

**Thriving Through Relationships:
A Theoretical Perspective on the Importance of Social Connections**

Brooke C. Feeney

Carnegie Mellon University

Nancy L. Collins

University of California, Santa Barbara

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the scientific study of well-being and positive aspects of mental health (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006; Keyes, 2005, 2007; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Ryff & Singer, 1998, 2008; Seligman, 2002; see also the special issue on thriving in the *Journal of Social Issues*, 1998). Although theoretical models differ in how they conceptualize and define optimal well-being, they all agree that deep and meaningful close relationships play a vital role in human flourishing. A large body of empirical work supports this view, showing that people who are more socially integrated and who experience more supportive and rewarding relationships with others have better mental health, higher levels of subjective well-being, and lower rates of morbidity and mortality (for reviews, see Cohen, 2004; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Seeman, 2000; Uchino, 2009; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996).

Although prior research has shown that social relations can have a positive or harmful impact on indices of thriving, such as psychological well-being and physical health (e.g., Antonucci, 2001; August, Rook, & Newsom, 2007; Baltes & Mayer, 1999; Berkman, Glass,

Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Berkman & Syme, 1979; Newsom, Mahan, Rook, & Krause, 2008; Rook, Mavandadi, Sorkin, & Zettel, 2007; Ryff & Singer, 2001; Seeman, 2000; Sorkin & Rook, 2006), most existing work has considered social relations in terms of individuals' general reports of their marital status, social networks, social integration, and perceived social support, and has revealed associations between these indices and various indices of well-being (e.g., Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; 1991; Antonucci, Fuhrer, & Dartigues, 1997; Antonucci, Okorodudu, & Akiyama, 2002; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Fiori, Smith, & Antonucci, 2007; Helgeson, 1993; Hughes, Waite, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2004; Lang & Carstensen, 1994; Ryff, 1989; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). With few exceptions (e.g., Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993; Newsom et al., 2005), researchers have not considered specific dyadic behaviors or interaction patterns that are likely to underlie the effects of social relations on indices thriving. As a result, we know relatively little about the specific social interaction patterns and interpersonal behaviors through which relationships promote (or hinder) thriving in specific life contexts. This is surprising given that social interactions are likely to be the building blocks of successful interventions aimed at improving the health and well-being of individuals across the lifespan. The psychology literature is in need of theoretical models that describe interpersonal processes that have important implications for human thriving.

We have recently delineated a Theory of Thriving through Relationships in an effort to address this gap in the literature (Feeney & Collins, 2012), which we recapitulate here. Our goal was to provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the specific social interaction patterns that underlie the effects of relationships on indicators of thriving. In order to accomplish that goal, we addressed 3 specific questions: (1) What exactly does it mean to thrive?, (2) What

enables a person to thrive?, and (3) What are the pathways to thriving through relationships or connections with others? The chapter summarizes our theoretical perspective and is organized around these 3 questions.

What does it mean to thrive?

Life Contexts through which People Thrive

Part of addressing the question of what it means to thrive involves specifying the life contexts through which individuals are likely to thrive. Our theoretical perspective identifies two such contexts. A first context in which people may thrive involves the experience of life adversity. People thrive in this context when they're able to cope successfully with life's adversities. An important point that we emphasize here is that coping successfully with adversity involves not only being buffered from potentially severe consequences of adversity, but also emerging from the experience as a stronger or more knowledgeable person. It involves weathering storms in a way that enables growth; for example, as a result of learning from experiences, developing new coping mechanisms, obtaining a new understanding or perspective, etc. Because thriving connotes growth and development, we propose that thriving in the face of adversity involves more than simply returning to baseline or maintenance of the status quo. Thriving occurs when people are able to weather the storms of life in ways that enable them to grow from the experience (perhaps through heightened sense of mastery, increased self-regard, greater sense of purpose in life, deeper social bonds).

A second context through which people may thrive involves the experience of life opportunities for growth. People thrive when they are able to participate fully in life's opportunities when not facing adversity. This involves active engagement in opportunities for personal growth and development through work, play, socializing, learning, discovery, creating,

meaningful contributions, hobbies, etc. These opportunities may be viewed as positive challenges because they frequently involve goal strivings and pursuits that require time, effort, and concentration.

Indicators of Thriving through Adversity and Life Opportunities

Although there are many ways in which people may thrive, we have proposed that there are 10 core indicators of thriving through adversity and through life opportunities.

They all involve forms of learning, growth, and prosperity and are consistent with the definition of thriving as flourishing/growing, prospering, and progressing toward or realizing a goal despite or because of circumstances (www.merriam-webster.com). We propose that one must function well in both contexts (in adversity and in pursuing life opportunities) in order to be a fully thriving individual. Functioning in each context makes independent contributions to the prediction of these 10 core thriving outcomes:

Development of Skills/Talents. Just as rough seas make skillful sailors, one index of thriving through adversity is the development of skills/talents – or the elicitation of talents that had been dormant in non-adverse times. It sometimes takes adverse circumstances to motivate people to stretch their capacities in ways they wouldn't otherwise. Examples of skills that may be nurtured or developed through adversity include problem-solving skills, social/communication skills, and performance skills in a variety of life domains. The development of skills/talents is also an index of thriving through participation in life opportunities because people who fully engage in life (try new things, pursue meaningful goals, engage in social activities) are likely to strengthen existing skills & discover & cultivate new abilities. This is one form of self-expansion that should be a natural consequence of full engagement in life opportunities. For example, people who fully engage in their careers and

create/seize opportunities are likely to not only strengthen existing career-related skills but also develop new ones.

Discovery of self and life purpose. Another potential outcome of adversity that indicates thriving involves discovery of self and life purpose as individuals may learn a great deal about themselves through adversity. For example, they may learn about what matters most to them in life, about how strong they are with regard to weathering storms, and about the type of person they are (or want to be). People may also find their life's purpose in tragedy/adversity, so adversity may redirect lives in a meaningful way. Self-discovery is also an index of thriving through life opportunities because full engagement in life opportunities allows one to obtain a great deal of information about oneself – about one's likes, dislikes, strengths, weaknesses, untapped abilities, etc. For example, embracing an opportunity to try a new activity like fitness training might lead one to discover that he/she enjoys it, is good at it, and continue to pursue it (pursue a career in this area).

Accumulation of wisdom. The accumulation of wisdom is a third index of thriving through adversity as adverse life events often contain nuggets of information about life, people, and the events themselves. They provide exposure to experiences that one is unlikely to encounter in prosperous times. The extent to which one can glean insight from such experiences is an index of thriving through adversity. For ex, one may obtain wisdom about the psychology of bullies after having experienced this in one's peer group – or wisdom related to environmental hazards as a result of experiencing an illness caused by such hazards. The accumulation of wisdom is also an index of thriving through life opportunities because full engagement in life opportunities gives one a variety of experiences that include information (about life, people, events) that can only be obtained through actual experience. For example, this may include

insight about how to be an effective leader, how to motivate colleagues/employees, the needs of people in different age groups, the characteristics of life treasures (animals, nature). Many widely quoted life axioms were probably written as a result of wisdom gleaned from full participation in life (e.g., importance of a positive attitude, that one must show oneself friendly to have friends).

Development of core strength. A fourth index of thriving through adversity is the development of core strength. This involves the development of better coping capacities (or ability to cope with life stressors), greater resilience (or immunity to potentially harmful effects of stress), higher thresholds for the experience of stress, and better self-regulatory capacities. This may also involve the growth and development of core seeds of faith (regarding self, others, and spirituality). For example, people who have experienced a serious illness may no longer be bothered by less significant life stressors and may have found a peace within them that enables them to better handle even major life stressors. The development of core strength is also an index of thriving through engagement in life opportunities because embracing opportunities to experience a variety of aspects of life (including challenges and opportunities to engage with other socially) will (a) enable one to develop a strong support network, and this availability of others should contribute to the development of core strengths such as higher thresholds for experiencing stress and positive belief systems, and (b) enable one to experience a higher threshold for experiencing stress because they will be less likely to perceive novel events as threatening or stressors as beyond their ability to cope.

