# The Effects of Motivational Orientations on Regulating Others' Emotions in Close Relationships

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## Abstract

Approach and avoidance motivational orientations play a striking role within close relationships, with approach-oriented goals predicting increased positive affect and relationship satisfaction. As research suggests that motivational orientations influence individuals' ability to regulate their own emotions (i.e., intrapersonally), we posit that these motives may also moderate individuals' ability to regulate the emotions of others, thus affecting social outcomes. We hypothesize that individuals whose partners use more affect-bettering (versus affect-worsening) emotion regulation strategies will show improved relationship outcomes, with this link being strengthened in individuals high (rather than low) in approach motives. 37 romantic couples (74 participants) completed daily diary surveys for 10 days, with one partner reporting their use of affect-bettering and affect-worsening emotion regulation strategies and the other partner reporting their relationship outcomes. Preliminary results show that participants high in approach motives experienced significantly improved relationship outcomes in response to their partners' use of affect-bettering emotion regulation strategies. This has implications for extending our understanding of extrinsic emotion regulation strategies and approach-avoidance motives in the close relationships context.

## Introduction

Within our close relationships, we often find ourselves evaluating the current state of affairs, searching for clues as to how well (or terribly) things are going. Perhaps we hope that our partner will present us with a thoughtful surprise; conversely, we may watch to see if they are showing signs of disinterest or detachment. Motivated attention toward positive stimuli and away from negative stimuli are considered within the psychological study of approach and avoidance orientations, respectively (Elliot & Covington, 2001). These two motivational systems are thought to operate independently of one another, with approach orientations functioning via the "appetitive" Behavioral Activation System (BAS) and avoidance orientations via the "aversive" Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS; Gray, 1987). According to these models proposed by Gray, BAS seeks to activate behavior in the face of positive cues whereas BIS inhibits behavior in response to negative cues. Neurological research shows that BAS and BIS pathways activate different areas of the prefrontal cortex, suggesting that individuals possess both appetitive and aversive motivations (Sutton & Davidson, 1997). Additionally, an individual's inclination toward approach or avoidant orientation is thought to remain relatively stable over their lifetime (Elliot & Thrash, 2002).

Motivational orientations are thought to be predictive of outcomes in multiple domains of life. Within the realm of education, mindsets have been shown to play an important role in academic achievements—fixed orientations view intelligence as pre-determined and hinder personal academic success more so than growth orientations, which view intelligence as malleable and support academic success through the adoption of learning goals (Dweck, 1999; Robins & Pals, 2001). In regard to health, avoidance orientations and avoidance-framed goals have been linked to increased stress generation and lower subjective well-being (Elliot, Thrash, & Murayama, 2011). Research also suggests that motivational orientations are predictive of social outcomes within close relationships, with approach-framed social goals leading to more positive relationship outcomes than avoidance-framed goals (Gable, 2006; Gable & Impett, 2012). In line with these findings, the current study investigates an explanation for how these differences in close relationship outcomes may arise as a result of individuals' different motivational orientations.

## Motivational Orientations in Relationships

Approach-avoidance motivational systems play an important role within relationships, providing a means of social evaluation through the presence and absence of signals (Gable, 2015). In accordance with this perspective, individuals' relationship goals may be framed in either an approach-consistent manner (e.g., wanting to have a good anniversary dinner) or in an avoidance-consistent manner (e.g., not wanting to have a bad anniversary dinner). Interestingly, the cognitive framing of interpersonal goals has been shown to significantly correlate to individuals' perceived social outcomes: approach orientations positively predicted positive affect and relationship satisfaction, whereas avoidance orientations positively predicted negative affect and relationship dissatisfaction (Gable, 2006). These findings suggest that not only do motivational frameworks determine which external stimuli are catered to, they may significantly influence individuals' emotional and social well-being. Elliot, Gable, and Mapes (2006) consider the role of approach-avoidance motivations within the social context of close relationships, concluding that the adoption of a motivational orientation leads to the creation of like

minded goals. Social motives framed in an approach manner lead to increased salience of positive signals, whereas avoidance-framed motives increase the salience of negative signals (Gable, 2006). In turn, attending to these cues influences a person's cognitive appraisal of their relationship.

