yet people are remarkably unaware of its existence and function (Gilbert, Pinel,

Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). For example, avoiding negative rumination following a

romantic rejection and instead seeking to find meaning in the experience can buffer people

against some of the upset they might otherwise experience (e.g., Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007).

Finally, research tells us that not all of the outcomes of rejection are negative. Being rejected can

make people more perceptive to social cues connoting acceptance. For example, rejected

individuals are better able to detect whether a smile is genuine or faked compared to their non-

rejected counterparts (Bernstein, Young, Brown, Sacco, & Claypool, 2008). Rejection may also

fuel creativity by fostering feelings of uniqueness from the rejecting person or group (Kim,

Vincent, & Goncalo, 2013). Indeed, six years after a divorce, the vast majority of people report

that their divorce was a good thing (Heatherington, 2003). Although rejection is ultimately

unavoidable across the whole span of people's romantic lives, it can be an important learning

experience and opportunity for personal growth. So when rejection happens – and it will happen

in some form or another -- most people are able to pick up the "shattered glass" and keep on

walking.

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