

THE ROLE OF RESPONSE ANTICIPATION IN HINDERING EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

An essential component of close, successful relationships is the feeling of being heard and understood by one's partner which cultivates intimacy. But is responsiveness limited to the expectation and fulfilment of gaining validation when an individual discloses any information to his/her partner? Current research has shown that responsiveness is the key to many of the important qualities that builds healthy and satisfying relationships. This article describes the response anticipation from an expressor (sender), and responder (receiver) point of view suggested by existing literature, and data. We analyse the evidence regarding following segments, first, responsiveness and intimacy, second, the minimum threshold of self-worth, and identity carried into the relationship, third, the influence of attachment on response anticipation, fourth, response anticipation and communication dynamics and fifth, antidote to lack of intimacy due to response anticipation that hinders emotional intimacy. The responses to these inquiries help shape a comprehensive understanding of responsiveness that can serve as a foundation for additional research.

Keywords: Responsiveness; self-worth; validation; response apprehension; intimacy

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Close personal relationships that are of a high quality contribute to one's mental and physical health, whilst those that are of a low quality are a source of stress and can be harmful to one's health and well-being (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Uchino et al., 1996). Beliefs about a romantic partner's responsiveness, or the perception that a partner understands, values, and supports significant aspects of the self, determines the quality of a relationship. The quality of a relationship is dependent on these perceptions, and expectations. People who feel a sense of closeness, satisfaction, and commitment to their romantic partnerships are more likely to regard their partners as responsive (Reis, et al., 2004). This study focuses on the anticipation of response i.e., how will my partner respond to something I want to share, and whether that response would be validating in the way I imagine or expect? Contrary to popular belief, that it is the responsibility of the partner to make their significant other feel safe each time they reach out, we suggest that it is limited to the romanticized idea of love. The people who seek validation when sharing something confide their thoughts and feelings in another person, which leads to fear of non-

reciprocation, distrust, judgment, and criticism (Reed, 2018). Therefore, this article explores the groundwork of responsiveness by focusing on sender (expresser), as well as receivers (responder) point of view highlighting the possibility of couples building and maintaining relationship dynamics that can get complicated based on response anticipations leading to misaligned communication and mis-defined expectations.

Responsiveness and intimacy

American Psychological association (APA) refers to responsiveness to the way in which people involved in an encounter pay attention to and respond positively to one another's needs, desires, and situations. The degree to which two people are responsive to one another depends on how well they understand one another's wants, needs, and goals in a given engagement. It manifests itself through verbal and nonverbal means. Numerous studies have found that responsiveness is strongly linked to feelings of liking, closeness, security, and commitment, making it a crucial component of healthy intimate relationships. Parental responsiveness, here understood as behavior that is attentive to the children's needs, is widely held to play a pivotal role in the

formation of the child's sense of safety and positive identity, according to developmental research. Therefore, responsiveness is a major element of intimacy and close relationships as it sends the underlying message of reassurances i.e., I see you, I hear you, I support you and I value you (Floyd, 2006) and you matter to me. Therefore, every time there is an overt expression of internal feelings of affection in any form within a romantic relationship, it creates an opportunity to build closeness and intimacy (Horan, & Booth, 2013; Gordon et al., 2012). It has also been concluded that affectionate messages enhance satisfaction, and commitment and is related to many positive aspects of close relationships (Horan & Booth, 2010).

Sue Johnson, 1998, the founder of Emotionally-Focused Therapy (EFT), claims that being responsive is one of the most important ways to know that a partner is there for their significant other. This sense of closeness does cultivate intimacy (Rimland, 2019). It is whether a partner is responsive to their significant others' emotions, interested in their personal world, and whatever they reach out for to you when they need their attention and participation. She describes engagement refers to the active involvement in the conversation which creates true connection. This can include actions like- curiosity, validating emotions, expressing empathy, and being present with the partner. These components do cultivate intimacy as also supported by other researchers (e.g., Reis, 1990). Therefore, responsiveness can motivate partners to lean in, be involved in ways that allow them to tune into each other's needs, thoughts, and emotions. Once, that is achieved, it can co-create an environment of safety, comfort, and support (Collins & Sroufe, 1999) which further helps in conflict management through better communication. There is a consensus among existing theory and research on responsiveness that individuals' responsiveness to their partners influences their own and their partners' perceptions of responsiveness in the relationship (Reis & Gable 2015).