Positive view of oneself. A fifth index of thriving through adversity involves positive views of oneself in terms of self-esteem and perceived self-efficacy. This is an important index of thriving through adversity because adverse circumstances often involve some sort of attack on

one's sense of self. For example, illnesses, rejections, and failures are common life adversities that people face, and they can easily lead people to feel poorly about themselves. People who thrive through adversity not only are buffered from the negative effects of life adversity on self-esteem and self-efficacy, but they also develop a stronger, more positive and stable sense of self-esteem – perhaps as a result of the core strengths and skills they develop through the adverse experience. This is also an index of thriving through life opportunities because people who fully embrace life and its opportunities are likely to experience social, personal, and intellectual successes that should underlie a healthy self-esteem and self-efficacy. People are not truly thriving if they do not feel good about themselves, their abilities, and their potential. Fully engaging in life opportunities for growth is one important means by which this is accomplished.

Positive Views of Others. A sixth index of thriving through adversity and life opportunities involves positive views of oneself in terms of self-esteem & perceived self-efficacy. Because the nature of some life adversities involve harm inflicted by others (e.g., betrayal, infidelity, physical injuries, neglect, rejection), these circumstances are especially likely to erode one's views of others and positive motivation toward others. Individuals who are able to thrive through adversity do not allow particular adverse experiences to taint their overall view of their social network or humanity, or of their concern for the well-being and needs of others. Because life opportunities include many that are social in nature, and because full engagement in them includes interacting successfully with others, taking others' perspectives, and contributing to others' welfare, thriving through these life opportunities is also indexed by the development of positive views of others and a prosocial orientation toward others.

Movement toward full potential. Movement toward one's full potential is a seventh index of thriving. This involves living life to one's full potential, having and progressing toward

meaningful life goals, and showing zest/enthusiasm in living. This is action-oriented thriving that involves pursuing what one is capable of becoming, and is the self-actualization motive to realize one's full potential that has been discussed widely in the psychology literature. The ability to do this despite the adversity one faces is an important index of thriving through adversity. This is also the most obvious index of thriving through life opportunities because if an individual is fully engaged in life and embracing opportunities, then he/she should be progressing toward personally meaningful goals, showing zest/enthusiasm in living, following his/her perceived life purpose, and being genuine and true to him/herself. This is thriving in terms of being a fully productive and contributing citizen.

Relationship Growth/Prosperity. Relationship growth and prosperity is an eighth index of thriving through adversity and life opportunities. First, through adversity, people learn about who they can count on to be there for them. Adverse circumstances provide diagnostic contexts in which the behavior of relationship partners can be viewed as indicating their degree of caring and commitment. Viewing a partner as caring and committed should increase closeness/intimacy, satisfaction, attachment security, reduce conflict, and contribute to the long-term stability of a relationship – all indices of a thriving relationship. Having strong ties with social network members is an important indicator of thriving. Also, because reputations can be built and characters shown by the way people deal with adversity, relationship growth in terms of respect from others and positive relations with others is another index of thriving in this life context. Relationship growth and prosperity is also an index of thriving through life opportunities because full engagement involves creating bonds and connecting with others socially and emotionally. If people are connecting in the social aspects of their lives, then they should experience greater relationship satisfaction, commitment, trust, intimacy, and stability,

which are indicators of a healthy and prosperous relationship. Engagement in life opportunities should also enhance the quality of relationships by providing opportunities for capitalization within the relationship (celebrating life successes).

Psychological health. Thriving through adversity is also indexed by psychological health and well-being. This includes happiness and life satisfaction, as well as a lack of psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, & hostility. People who cope with adversity well by not dwelling on or ruminating about negative circumstances and who experience thriving in the ways already described should also thrive in terms of mental health. Positive mental health also includes a special appreciation for the good aspects of life that may be taken for granted if people never experienced adversity. Psychological health is also an index of thriving through life opportunities because first, over the long term, people are most likely to regret the things in life that they didn't do when they had the opportunity. Thus, people who fully engage in life opportunities are less likely to have regrets, and this should contribute to good psychological health. Second, people who fully engage in life opportunities are more likely to feel a sense of personal accomplishment, which should prevent feelings of inadequacy, depression, and anxiety.

Physical health. Physical health is an important index of thriving through adversity because stress and adverse life events frequently take a toll on physical health. Although the nature of some adverse life experiences involves physical illnesses, thriving people do not experience additional negative health effects as a result of negative coping strategies – such as ruminating or unhealthy lifestyle behaviors. The health of thriving individuals is buffered from the negative effects of stress, perhaps because these people have a higher threshold for

experiencing stress and do not allow the stress to take over their lives. Thriving people have more personal and interpersonal resources for coping with adversity in a healthy way.

Physical health is also an index of thriving through life opportunities because active engagement in life opportunities should increase one's social network over time, which is likely to provide resources that are health protective. Also, because variables representing the opposite of engaging in life opportunities (such as loneliness and social isolation) have been linked with poor physical health outcomes, engaging in life opportunities should have health benefits that provide an index of thriving in this context. Full engagement in life opportunities also should contribute to physical health through increases in physical activity and mental stimulation, and by helping people to maintain a healthy energy balance.

What Enables a Person to Thrive through Adversity and Life Opportunities?

Relationships are fundamental to the experience of thriving (and promote thriving) by serving two important support functions that correspond to the two life contexts through which people may potentially thrive. One function is the provision of support for thriving in the face of adversity. The other function is the provision of support for thriving through full participation in life opportunities when not facing adversity. The specification of these functions are rooted in the attachment theoretical propositions (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1988) that all individuals enter the world with propensities to seek proximity to close others in times of stress (an attachment system), to explore the environment (an exploration system), and to support the attachment and exploration behavior of close others (a caregiving system). This theory of thriving through relationships uses attachment theory as a launching point for a new and innovative perspective on thriving and the interpersonal processes through which relationships promote thriving. These relational support functions also are rooted in other psychological

theories such as self-determination theory (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000), lifespan theories of positive well-being (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 1998); interdependence theory (e.g., Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), the broaden and build theory of positive emotions (e.g., Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002), theories regarding positive processes in relationships (e.g., Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Gable, Reis, & Impett, & Asher, 2004; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009), and theoretical models of intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988). This perspective is novel in its identification of two relational *processes* that work together to promote thriving, and in its identification of mediators of core thriving outcomes, which has not been the focus of prior theoretical work.

Support for thriving through adversity. One important function that close relationships serve is to support thriving through adversity, not only by buffering partners from the negative effects of stress, but also by helping them to emerge from the stressor in a way that enables them to flourish either because of or despite their circumstances. This idea of flourishing through adversity is consistent with prior work on post-traumatic growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004) and personal benefit-finding when facing chronic illness (e.g., Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Carver & Antoni, 2004; Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Updegraff, Taylor, Kemeny, & Wyatt, 2002) and on the development of resilience in the face of adversity (Aldwin, Sutton, & Lachman, 1996; Carver, 1998; Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010). However, these processes have not been considered in a relational context; no prior perspectives have specified or investigated how relationships facilitate the process of growth through adversity. Nor has the support of growth through adversity been a focus of theoretical or empirical work in the social support literature, which has focused on stress-buffering effects of

social support. TTR emphasizes that relationships can serve an important function of not simply helping people return to baseline when they face adversity, but helping them to thrive by exceeding prior baseline levels of functioning.