In light of these core distinctions, it is not surprising to learn that motivational orientations are highly predictive of social outcomes. A series of studies conducted by Gable (2006) found that individuals with higher approach motives and lower avoidance motives exhibited significantly more positive affective outcomes (e.g., less relationship anxiety, less loneliness, and more positive social attitudes). Participants' motivational orientations, framing-style of social goals, and qualities of social bonds were measured in order to assess the relationship between orientations and outcomes. Approach-oriented goals were consistently found to be associated with higher relationship satisfaction and positive social outcomes, while avoidance-oriented goals were predictive of less satisfaction and more negative social outcomes. Additionally, the adoption of approach and avoidance goals were not found to be mutually exclusive, suggesting that individuals may possess both approach- and avoidance-framed goals simultaneously. These findings provide substantial support for the premise that motivational orientations correlate with social outcomes.

## Motivational Orientations and Emotions

Whether a motive is framed from an approach or avoidant perspective also influences the spectrum of affective feedback; approach-framed goals generate cheerfulness-dejection emotions, as compared to avoidance-framed goals which elicit quiescence-agitation responses (Carver, 2004). Cognitive appraisals play a key role within this process as they ascribe meaning and relevance to an attended situation (Goldenberg, Halperin, Zomeren, & Gross, 2016). Thus, if a social goal is made cognizant via an approach-oriented mindset, an individual may expect to experience emotions ranging from cheerfulness to dejection rather than quiescence to agitation.

As motivational orientations influence our attention toward environmental cues, accompanying emotions arise which must also be managed. As defined by Gross (2008), emotion regulation involves the processes in which we attempt to control emotional (affective) experiences and expressions. Emotion regulation goals may seek to either increase or decrease an emotion, depending on its specific function within a given circumstance—for example, an individual's emotional response of fear may be subdued after the potential threat no longer poses any risk, or emotions of happiness may be inflated in order to express support toward a friend's good news (Gross, 1999).

Individuals' ability to regulate their own emotions has also been linked to approach and avoidance motivational orientations. In their study on motivational orientations in relation to emotional coping, Chasiotis, Wedderhoff, Rosman, and Mayer (2019) concluded that approach motives had significantly more positive effects on individuals' emotion regulation than did avoidance motives. Approach orientations were posited to increase individuals' perceived self-efficacy in facing a problem, thus enhancing their emotional-regulation and coping abilities.

Emotions are not an isolated phenomena but are multifaceted by nature and closely connected to our external environments. The consideration of social factors involved in emotion management leads us to the study of interpersonal emotion regulation, in which others are involved in the regulation of affect.

## Interpersonal Emotion Regulation

Interpersonal emotion regulation occurs when these affective regulatory processes occur between multiple persons, in which the regulator seeks to influence the emotions of another person, often in service of achieving a social goal (Netzer, Van Kleef, & Tamir, 2015). This may occur as individuals navigate their close relationships and seek to regulate the emotional state of a partner. Interpersonal emotion regulation processes follow two types of motives, or goals: hedonic motives and instrumental motives. Hedonic motives aim to increase positive and/or reduce negative emotions in partners, whereas instrumental motives prioritize the attainment of non-emotional goals (Netzer, Van Kleef, & Tamir, 2015). Research from Netzer and colleagues (2015) posit that when both hedonic and instrumental motives are present and conflict with one another, instrumental goals take precedence over hedonic ones.

Two distinct types of interpersonal emotion regulation exist: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic interpersonal regulation involves an individual's attempt to regulate their own personal affect via social interaction, whereas extrinsic interpersonal regulation describes an individual's attempt to regulate the emotions of another person (Zaki & Williams, 2013). Each of these may operate on a response independent or response dependent basis, with response dependent processes relying on specific feedback from the other person in order for emotion regulation to successfully occur (Zaki & Williams, 2013). As we are presently concerned with how participants regulate their romantic partners' emotions, rather than individuals' regulation of their own emotions, the current study will focus on extrinsic as opposed to intrinsic emotion regulation processes.