Relationship partners who communicate through responsiveness, understanding, validation, and care for one another (Gable &

Reis, 2006) are kind and sensitive to the emotions of their partners, and they have a strong desire to ensure that their partners have a sense of being heard, cared for, cherished, and acknowledged. As a result, it encourages and fosters intimacy between people. However, Responsiveness isn't an easy phenomenon practiced in a relationship. It is attached with needs, expectations, attachment styles, and self-narratives which gives rise to response anticipations that obstructs intimacy and affectionate communication. Most of the feelings, emotions and thoughts are shared through a process of self-disclosure or showing up with vulnerability onto which people seek validation, reassurance, reciprocation and presence (Derlega et al., 1993; Villard, 1976). This pursuit of validation on self-disclosure becomes an issue when the partners response is what people start identifying with especially when it is not in alignment with their expectations and needs. Among these dangers are the possibility that the other person will misinterpret the display of affection (Villard & Whipple, 1976), that they will view it as inappropriate for the relationship, the context/situation, or other factors (Floyd & Morman, 2000), that their partner will violate their personal expectations (Floyd & Voloudakis, 1997), or will fail to reciprocate (Derlega et al., 1993). Relational partners run the risk of us being humiliated, hurt, or losing face if they share our secrets with people we don't know or like; if they avoid or stop liking us; if they ridicule, reject, or exploit us (Derlega et al., 1993). There's a chance the relationship will depreciate or end in the future. Developing intimacy entails looking inward and opening up to one's partner. And it is more than just mere self-disclosure. Not all intimate experiences encourage and evoke self-confrontation and personal progress, and disclosing parts of oneself that are familiar, comfortable, and most likely "good enough" hinders the development and growth of self, and relationship as a whole. The interpersonal aspect of the process, in particular the reaction an individual expects and receives from their spouse, is just as important as how one feels about what they are going to reveal (Schor, 2014). Studies have concluded (Peel, 2019),

that most of the participants need emotional reciprocity, validation, responsiveness, and reassurances, that would generate deeper connection and if not received led them to self-betrayal such as holding back needs, dishonest communication and letting hurtful behavior pass etc. Therefore, before we expect responsiveness, and rely on others for closeness, it is important to understand the baseline with which people even enter the relationship i.e., when people seek responsiveness in the moments of sharing, and expressing, the conditioning, needs, expectations, and values are the underlying motivation, which if not lived up to can lead to perceived relational threat, and triggers (Luerssen, 2017) which further results in response anticipation, that either obstructs or confines intimacy.

The presence of minimum Threshold before seeking intimacy of any form

It has been found that participants do share and express based on the perceived responses, and reciprocity achieved through affectionate gestures (e.g., Floyd & Burgoon, 1999). This means that Response anticipation can lead to self-protection goals if self-identity and self-worth is highly dependent on external sources. Partners who seek responses and love from their partners to fill the void through their significant others validation, reassurances, and emotional attending, can lead to anxious tendencies or other maladaptive coping strategies to deal with responses that didn't match their script/belief around relational rules of 'how it should/could be'. This makes people lose the opportunity to give, or receive honest love, and work upon building interdependence together. It is not just the nature of the expectations but the discrepancy between what is expected and within relationship experiences (reality) that determines the relationship satisfaction (Lemay & Venaglia, 2016), commitment, and future of the relationship. As Esther Perel quoted in one of her interviews (Shwartz, 2018), "We have gone up the Maslow ladder of needs, and now we are bringing our need for self-actualization to the marriage. We keep wanting more. We are asking from one person what once an entire village used to provide". It also decreases the

tolerance of needs going unmet or receiving love without distrust. The failure of significant others meeting these needs leads to feelings of neglect, abandonment, betrayal, and distrust.