In prior work, we have referred to the support of a relationship partner in times of adversity as the provision of a *safe haven* based on attachment theory's notion of a safe haven (Bowlby, 1988), which functions to support behavior that involves "coming in" to the relationship for comfort, reassurance, protection, and assistance in times of stress (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Collins, 2004). Although the provision of a safe haven is part of what is necessary in times of adversity, this term does not fully capture the *promotion of flourishing or thriving* function of relational support in times of adversity. During adversity, relationship partners may promote thriving by helping the partner to renew or rebuild the self through the adversity. A useful metaphor is that houses destroyed by storms are frequently rebuilt into homes that are better able to withstand similar storms in the future. So too are people able to emerge from adverse circumstances stronger than they were before with the support of relationship partners who fortify and assist them in the rebuilding. In this sense, relationship partners can provide a source of strength, in addition to a refuge, in adverse circumstances. TTR refers to this relational support function that involves strengthening/fortifying as well as comforting/protecting by providing a safe haven in times of adversity as *Source of Strength (SOS) Support*. This support function not only assists an individual in dealing with a stressor, but it *promotes thriving through the stressor*. The promotion of thriving through adversity is what differentiates this support function from others that have been considered in the psychology literature.

How does SOS support promote thriving through adversity? What is the nature of this support function? First, it is important to emphasize that the SOS support function must be enacted on a foundation of safe haven support. The provision of a safe haven (or refuge) involves providing safety and protection from danger or trouble, as well as relief of the burdens that one experiences during times of adversity (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Collins & Feeney, 2000). Relationship partners can provide this function by accepting the partner's dependency needs in times of stress (Feeney, 2007), providing emotional comfort and reassurance (physical and/or verbal), providing instrumental aid with regard to alleviating the adverse circumstances, and shielding/defending the partner from negative forces related to the stressor. For example, a relationship partner may provide a refuge or safe haven to a partner who has been blindsided by friendship betrayal by accepting the partner's expressions of distress and need for support, offering comfort to the partner, seeking information from others that may help the partner understand why the betrayal occurred, and by defending/protecting the partner's reputation from negative repercussions of the betrayal.

On this foundation, the SOS function of support promotes thriving through adversity (instead of just coping with adversity) by assisting a partner in rebuilding after an adverse experience. One way that support-providers may do this involves *fortification*, or assisting in the development of a partner's strengths and talents in times of adversity. Relationship partners may do this by recognizing, nourishing, and encouraging the latent abilities relevant to coping with the adversity that partners might possess. They may point out strengths and abilities that partners already have but may not recognize or know that they have (i.e., helping the partner learn about the self through the adversity), or they may recognize a strength/ability that is needed for successful coping with the adversity and assist the partner in attaining it. This involves helping

the partner to get "fit" for dealing with the adversity. For example, a relationship partner may fortify an especially shy friend who is being taken advantage of at work by increasing his/her self-confidence, coaching him/her in ways of interacting with colleagues, helping him/her develop communication and social skills, and providing opportunities for practicing the skills that are being developed. This type of support fortifies the recipient in a way that is likely to promote thriving through the adversity: The recipient is likely not only to effectively stop the adverse events that are occurring at work, but also to use his/her new skills to reach new heights in his/her career.

Fortifying a partner to have the strength and skills to overcome adversity is only part of the function of Source of Strength Support. A related and necessary function involves actively motivating/assisting the partner in using one's strengths (once developed and noticed) to problem-solve, deal with the adversity in a positive manner, and rebuild after adversity. This involves actively *assisting in the actual reconstruction process* once the partner has been fortified with the strength to rebuild. It involves motivating/assisting a partner who has been "knocked down" to get back up, stay in the game, and use their newfound strengths to implement new approaches to scoring that take into account the negative forces and opponents identified through the adverse experience. This aspect of the SOS support function also involves the motivation of positive coping with adversity by encouraging the partner not to dwell on negative circumstances or ruminate on negative aspects of the situation that cannot be changed -- and by preventing the partner from reacting to the adversity in behaviorally destructive ways. For example, an individual who begins coping with the loss of a job by feeling helpless and untalented, by ruminating on the negative aspects of the events that occurred at work, and by staying in bed all day, is likely to benefit from having a relationship partner who not only helps

to nurture his/her strengths and talents, but who also encourages and assists him/her to use those strengths to cope in a positive manner (e.g., to apply for jobs, make a career change, go back to school).

Doing this successfully involves a cognitive redefining of the adversity -- viewing and using the adverse circumstances as stepping stones for positive change -- and assisting in this process is another function of SOS support. This involves *helping to reframe the adverse situation* so that it does not seem as threatening or insurmountable as it may have initially seemed. Relationship partners may do this by helping one's partner to view the adversity in a positive light or to find benefits in the adverse experience. For example, relationship partners may facilitate the viewing of adversity as an experience that may lead to the development of latent strengths and capacities, the identification of life purpose, the redirection of one's life in a meaningful way, or the development of wisdom about the adverse circumstance. This redefinition of adversity should enable individuals to approach the adversity in a way that will promote thriving. For example, getting an important manuscript that is central to one's career rejected after putting a great deal of time and effort into it would be a life adversity that can be enormously disheartening to an academic. Viewing the rejection as an indicator of a lack of ability, a lack of the field's interest in one's work, or the end of one's career would be detrimental to positive coping and thus to the possibility of thriving through adversity. In this context, a relationship partner may provide the cognitive reframing aspects of SOS support by putting the adversity in perspective (e.g., by pointing out the high rejection rate for the journal and other leading researchers who have received similar rejections) and by redefining it in such a way (e.g., as an opportunity to learn from mistakes) that the individual is motivated to stay in the game and continue progressing toward important career goals.

Support for thriving through life opportunities. Another important function that close relationships serve is to provide support for thriving by fully participating in life opportunities for growth in the absence of adversity. In the absence of adversity, supportive relationships can help people thrive by promoting engagement in life opportunities for growth, thereby enabling people to enhance their positive well-being by broadening and building resources (Bowlby, 1982; 1988; Fredrickson, 2001; 2005; 2006) and finding purpose and meaning in life (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Although most research in the social support literature concerns support in times of stress, TTR emphasizes that support in the absence of adversity is equally important for thriving. This theoretical view is that (a) people must fully embrace life and its opportunities in order to achieve optimal happiness, health, and well-being, and (b) close relationships are integral in this process and underlie one's ability to embrace life opportunities.

In prior work, we have referred to the support of a relationship partner's exploration behavior as the provision of a *secure base* (e.g., Bowlby, 1988; Feeney, 2004, 2007) based on attachment theory's notion of a secure base, which functions to support behavior that involves "going out" from the relationship for autonomous exploration in the environment (Bowlby, 1988; see also Crowell, Treboux, Gao, Fyffe, Pan, & Waters, 2002; Waters & Cummings, 2000). Although the provision of a secure base is part of what is necessary to promote engagement in life opportunities, this term does not fully capture what we mean by the support of thriving through life opportunities as it is narrowly focused on one particular type of life opportunity -- novel, exploration behavior -- and because it emphasizes a "waiting" role (Bowlby, 1982; Feeney, 2004). In the absence of adversity, relationship partners may promote thriving by supporting the partner's engagement in a variety of life opportunities for growth (both novel/exploratory and non-novel/non-exploratory) including participation in hobbies, fitness

regimens, social events, recreation, as well as opportunities to learn, discover, and accomplish goals. The *promotion of thriving* through life opportunities (versus the simple promotion of exploration behavior) requires a more active role on the part of a support-provider or relationship partner.