## Emotion Regulation Strategies

As proposed in the process model of emotion regulation (Gross & Thompson, 2007), Gross (2008) outlines different types of emotion regulation strategies such as situation selection, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation. Emotion regulation may occur via situation selection as a person acts in ways which a) increase their chances of being in a situation where preferred emotions are expected to arise, or b) decrease their chances of being in a situation where unpreferred emotions are expected to arise. This strategy is implemented before a situation occurs, in anticipation of the emotion-generative process. For example, a child may avoid their parents in anticipation of being scolded for a poor report card. The emotion regulation strategy of attentional deployment occurs without the modification of one's external situation, but instead via the strategic diversion of attention; common examples include rumination and distraction. The regulation strategy known as cognitive change includes a shift in the appraisal process of a situation in order to alter its emotional significance; this includes the process of reappraisal, where an individual re-interprets an event in order to modify their initial emotional response to said situation. Finally, there is the emotion regulation strategy of response modulation. Occurring at the end of the emotion-generative process, this strategy works by adjusting physiological, experiential, and behavioral responses of affective experiences. One well-known

example is expressive suppression, where an individual attempts to hide perceivable signs of emotional response (e.g., concealing anger felt toward your significant other). These strategies occur throughout the different phases of emotion generation, allowing multiple opportunities for emotion regulation to occur.

Motivational orientations provide a promising explanation for close relationship outcomes, giving subsequent reason to consider the potential mediating role of emotion regulation strategies. Emotion regulation has been established as a significant factor in close relationship outcomes (English, John, & Gross, 2013), with greater emotion dysregulation being shown to negatively influence relationship outcomes (Tani, Pascuzzi, & Raffagnino, 2015). Research from Chasiotis and colleagues (2019) suggests that approach-avoidance orientations significantly influence processes of intrapersonal emotion regulation, with approach orientations leading to improved intrapersonal coping and emotion regulation in comparison to avoidance orientations. Accordingly, we predict that individuals' interpersonal emotion regulation abilities may also show improvement when an approach orientation is adopted. For example, someone with an approach motivational orientation would be more willing to have a difficult yet necessary conversation with their partner, lessening relationship anxiety and increasing relationship satisfaction. Conversely, an avoidance-oriented individual would be less inclined to confront this contentious topic, creating higher relationship anxiety and decreased relationship satisfaction. As illustrated in this case, an individual's ability to regulate their partner's emotions may be influenced by their adoption of either an approach or avoidance motivational orientation, potentially leading to significant differences in relationship outcomes. We predict that correlative differences in relationship outcomes will arise due to orientation-based differences in the use of interpersonal emotion regulation strategies.

Many facets of interpersonal emotion regulation have yet to be investigated, as the majority of existing research focuses on how individuals regulate their own emotions (i.e., intrapersonally) rather than the emotions of others. The current study seeks to expand this area of research by investigating the effects of motivational orientations and extrinsic emotion regulation strategies upon close relationship outcomes.

## Hypotheses

1. Extrinsic emotion regulation strategies will affect relationship outcomes.
    a. Individuals whose partners use more affect-bettering emotion regulation strategies will have more positive relationship outcomes.
    b. Individuals whose partners use more affect-worsening emotion regulation strategies will have more negative relationship outcomes.
2. This link will be moderated by individuals' motivational orientation.
    a. Individuals high (rather than low) in approach motives whose partners use more affect-bettering strategies will experience improved relationship outcomes.

b. Individuals high (rather than low) in avoidance motives whose partners use more affect-worsening strategies will experience worsened relationship outcomes.

# Methods

## Design

This study featured a between-subjects design with the independent variable of interest being Partner A's use of extrinsic emotion regulation strategies and the measured dependent variable being Partner B's close relationship outcomes. Partner B's levels of approach and avoidance motivational orientations were also assessed as a mediating variable.