As predicted by self-verification theory [Swann, 2012], one study found that receiving feedback from others that is in line with one's own self-understanding increases one's sense of being understood with positive affect (Campbell et al., 2006; Oishi et al., 2010). Therefore, it appears uncertain that a partner's affirming feedback would be positively viewed if it were much at odds with the recipient's own self-view (Reis & Gable, 2015). According to the research of Baumeister and Leary (1995), the desire to feel like one belongs somewhere is one of the most fundamental human needs. Giving emotional communication may be adaptive since it increases the chances of satisfying the urge to belong; nevertheless, it may be counterproductive in times of deprivation'. There are two scenarios in which this could occur. Once a person has received enough affection from another to feel comfortable, the act of giving affection to another person is more beneficial to one's well-being than getting affection from another person. Second, showing love to others may make me feel loved, which in turn raises my own self-esteem and satisfies my need for love even more. Therefore, giving affection with imbalance can create alter in the perception of meeting one's own minimal threshold of needs of affection such as I am loved if I love people harder (Hesse & Tian, 2019).

There are two types of intimacy, namely, self-validated intimacy, and other validated intimacy given by David Schnarch (Schor, 2014). The expectation of approval, empathy, validation, or reciprocal disclosure from one's partner is what is meant by "other-validated intimacy." This is what is frequently misunderstood for actual intimacy. When revealing, a person must maintain his or her own sense of identity and self-worth without expecting approval or reciprocity from the other. This is the foundation of self-validated intimacy i.e., the ability to preserve a strong sense of oneself even when people they care about want them to change. Sharing based on how a partner would react to it, i.e., if a partner doesn't share something significant to their

spouse because they might not validate them, this can lead to problems because it puts one's self-worth and self-identity at risk (Erikson, 1968). Reis et al. (2004) says that understanding, validation, and care are the three most important parts of responsiveness. Understanding means that the person giving support gets to know the person receiving support's core self (e.g., needs, wants, and weaknesses). Validation means that the person receiving support respects or values the person's view of himself or herself. Caring for means showing affection, warmth, and concern for the person receiving support's well-being. Therefore, to understand that partners reaction to what one shares have nothing to do with them and still able to validate oneself irrespective of the partners response, needs a strong sense of self. No amount of responsiveness can make an individual feel safe, until they know how to find validation, acceptance, and love within. This is not to mean that people must put up with a partner who is uncaring and lacking in empathy. The key is to learn how one feels about themselves shouldn't be determined by how their partners treat them. The absence of it can give rise to response anticipations that leads to concealing of one's own true self which encourages inhibitions to express, or share oneself which disrupts intimacy, and closeness. Similarly, when one shows up with vulnerability in hope to receive responses that displays approval, validation or love brings in intentional sharing that reflects their rejection of themselves as when the expectation isn't met, it leads to shame, guilt and difficult emotions. Therefore, it can be said that the goals of sharing leading to response, and goals expected when shared are inter-related. To have an alignment within a relationship it is important for one to be open to self-growth, and teamwork required to create interdependency and safety within the relationship