A useful metaphor is that, in order to lift off, rockets or spacecraft must have a supportive launch-pad, which consists of (a) structures that provide services to the vehicle before the launch and (b) connective structures that have gas, power, and communication links to the launch vehicle. Most rockets need stable support for a brief period of time after ignition while the engines ramp up and stabilize at full thrust and this is often accomplished by the use of bolts to connect the launch vehicle to the pad (which explode when the vehicle is stable and ready to fly). Similarly, TTR posits that close relationship partners function as launching pads in the pursuit of life opportunities by providing necessary service and connective functions that promote thriving in this context. TTR refers to this relational support function that involves the support of full engagement in life opportunities (exploratory and non-exploratory) in non-adverse times as *Relational Catalyst (RC) Support* because relationship partners may act as springboards or launch pads for thriving through engagement in life opportunities. This support function not only assists an individual in engaging in life opportunities, but it *promotes thriving through the life opportunities*, which is what differentiates this support function from others that have been considered in the psychology literature. RC support represents a distinctive support function because it occurs in a specific life context (regarding pursuits of life opportunities for growth), because it involves unique forms of behavior that are provided in response to a partner's behavior surrounding life opportunities, and because it is posited to make independent contributions to the prediction of core thriving outcomes, above and beyond contributions made by SOS support.

How does RC support promote thriving through life opportunities for growth? What is the nature of this support function? First, *motivating the creating and seizing of life opportunities for growth* is a key function of Relational Catalyst Support. This involves encouraging and nurturing a desire to create, pursue or take advantage of life opportunities and includes behaviors such as instilling confidence in one's partner (e.g., communicating confidence in or complimenting the partner's abilities), expressing enthusiasm regarding the pursuit of life opportunities, and encouraging the partner to challenge or extend himself/herself and grow as an individual (e.g., leave one's comfort zone to try challenging as well as familiar activities). This category of behaviors also involves communicating the potential benefits of creating/pursuing life opportunities, encouraging a focus on living in the present (instead of the past), and providing encouragement to embrace even small life opportunities that may be stepping stones to bigger ones. Because opportunities are not always provided by chance, the encouragement to take initiative in creating one's own opportunities is an important part of motivating the pursuit of life opportunities.

Doing this successfully involves the provision of *perceptual assistance in the viewing of life opportunities*, which is another function of RC support. This involves assisting the partner in viewing life opportunities as positive challenges and not as threats to be avoided (Blascovich, 2008a). A major impediment to full engagement in life opportunities is likely to begin with the recipient's perception of them. That is, if an opportunity is viewed as too daunting or difficult to attain, as a threat to security, as something that could result in failure, or as fearful because it involves change, then the recipient will be unlikely to risk pursuing it. Relationship partners can assist in reducing or alleviating negative views of life opportunities by encouraging the partner to focus on the positive aspects of opportunities instead of being paralyzed at the thought of the

difficulty in opportunities, by instilling feelings of security (by being unconditionally accepting and consistently available when needed, Feeney, 2007), and by communicating that even failures can lead to growth and subsequent opportunities. Perceptual assistance also includes helping a partner to recognize opportunities, as many opportunities are missed because they are not obvious, because they are so plentiful that they are not recognized as opportunities, because the recipient is distracted or not being attentive/observant to opportunities, because the opportunities may not look as expected (e.g., not as big or small as expected, involving a great deal of work), or because opportunities do not typically appear with a list of benefits attached. Individuals may also become so focused on lost opportunities (a closed door) that they fail to see new ones (a newly opened door). Partners who function as relational catalysts help their partners to see and positively evaluate opportunities before they have passed.

A third function of Relational Catalyst support is to *facilitate preparation for full engagement in life opportunities* by providing preparatory assistance in the development of skills/talents, plans, and resources for approaching opportunities. This includes behaviors such as encouraging the development of necessary skills related to opportunities/goals one would like to pursue (and giving necessary space to do so), providing instrumental or informational assistance in attaining necessary resources, praising/complimenting preparation efforts, accommodating plans/strategies for pursuing goals, providing direct teaching/instruction or feedback if one has relevant expertise for doing so, encouraging the partner to perform to his/her capabilities (and to challenge oneself to stretch his/her capabilities), encouraging the setting of attainable goals (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003), and communicating that one values the preparation efforts. Relationship partners may also see something "special" in their

partner that others cannot yet see and nurture its development (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009).

The final function of RC support is to *provide the launch pad function during a partner's actual engagement in life opportunities for growth*. Part of this function involves the provision of a secure base (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1988) during the seizing of life opportunities (extended to apply to both novel/exploratory and non-novel/non-exploratory opportunities). In prior work, we have identified three core features of a secure base (Feeney & Thrush, 2010), which we extend to apply to supporting the seizing of any type of life opportunity for growth. First, a secure base supports full engagement in life opportunities by providing continued encouragement during the engagement. This includes communicating confidence in the partner's abilities, communicating enthusiasm for the activities, complimenting/praising the partner's progress, and celebrating accomplishments (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004) -- all of which facilitate engagement in life opportunities. Second, a secure base is not unnecessarily interfering, as the primary function of a base is a waiting one (Bowlby, 1988). Unnecessary interference includes behaviors such as providing support that is not needed or wanted; taking over and controlling a partner's exploration activity; becoming emotionally over-involved (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986; Coyne, Wortman, & Lehman, 1988); being too directive, forceful, or dominating in support attempts; or impeding the accomplishment of a goal/activity. Interfering behavior discourages engagement in life opportunities and disrupts performance because it communicates negative messages to the recipient (e.g., that he/she is not capable or competent), and it undermines concentration and confidence (Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Thrush, 2010). Non-interference involves backing away to allow the partner to launch and employ his or her talents. Third, a secure base is available in the event that the base is needed while the partner

is engaging in life opportunities. This is the connective function of Relational Catalyst support that ties the rocket to the launch pad, and it is important because individuals who are confident in the availability of their base do not have to cling to that base to the extent that individuals who lack such confidence do (Feeney, 2007). Availability includes behaviors such as assisting in removing obstacles and responding to needs as they arise, providing protection against threats, and staying connected to the partner and his/her world (e.g., his/her interests, choices, social network, and feelings; Gottman & Gottman, 2008).

The other part of this function that is particularly important for the promotion of thriving through engagement in life opportunities involves assisting in tune-ups and adjustments (e.g., in perceptions, skills, and strategies) that may be necessary during and after engagement in life opportunities for growth. Just as a coach reviews plays with athletes to determine what did and did not work as planned and makes necessary adjustments, so too can relationship partners serve a similar function in promoting thriving through engagement in life opportunities for growth. This can occur through initiation of discussions about the opportunities and facilitating the adjustments that must be made. This supports thriving by increasing the likelihood that partners think about and learn from their experiences and that each successive expedition is strengthened by building on the one before.

Importance of responsiveness and sensitivity. Our theoretical perspective also emphasizes that neither of these support functions will promote thriving unless they are delivered both responsively and sensitively. First, being *responsive* involves providing the type and amount of support that is dictated by the situation and by the partner's needs (Cutrona, 1990; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Lehman & Hemphill, 1990). It involves increasing support efforts in response to increases in the partner's

distress/need, and decreasing support efforts in the absence of need (Collins & Feeney, 2005; Collins et al., 2008; Feeney & Collins, 2001). Thus, responsive support-providers flexibly respond to needs and adjust their own behavior in response to the contingencies of the situation. Second, being *sensitive* involves responding to needs in such a way that the partner feels understood, validated, and cared for (Burlinson, 1994, 2009; Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988). This is accomplished by offering support in a way that expresses generous intentions, protects the partner's self-esteem, acknowledges the partner's feelings and needs, conveys acceptance of the partner (and his/her vulnerabilities), and respects the partner's point of view (Collins et al., 2008).