## Participants

41 couples (82 participants) were recruited via SONA. However, four couples (eight participants) were excluded. In two couples, one member did not consent, and in the other two couples, one member did not respond to any of the daily surveys. Thus, we had a total of 37 couples (74 participants). In order to be eligible to participate in the study, individuals were required to currently be in a monogamous romantic relationship of at least one month's duration with both partners agreeing to participate. Participants were self-selected and compensated either monetarily or with course credit for their time.

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 27 years ($M$ = 19.54, $SD$ = 1.59). Couples' relationship lengths ranged from 1 to 52 months, with a mean relationship duration of approximately 14 months ($M$ = 13.97, $SD$ = 14.44). 50% of participants identified as male and 47.3% as female, with 2% of individuals preferring not to disclose their gender identity. Of the 37 couples, 32 were heterosexual male-female relationships, 2 homosexual male-male relationships, 1 homosexual female-female relationship, and 2 unspecified. Participants' ethnic backgrounds consisted of 33.8% White/Caucasian, 29.7% Asian/Asian-American, 21.6% Hispanic/Latin American, 8.1% mixed ethnicity, and 6.8% other.

## Procedures and Measures

Participants and their romantic partner first attended an online meeting with researchers via Zoom. Upon their arrival to the meeting, participants were presented with a consent form and told that the purpose of the study was to better understand how people experience daily events in their romantic relationships. After reviewing the consent information, each participant completed the 30-minute preliminary survey via Qualtrics on their own separate device.

### Preliminary Measures

*Approach and avoidance motivational orientations in the social domain.* Participants responded to the Relationship Goals Questionnaire: Friendship Version from Elliot, Gable, and Mapes (2006), on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all true of me) to 5 (Very true of me). This scale assessed individuals' approach-avoidance social motivations via the measurement of friendship-approach goals (i.e., goals which focus on positive possibilities) and friendship-avoidance goals (i.e., goals which focus on negative possibilities). A sample item for friendship-approach goals is "I am trying to enhance the bonding and intimacy in my relationship", whereas a sample item for friendship-avoidance goals is "I am

trying to avoid getting embarrassed, betrayed, or hurt by my relationship." Higher scores on approach-goal items positively predicted relationship satisfaction, while higher scores on avoidance-goal items positively predicted loneliness. The scale for approach demonstrated high reliability (Approach: $\alpha$ = .86), while the scale for avoidance showed moderate reliability (Avoidance: $\alpha$ = .69).

### Daily Measures

Upon confirmation that their relationship meets all requirements for participation in the study, individuals from each couple were randomly assigned to either the Partner A or Partner B condition, where Partner A is the regulator and Partner B is being regulated. Next, participants completed daily diary surveys remotely via Qualtrics every night for ten consecutive days, with each survey taking participants approximately five minutes to complete. Participants received daily surveys respective to their assigned Partner A or B condition: Partner A daily surveys asked questions regarding participants' use of emotional regulation strategies within their relationship that day, whereas Partner B daily surveys focused on measuring participants' relationship outcomes. At the end of their final daily survey on Day 10, participants were debriefed, informed of the true purpose of the study, and compensated.

#### *Partner A.*

*Emotion regulation strategies.* Participants assigned to the Partner A condition responded to the RoOF scale (Gable, 2021), on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 3 (A lot). The RoOF scale measures individuals' implementation of both positive (affect-bettering) and negative (affect-worsening) emotion regulation strategies. A sample item of a positive strategy is "Today, I made or bought my partner something that they like." A sample item of a negative strategy is "Today, I did or said something unpleasant to change the mood." Higher scores indicated greater implementation of emotion regulation strategies with their romantic partner. High reliability was demonstrated for both affect-bettering and affect-worsening emotion regulation strategies (Affect-bettering: $\alpha$ = .89; Affect-worsening: $\alpha$ = .92).