Thus, the degree to which support behavior is responsive depends on the *type and amount* of support given, and the degree to which it is sensitive depends on the *manner* in which the support is provided. In order for a relationship partner to provide appropriate Source of Strength or Relational Catalyst support, he/she must show both responsiveness and sensitivity in delivering the support behaviors by taking cues from and allowing interventions to be paced by the support-receiver, attending to the details of the recipient's verbal and non-verbal signals, interpreting the recipient's signals and behaviors correctly, discovering what response is most appropriate, responding promptly and appropriately, and monitoring the effects of his/her behavior on the recipient and modifying it accordingly (Bowlby, 1988).

There are, of course, many ways in which relationship partners may be insensitive and unresponsive in both life contexts. This is because being sensitive and responsive is not always easy (Rini & Dunkel Schetter, 2010), and even well-intended support efforts may have unintended negative consequences (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Collins et al., 2010; Coyne, Wortman, & Lehman, 1988; Dunkel-Schetter, Blasband, Feinstein, & Herbert, 1992; Gleason,

Iida, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008; Rini, Dunkel-Schetter, Hobel, Glynn, & Sandman, 2006). For example, support-providers may offer support in a way that makes the recipient feel weak, needy, or inadequate; that induces guilt or indebtedness; that makes the partner feel like a burden; that minimizes or discounts the partner's problem; or that blames or criticizes the partner for his or her misfortune. Unresponsive and insensitive support behaviors undermine thriving because they promote either overdependence or underdependence in relationship partners: Overdependence represents a means of clinging to a person whose availability and acceptance is perceived to be uncertain (inconsistently responsive support-providers), or to a person who provides support when it is not needed (compulsively over-involved support-providers). Underdependence (defensive self-reliance) represents a means of coping with a support environment in which partners have been insensitive to, and unaccepting of, dependency needs (consistently neglectful/disengaged or negative/demeaning support-providers). Optimal interdependence occurs when relationship partners support thriving by providing consistently sensitive and responsive SOS and RC support.

What are the Pathways to Thriving through Relationships?

Our theory of thriving through relationships posits that life adversity and life opportunities for growth make independent contributions to the thriving described above through two different interpersonal processes involving Source of Strength and Relational Catalyst support (see Figure 1). Each process occurs in a different life context, involves different support functions, results in unique immediate outcomes, and thus promotes long-term thriving through different mediators. Because each process makes independent contributions to thriving outcomes, *both* SOS *and* RC support (delivered sensitively and responsively) are necessary for thriving.

Source of Strength Processes for Promoting Thriving

As depicted in the top portion of Figure 1, this interpersonal process is set into motion with an individual's experience of life adversity. The experience of adversity can motivate SOS support from a close relationship partner through two possible pathways: (1) Adversity should lead an individual to feel/express distress and desire proximity to and support from a close relationship partner/support-provider (path a), and the expressions of distress and proximity/support-seeking behaviors should motivate the relationship partner to provide SOS support (path b). This is consistent with theory and research indicating that support-seeking behavior increases in response to stressful or threatening events (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Collins & Feeney, 2000, 2005; Collins, Kane, Guichard, & Ford, 2011), and that partners' support efforts increase in response to expressions of distress or need (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney, Cassidy, & Ramos-Marcuse, 2008; Feeney & Collins, 2001; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). (2) Alternatively, just the knowledge that an individual is experiencing an adverse event should be enough to motivate SOS support from a sensitive and responsive relationship partner, without the individual having to explicitly seek or express a need for support (path c). Sensitive and responsive relationship partners are likely to know when the individual is distressed (or to know when a particular situation is likely to cause distress) and provide support proactively, spontaneously, and sometimes subtly or outside of the recipient's awareness (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000; Howland & Simpson, 2010). Moreover, the recipient's response to adversity and a partner's SOS support provision should have reciprocal influences and be linked in complementary ways (path d). Evidence for complementary links between support-seeking and support-giving behaviors has been obtained in observational, daily

diary, and experimental studies (Collins & Feeney, 2000, 2005; Feeney, Cassidy, & Ramos-Marcus, 2008; Feeney & Collins, 2001; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992).

In order for any support-provision to be effective, it must be evaluated positively by the recipient. Having a partner who provides SOS support during times of adversity should result in the recipient perceiving that the partner's behavior was supportive and caring (path e). This is consistent with the concept of "perceived partner responsiveness," which is the belief that a relationship partner has both attended to and reacted supportively to core defining features of the self (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004), and that one has been understood, validated, and cared for (Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Perceptions of support should be grounded in actual features of the partner's behavior (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Lakey, Orehek, Hain, & VanVleet, 2010), and SOS support that is sensitive and responsive to needs should be perceived as such. This is consistent with research showing that perceptions of support are predictable from actual features of the support-provider's behavior (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Collins & Feeney, 2000; 2004b; Cutrona, 1990; 1996; Cutrona et al., 1990; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1987; Fincham & Bradbury, 1990; Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986; Lehman & Hemphill, 1990; Pierce et al., 1997).

In the next stage of the model, perceptions of partner responsiveness in receiving SOS support should predict immediate outcomes (path f) that are unique mediators of the link to thriving through SOS support (path g). These immediate outcomes are expected to temporally precede the core thriving outcomes, which develop over time and represent long-term outcomes. Immediate outcomes that are likely to be unique consequences of receiving SOS support include (a) increased feelings of hope/optimism, peace, forgiveness, and gratitude; (b) decreased or

alleviated feelings of fear, stress/distress, anxiety, depression, shame, and anger; (c) felt security, which involves a feeling of safety from threats (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Sroufe & Waters, 1977); (d) positive coping (improved coping strategies and greater perceived ability to cope), (e) problem resolution (alleviation of the problem or reduction of the severity of the problem), (f) reduced physiological threat (cardiovascular, cortisol, and immune function/reactivity), which occurs when individuals evaluate their resources as being outweighed by situational task demands (Blascovich, 2008) and physiological hardiness, which buffers the physical effects of stress on the body (Contrada, 1989; Solcova & Sykora, 1995; Woodard, 2004), and (g) relationship variables including trust in one's partner (a state of trust in a partner's caring and commitment [Murray, 2005; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Murray et al., 2005] and beliefs that seeking support from the partner and showing vulnerability is beneficial and met with compassionate responses) and feelings of emotional closeness as a result of feeling understood, validated, and cared for (Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Although these proposed links have not been tested with regard to SOS support, there is evidence indicating that acts of caring from a partner can result in immediate increases in relationship perceptions of feeling loved, valued, accepted, and happy in one's relationship (Collins & Feeney, 2005; Guichard & Collins, 2007; Kane, McCall, Collins, & Blascovich, 2010; Jaremka, Kane, Guichard, Ford, & Collins, 2010), increases in positive mood (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Guichard & Collins, 2007), increases in feeling calm and secure (Jaremka, Kane, Guichard, Ford, & Collins, 2010; Simpson et al., 1992), decreases in depression and anger (Cutrona, 1986; Winstead & Derlega, 1985), decreases in anxiety (Kane et al., 2010), and facilitation of problem resolution (e.g., Lakey & Heller, 1988; Winstead et al., 1992). Also in support of the proposed links, research has shown that cardiovascular reactivity is buffered in

individuals who experience a stressor in the presence of a close, non-evaluative support provider relative to individuals who experience the stressor alone, with a stranger, or with an evaluative other (e.g., Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, & Kelsey, 1991; Edens, Larkin, & Abel, 1992; Fontana, Diegman, & Villeneuve, 1998; Kamarck, Manuck, & Jennings, 1990; Snydersmith & Cacioppo, 1992), whereas negative and unsupportive interactions predict slower recovery (Fritz, Nagurney, & Helgeson, 2003). In addition, soothing touch or close physical contact with a close relationship partner during a stressful task has been shown to decrease heart rate and blood pressure (e.g., Ditzman, Neumann, Bodenmann, van Dawans, Turner, Ehlert, & Heinrichs, 2007; Fishman, Turkheimer, & DeGood, 1995; Grewen, Anderson, Girdler, & Light, 2003; Lynch, Thomas, Pasketwitz, Katchar, & Weir, 1977; Wihitcher & Fisher, 1979) and to attenuate neural activation in brain regions associated with emotional and behavioral responses to threat (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006).

In the next stage of the model (path g), the immediate outcomes of receiving SOS support should, over many interactions, make independent contributions to the prediction of the 10 indicators of long-term thriving. This theoretical perspective considers immediate outcomes of social support interactions to be important because they have a cumulative impact on long-term outcomes. Because even daily hassles have cumulative, long-term effects that can equal that of major life events (DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988), it is important to examine the immediate solutions to life's adversities and determine the ways in which immediate solutions may, over time, have serious long-term consequences for thriving. If an individual experiences increased hope/optimism, reduced fear/anxiety, reduced autonomic reactivity to stress, increased feelings of security, positive coping, problem resolution, and increased trust/closeness after interacting with a close relationship partner when distressed, then these positive support

experiences should, over time, contribute to thriving in terms of improved relationship growth/prosperity, enhanced prospects for good mental and physical health, positive views of oneself (increased self-esteem and perceived self-efficacy), positive orientation toward others (a general perception of an effective social support network and helpfulness to others), accumulation of wisdom, the development of core strength, the development of skills/talents, the discovery of self and life purpose, and movement toward one's full potential.

The predictions regarding positive emotions are consistent with research linking hope/optimism [Carver & Scheier, 2009; Rasmussen, Scheier, & Greenhouse, 2009; Scheier & Carver, 1992; Snyder, Irving, & Anderson, 1991], forgiveness [McCullough, 2000; Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001; Worthington, & Scherer, 2004], amusement [Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000; Giuliani, McRae, & Gross, 2008; Martin, 2002] gratitude [Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lambert, Clark, Durtshi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010] and positive affect [Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli, & Muraven 2007] to outcomes that indicate thriving, and with Fredrickson's (2009) research identifying 3:1 as the ideal happiness ratio; that is, for every one negative life experience, three positive experiences are needed to offset the negative experience's impact and to thrive. TTR predicts that through SOS support, partners assist in restoring this positive affective balance. Additional support for path g comes from theory and research indicating links between coping (e.g., Carver, 2011; Denson, Spanovic, Miller, & Denson, 2009; Park, 1998), felt security (e.g., Cawthorpe, West, & Wilkes, 2004; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005, 2007), anger, anxiety, and depression (e.g., Kubzansky, Cole, Kawachi, Vokonas, & Sparrow, 2006; Sirois, & Burg, 2003; Smith et al., 2008), shame (e.g., Dickerson, Gruenewald, & Kemeny, 2004; Dickerson, Kemeny, Aziz, Kim, & Fahey, 2004), stress (e.g., Cohen, Tyrrell, &

Smith, 1991; Cohen & Williamson, 1991; DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988; Herbert & Cohen, 1993), physiological threat responses (e.g., Blascovich, 2008a), and relationship trust/closeness (e.g., Cramer & Donachie, 1999; Schneider, Konijn, Righetti, & Rusbult, 2011) with health and well-being outcomes relevant to thriving.

Relational Catalyst Processes for Promoting Thriving

As depicted in the bottom portion of Figure 1, the interpersonal process surrounding RC support is set into motion with an individual's experience of a life opportunity. The experience of a potential life opportunity can motivate RC support from a close relationship partner through two possible pathways: (1) A potential life opportunity should lead an individual to desire to pursue it, perceive it as worthwhile, engage in behavior directed toward pursuit of the opportunity, and seek opportunity-relevant support as needed (path h), and this behavior should motivate the relationship partner to provide RC support (path i). This is consistent with research showing that people's perceptions of life opportunities influence the way they approach them (Feeney, 2004), and that spouse secure base behavior (availability, encouragement, and non-intrusiveness) facilitates exploration behavior and goal strivings, whereas intrusive/interfering behaviors inhibit exploration (Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Thrush, 2010). (2) Alternatively, just the knowledge of a partner's potential life opportunity should be enough to motivate RC support from a sensitive and responsive relationship partner, without the individual having to explicitly seek or express a need for support (path k). Sensitive and responsive relationship partners are likely to be emotionally connected to one another, aware of happenings in each other's lives, and thus aware of a partner's potential opportunities (and potential reactions to it) and provide RC support proactively and spontaneously. Moreover, the recipient's response to a life opportunity and a partner's RC support provision should have reciprocal influences and be linked in

complementary ways (path j). Evidence for this link comes from observational work showing complementary links between exploration behavior (e.g., goal striving, pursuit of challenging tasks) and a partner's secure base support provision (e.g., Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Thrush, 2010).

Next, the recipient's subjective perception of the partner's behavior should depend on the degree to which the partner effectively provides RC support (path l). Having a partner who provides RC support for life opportunities should result in the recipient perceiving that the partner's behavior was supportive and caring (path e). Support behaviors that sensitively encourage the support-receiver in his/her pursuit of life opportunities (e.g., exploration behavior, goal attainment, and in the pursuit of personally-rewarding challenges), as well as behaviors that convey availability if needed and that are appropriately contingent on the needs of the recipient in this life context should be perceived by the support-receiver as supportive. In contrast, insensitive and unresponsive RC support behaviors (e.g., intrusive, interfering, discouraging, neglecting/unavailable) should be viewed as unsupportive. Some preliminary evidence for this link in the context of life opportunities was provided in laboratory investigations of relationship partners' discussions of goal strivings (Feeney, 2004) and engagement in a challenging exploration activity (Feeney & Thrush, 2010).

In the next stage of the model, perceptions of partner responsiveness in receiving RC support should predict immediate outcomes (path m) that are unique mediators of the link to long-term thriving through RC support (path n). Because SOS and RC support serves different functions, it is expected that RC support will have important immediate consequences that are distinct from those afforded by SOS support. Immediate outcomes that are likely to be unique consequences of receiving RC support include (a) felt enthusiasm/excitement regarding the

pursuit of the life opportunity; (b) release from concerns associated with the engagement in life opportunities, including feelings of guilt for spending time away from family or using family resources and concerns about failure; (c) increased confidence/empowerment, state self-esteem (sense of personal worth), perceived competency, and self-efficacy (power to produce desired effects) (d) successful engagement in, and persistence at, the life opportunity, (e) openness to experience (i.e., inclination to try new things, openness to new ideas) and curiosity, (f) healthy physiological response (a challenge versus threat physiological response pattern, which occurs when individuals evaluate their resources as outweighing their situational task demands Blascovich, 2008a, 2008b), and (g) relationship variables including views that the partner believes in one's abilities, immediate self-expansion in terms of including one's partner in the self (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Ketay, Riela, & Aron, 2008), a healthy interdependence with relationship partners (versus overdependence or underdependence), and beliefs that sharing one's experiences pursuing life opportunities with the partner (capitalizing on the experiences) and seeking support for them is beneficial (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004).