#### *Partner B.*

*Relationship evaluation*. Participants reported daily evaluations of their relationship via a scale on relationship connectedness and security from Rempel, Ross, and Holmes (2001), on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much). A sample item for this scale is "Today, I felt that my partner was very trustworthy." Additionally, participants were asked to rate their relationship that day on a scale from 1 (Terrible) to 9 (Terrific). Higher scores on both of these measures indicated higher relationship satisfaction. The scale demonstrated high reliability for daily relationship outcomes ($\alpha$ = .90).

## Results

Two-level hierarchical linear model analyses were conducted to test our hypotheses that (1) Partner B's relationship outcomes are significantly influenced by Partner A's use of extrinsic emotion regulation strategies, and (2) this link is moderated by Partner B's motivational orientation. Partner B's approach and avoidance orientation scores were centered around the grand mean, and Partner A's extrinsic emotion regulation strategies were also centered around the grand mean. Level 1 analyzed Partner A's

emotion regulation strategies, while level 2 considered the motivational orientation of Partner B. The slopes, standard errors, and *t*-values of the main effects and interactions are demonstrated in Tables 1 and 2.

In testing Hypothesis 1a (individuals whose partners use more affect-bettering emotion regulation strategies will have more positive relationship outcomes), results showed that the main effect of affect-bettering strategies on relationship outcomes was not statistically significant, however it was trending in the predicted direction, $t(232) = 1.68$, $p = .09$. When all predictors are equal to 0, relationship outcomes are expected to be 4.29. Holding all predictors constant, relationship outcomes are expected to increase .25 units for every 1 unit increase in approach orientation.

In analyzing Hypothesis 2a (individuals high (rather than low)) in approach motives whose partners use more affect-bettering strategies will experience improved relationship outcomes), the interaction effect of Partner B's approach orientation and Partner A's use of affect-bettering strategies on Partner B's relationship outcomes was statistically significant, $t(232) = 2.16$, $p = .03$. This finding suggests that individuals high in approach motives are significantly influenced by their partner's use of affect-bettering emotion regulation strategies, thus leading to improved relationship outcomes. This supports our first hypothesized interaction (see Figure 1).

In testing Hypothesis 1b (individuals whose partners use more affect-worsening emotion regulation strategies will have more negative relationship outcomes), results showed that the main effect of affect-worsening strategies on relationship outcomes was not statistically significant, however it was trending in the predicted direction as well, $t(232) = -1.58$, $p = .12$. When all predictors are equal to 0, relationship outcomes are expected to be 4.30. Holding all predictors constant, relationship outcomes are expected to decrease .06 units for every 1 unit increase in avoidance orientation.

In analyzing Hypothesis 2b that individuals high (rather than low) in avoidance motives whose partners use more affect-worsening strategies will experience worsened relationship outcomes, the interaction effect of Partner B's avoidance orientation and Partner A's use of affect-worsening strategies on Partner B's relationship outcomes was not statistically significant, $t(232) = -.263$, $p = .79$. This suggests that relationship outcomes for individuals high in avoidance motives are not significantly influenced by their partner's use of affect-worsening emotion regulation strategies (see Figure 2).

## Discussion

The present study set out to determine how approach-avoidance motivational orientations and the use of extrinsic emotion regulation strategies between romantic partners influence close relationship outcomes. Our data showed significant effects in individuals high in approach goals whose partners used affect-bettering emotion regulation strategies—when their partner used more (versus less) daily affect-bettering strategies, individuals high in approach goals reported better daily relationship outcomes than those low in approach goals. This suggests that individuals high in approach motives are highly receptive to their partners' attempts to positively regulate their emotions, thus leading to improved social outcomes. In accordance with past research, this finding supports our proposed hypothesis that

emotion regulation strategies and motivational orientations are connected to close relationship outcomes.

There was no statistically significant difference in individuals' daily relationship outcomes for those low or high in avoidance motives based on their partner's use of affect-worsening emotion regulation strategies. This contradicts approach-avoidance literature, which posits that avoidance orientations are predictive of negative affect and relationship dissatisfaction. However, this non-significant finding may be due to our small sample size and subsequently reduced statistical power.

Individuals' sole use of affect-bettering and affect-worsening extrinsic emotion regulation strategies were not found to significantly influence their partners' relationship outcomes. This does not provide support for our hypotheses that affect-bettering and affect-worsening emotion regulation strategies would improve and worsen relationship outcomes (respectively). However, these results trending in their predicted directions suggest that we may see significant results in the future under increased statistical power.

Individuals' motivational orientations did not independently produce any significant main effects upon relationship outcomes. This contradicts previous approach-avoidance literature findings which suggest that motivational orientations are highly predictive of social outcomes. Again, it is likely that this finding is due to our underpowered preliminary design.

As many of our non-significant findings may be attributed to a lack of statistical power, it is important that we consider how to address this limitation moving forward. Subsequently, we will continue to recruit new participants during the upcoming months in order to increase our sample size and statistical power.

This study has important implications for future research, as it extends our understanding of extrinsic emotion regulation strategies and approach-avoidance motives in the close relationships context. Notably, our significant findings provide an empirical foundation for future studies seeking to understand how positive emotion regulation strategies and motivational orientations can improve relationship outcomes. Empirically-supported methods for improving close relationship outcomes may also have promising applications in applied psychological contexts, such as within clinical and counseling practices.

Moving forward, our current findings lead to the consideration of many interesting alternative research questions. Firstly, it would be beneficial to investigate whether these results hold true for populations outside of our current demographic of undergraduate students. For example, we may examine how extrinsic emotion regulation strategies influence relationship outcomes in long-term couples who have been together for many years, and how these interpersonal regulatory processes might differ from couples who have been together for only a short duration of time. With these questions in mind, our study's preliminary findings advocate for further research into this area.

# Appendix

## Table 1

*Approach Main Effect and Interaction Results on Relationship Outcomes*

| Fixed Effect | Coefficient | Standard error | *t*-ratio | Approx. *d.f.* | *p*-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 4.29 | 0.07 | 59.30 | 35 | <0.001 |
| Approach | 0.25 | 0.10 | 2.49 | 35 | 0.018 |
| Affect-bettering | 0.25 | 0.15 | 1.68 | 232 | 0.094 |
| Approach x Affect-Bettering | 0.33 | 0.15 | 2.16 | 232 | 0.032 |