Instilling excitement and enthusiasm for the pursuit of life opportunities and releasing a partner from feelings of guilt or anxiety are primary functions of RC support that should assist the individual in making challenge versus threat appraisals (Blascovich, 2008a, 2008b) regarding the life opportunity and increase the likelihood of one pursuing the opportunity. Also, because the provision of RC support involves instilling confidence and courage in one's partner to accept challenges and pursue opportunities, assisting the partner in viewing life opportunities as positive challenges and not as threats, and providing preparatory assistance in the development of skills/talents, feelings of increased confidence, empowerment, and state self-esteem should be a

natural consequence of receiving this type of support -- as well as full engagement, persistence, and success in the pursuit of life opportunities. Openness to experience and curiosity should also be a natural consequence of having a relationship partner who provides RC support by encouraging the pursuit of novel activities and challenging the individual to extend himself/herself and seek personal growth. Although openness to experience is typically viewed as a stable personality trait (McCrae, 1987; McCrae & John, 1992), TTR proposes that openness to experience can increase as a result of receiving RC support.

Although these proposed links have not been tested directly with regard to RC support as conceptualized here, there is evidence indicating that components of RC support are associated with recipients' greater persistence at and better performance on a laboratory exploration activity (Feeney & Thrush, 2010), increases in state self-esteem after engaging in exploration (Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Thrush, 2010), greater autonomous functioning with regard to personal goal-strivings (e.g., confident exploration of independent goals, Feeney, 2007), and greater perceived self-efficacy, perceived ability to achieve one's goals, self-confidence, and perceived capability (Feeney, 2004; 2007). Initial research in this area also has shown that responsive secure base support provision is linked with greater expressed enthusiasm during exploration activities and increases in positive mood after engaging in exploration activities (Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Thrush, 2010), with greater perceptions that exploration is enjoyable and that one is smart and competent to engage in it (Feeney & Thrush, 2010), and with a greater willingness to engage in exploration (Feeney, 2007).

In the next stage of the model (path n), the immediate outcomes of receiving RC support should (over many interactions) make independent contributions to the prediction of the 10 indicators of long-term thriving. If an individual experiences felt enthusiasm/excitement, a

release from guilt and failure concerns, increased confidence/empowerment/self-esteem, successful engagement in life opportunities, openness to experience and curiosity, adaptive physiological responses to challenge, and healthy interdependence after interacting with a close relationship partner regarding life opportunities, then these support experiences should, over time, make important contributions to thriving (relationship growth/prosperity, good mental and physical health, positive views of oneself, positive orientation toward others, accumulation of wisdom, the development of core strength, the development of skills/talents, the discovery of self and life purpose, and movement toward one's full potential) above and beyond contributions made by SOS processes.

These predictions are consistent with theory and research that links positive emotions such as excitement and enthusiasm to psychological and physical health (Cohen & Pressman, 2006; Fredrickson, 2000; Pressman & Cohen, 2005; Pressman et al., 2009). Additional support for path n comes from theory and research showing links between guilt (Quiles & Bybee, 1997), concerns about failure and self-handicapping (e.g., Deppe & Harackiewicz, 1996; Hendrix & Hirt, 2009), increased confidence/empowerment (Molix & Bettencourt, 2010; Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1996; Ungar & Teram, 2000), seeking self-esteem (Crocker & Park, 2004), goal engagement/pursuit (Brunstein, Schultheiss, & Maier, 1999; Little, Salmela-Aro, & Phillips, 2007; Sheldon et al., 2010), openness to experience (Yannick, 2009), curiosity (Kashdan, McKnight, Fincham, & Rose, 2011; Kashdan & Silvia, 2009), adaptive physiological responses to challenge (Blascovich, 2008a), and healthy interdependence (Feeney, 2007; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003) to outcomes relevant to thriving.

Thriving Influences on Future Responses to Life Adversities and Opportunities

Thriving individuals possess both personal and relationship fortitudes that should influence their reactions to future life adversities and future life opportunities. Thus, paths o and p in the theoretical model indicate that the long-term thriving outcomes of receiving both SOS and RC support should influence the recipient's future responses to life adversities and life opportunities. Individuals who are psychologically and physically healthy, experiencing relationship prosperity, possessing skills/talents and core strength, possessing wisdom and self-knowledge, moving toward their full potential, and holding positive views of oneself and others should experience, perceive, and approach life adversities and life opportunities in a more proactive and healthy manner than individuals who are not thriving. For example, they should perceive life adversities that arise as less threatening, more manageable and within their capacity to cope, and they should view life opportunities (goals, challenges) as important, attainable, and worth the effort and risk. Thus, when encountering these life experiences, thriving individuals should be less distressed by and physiologically reactive to stressors, they should have a greater desire to pursue opportunities for personal growth, and they should experience approach (versus avoidance) motivation in both life contexts (Carver, 2006; Elliot, 2008; Gable, 2006).

Although these ideas have not yet been tested directly, research has shown that individuals who perceive support to be available to them also view themselves as competent and as having a variety of positive attributes that are likely to help them deal with stress (Sarason, Pierce, Shearin, Sarason, Waltz, & Poppe, 1991). Thus, thriving individuals are less likely to appraise the demands of a situation as exceeding their resources to cope (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman et al., 1986), and they are likely to have a higher threshold for attachment system activation (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Bretherton, 1987). This idea is also consistent with research showing that individuals who have self-affirmational resources (people

who perceive themselves as having more abilities) are less reactive to stressors because their overall feelings of self-integrity rely less on the outcome of that particular stressor (e.g., Creswell, Welch, Taylor, Sherman, Gruenewald, & Mann, 2005; Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005; Murray, Bellavia, Feeney, Holmes, & Rose, 2001; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988).

SOS and RC Support within Specific and Multiple Relationships

This theoretical perspective predicts that some relationship partners will provide both SOS and RC support functions sensitively and responsively, whereas others will provide one support function well and the other support function poorly (or not at all), and yet others will provide neither support function. This is because the two support functions occur in two different life contexts and may have different implications for the support-provider's goals and needs. For example, Sarah may provide sensitive and responsive SOS support to Steve because having him "come into her" for SOS support is consistent with her relationship goal of keeping her partner nearby. However, Steve's pursuit of life opportunities may be a threat to this relationship goal; thus, Sarah may fail to provide RC support to Steve by discouraging him from engaging in this behavior. TTR predicts that people who have relationship partner(s) who provide at least one of these support functions will be healthier and happier than those who receive neither (as each makes an independent contribution to thriving). However, TTR emphasizes that individuals will not be fully thriving unless they receive both support functions within their relationships. The extent to which relationship partners provide responsive support in each context and the resulting effects on thriving is an area ripe for future research.

It is important to note that this theoretical perspective does not suggest that one particular close relationship (e.g., a romantic relationship) is necessary for thriving, or that one particular partner should be the only source of relational support. People may have different sources of

SOS or RC support (e.g., friends, siblings, spouse, parents, colleagues), and may benefit from having a network of responsive relationships that together serve these support functions (rather than expecting a single relationship to fulfill them all; DePaulo, 2006). Similarly, TTR does not argue that people cannot cope with adversity and embrace life's opportunities independently; nor does it suggest that close relationships are the only route to thriving. People can, and do, cope successfully with adversity and embrace opportunities without support from others. But TTR does propose that responsive relationships that provide the SOS and RC support functions provide the optimal environment for thriving and increase the chances that individuals will reach their full potential. This idea is consistent with research showing the benefits of a healthy dependence on others (see Feeney, 2007, for research on the dependency paradox).

Concluding Statement

Our goal has been to provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the importance of relationships (social connections) in the promotion of thriving. We believe that this perspective contributes to the literature by (1) providing a conceptualization of thriving and identifying core features of what it means to thrive, (2) identifying two major life contexts in which people may potentially thrive, and explaining how close relationships are fundamental to thriving in each context, (3) providing an integrative framework for considering how 2 support functions (SOS and RC) work together to promote thriving, (4) considering social support for thriving within a life context (i.e., engagement in life opportunities) that has been neglected in decades of research on social support, and (5) considering support for thriving in a context (i.e., dealing with adversity) that has historically focused on buffering negative effects instead of promoting positive ones. It is our hope that this framework will lead researchers to take a new look at social

support, and that it will facilitate the development of new programs of research on thriving through relationships.