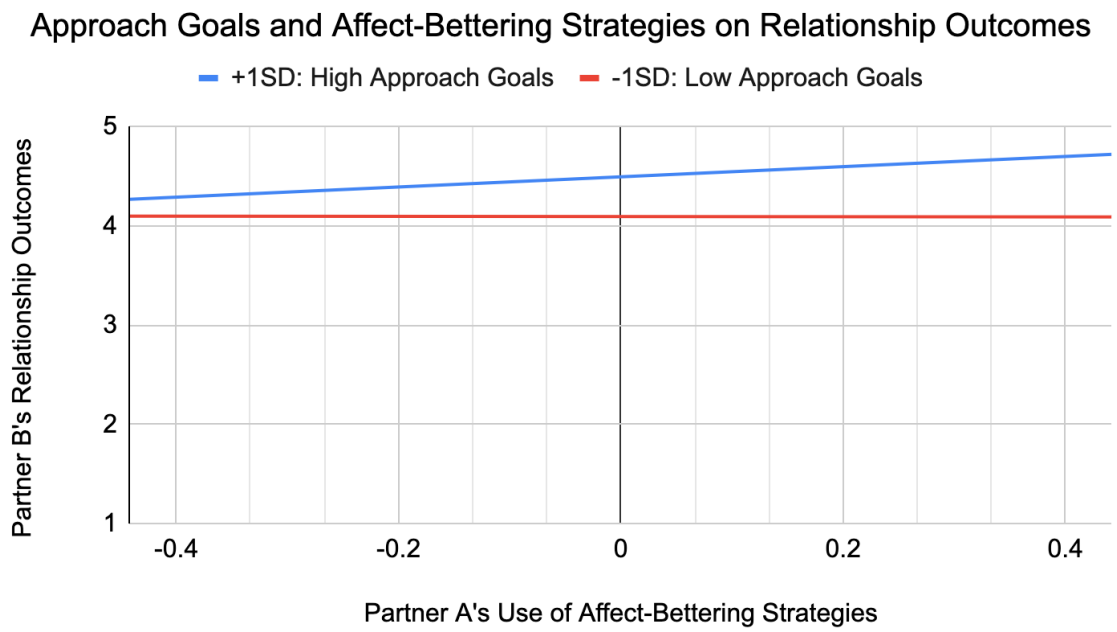
## Table 2

*Avoidance Main Effect and Interaction Results on Relationship Outcomes*

| Fixed Effect | Coefficient | Standard error | *t*-ratio | Approx. *d.f.* | *p*-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 4.30 | 0.08 | 54.64 | 35 | <0.001 |
| Avoidance | -0.06 | 0.11 | -0.53 | 35 | 0.597 |
| Affect-worsening | -0.34 | 0.22 | -1.58 | 232 | 0.115 |
| Avoidance x Affect-Worsening | -0.10 | 0.40 | -0.26 | 232 | 0.793 |

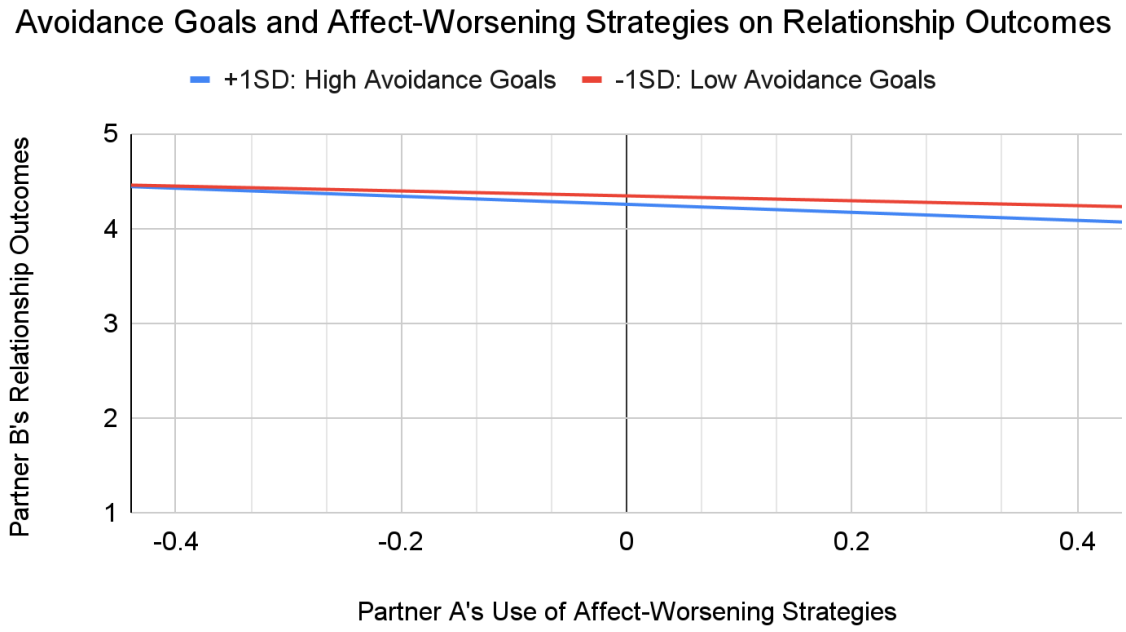
## Figure 1

*The Effect of Approach Goals and Affect-Bettering Strategies on Relationship Outcomes*




## Figure 2

*The Effect of Avoidance Goals and Affect-Worsening Strategies on Relationship Outcomes*



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