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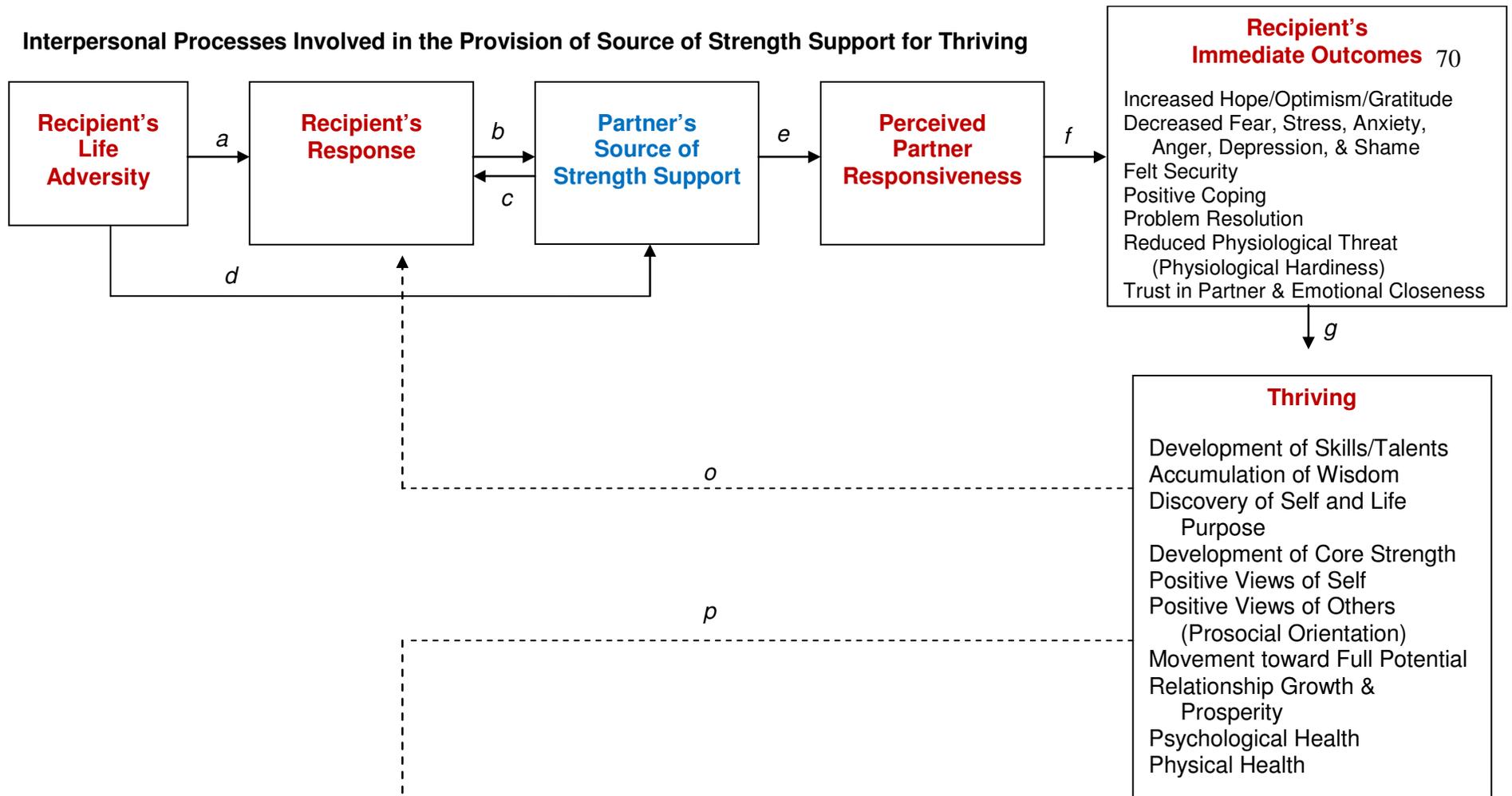
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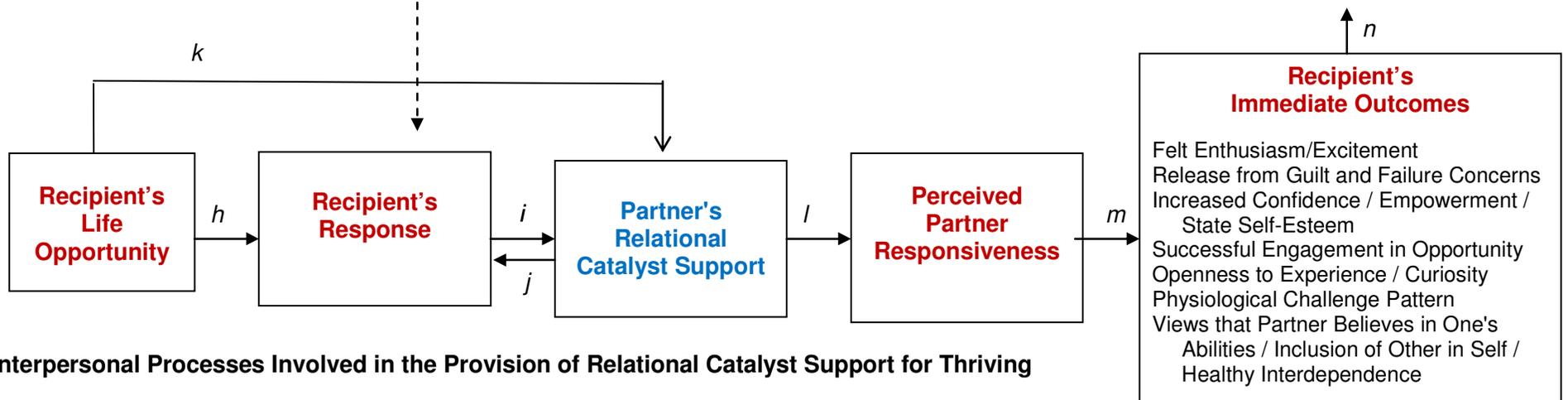
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Interpersonal Processes Involved in the Provision of Source of Strength Support for Thriving



Interpersonal Processes Involved in the Provision of Relational Catalyst Support for Thriving



Examples of social relationships include coworkers, distant relatives, and acquaintances. Commitment and interdependence are important interpersonal and psychological dimensions of a relationship that relate to social exchange theory. Interdependence refers to the relationship between a person's well-being and involvement in a particular relationship. A person will feel interdependence in a relationship when (1) satisfaction is high or the relationship meets important needs; (2) the alternatives are not good, meaning the person's needs couldn't be met without the relationship; or (3) investment in the relationship is high, meaning that resources might decrease or be lost without it. In this article, we present a model of thriving through relationships to provide a theoretical foundation for identifying the specific interpersonal processes that underlie the effects of close relationships on thriving. This model highlights two life contexts through which people may potentially thrive (coping successfully with life's adversities and actively pursuing life opportunities for growth and development), it proposes two relational support functions that are fundamental to the experience of thriving in each life context, and it identifies mediators through which relational support functions operate. The second important function of relationships is to support thriving in the absence of adversity by promoting full participation in life opportunities for exploration, growth, and personal achievement. Supportive relationships help people thrive in this context by enabling them to embrace and pursue opportunities that enhance positive well-being, broaden and build resources, and foster a sense of purpose and meaning in life. This type of support is referred to as relational catalyst (RC) support because support providers can serve as active catalysts for thriving in this context. A New Look at Social Support: A Theoretical Perspective on Thriving Through Relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2014; DOI: 10.1177/1088868314544222. Cite This Page