Response anticipation, and attachment style

Response Anticipation are highly impacted and guided from the childhood relationships with caregivers. Our mental model affects our conscious and unconscious assumptions, judgments, and emotions regarding the dependability, reliability, availability, and

responsiveness of attachment figures (Pietromonaco & Beck, 2015). In other words, our expectations in attachment relationships are based on our functioning model. It has been highlighted that the attachment figure and attachment relationship is based on three functions that must be accomplished by an attachment figure (Ainsworth, 1991). First, the person should feel the "proximity" at the time of need, second, they should be perceived as a "safe haven" and third the attachment figure should be viewed as "a secure base" (Obegi & Berant, 2009, p. 19). As described by Obegi & Berant (2009), secure base is where a relationship partner can provide a platform to obtain non-attachment related goals which leads to self-expansion which is also one of the most desired results of a healthy relationship and forming of strong foundation (Aron et al., 2004). Few studies highlight the prevalence of fear of rejection and abandonment by romantic partners in people with anxious attachment styles (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Attachments wounds of people when constantly reinjured in adult relationships, the focus can easily shift from safety to imbalance/insecurity which can lead to the desire to take control of the narrative by implying "rigid belief around relational rules" or "protective strategies" i.e., to feel in control, stable and balanced again. As attachment styles can create a chaotic sense of self, it can also have an impact on the way a person makes meaning of the event that can further influence their choices, actions, and quality of the relationship. Affectionate communication has also been positively associated with secure attachment style and its further impact on holistic well-being, highlighting total mental well-being (e.g., Dillow et al., 2014).

Due to the universal norm of reciprocity in close relationships, partners may project views about their own degrees of responsiveness onto their partners, essentially interpreting their partner as a reflection of their own actions or intentions (Debrot et al., 2012). Motivated bias also shows up in people's propensity to see signs of rejection and a lack of concern in their partners' mildly unfavorable or ambiguous behaviors (Murray et al., 2002), as well as in people who exhibit a high level of attachment avoidance and their propensity to see less

partner responsiveness when talking about a positive life event (Shallcross et al., 2011). Similarly, risk regulation model, explains the role of self-esteem in relationships. This model reasons out that the individuals with lower self-esteem have an activated self-protection goal and people with higher self-esteem have an activated promotion goal. Murray et al., (2006), state that people constantly struggle between these complex and opposing goals in romantic relationships. Promotion goals basically foster satisfying and fulfilling relationships and “preserve stable dependence” on them whereas self-protection goals are targeted to reduce the potential rejection risk which blocks the expression of emotional vulnerability to achieving a satisfying/fulfilling relationship. For maintaining this balance people develop a risk regulation system that observes and anticipates the signs of affection from partners and if positive, would choose promotion goals over self-protection goals. Individuals with positive self-esteem have a strong sense of self that also impacts the way they see their partners and make sense of their gestures which will consequentially be positive leading to promotional goals. Whereas people with lower self-esteem has a low sense of worth which makes it challenging for them to hold a strong sense of self that consequentially will also impact the way they maintain the balance between this complex phenomenon and rely on self-protection to provide them a buffer against a perceived pain and potential rejection (Luerssen et al., 2017). Many researchers stand in support of the impact of lower self-esteem and the use of self-protection strategies to alleviate the feeling of dependence., For example, insecure attachment people have been found to attach less relationship-enhancing attributions to the positive behavior of their partners (Collins et al., 2006) or doubt the positive regard their partner holds for them (Murray et al., 2001) and anticipates rejection at various levels from partners (Cameron et al., 2010). They have also been found to downplay partner support assuming them as less supportive (Collins & Feeney, 2004). Therefore, people with lower self-esteem find it challenging to build intimate and emotionally fulfilled relationships even if the relationship

provides them with an opportunity to build closeness (e.g., Gordon et al., 2012). Therefore, response anticipation can be hugely impacted because of attachment styles, as it can create misunderstandings, emotional masking, distance, and detachment.

Response Anticipation and Communication dynamics (relate, interact, and communicate with each other)

Responsiveness includes two components, how something is shared, and what is received as a response to that expression i.e., expressor, and the responder both are important part of the responsiveness dynamics in the relationship. Response anticipation from the expressor (sender) can come up in the form of self-protection such as, expressing through silence, contempt, stonewalling, or defensiveness, testing behavior, and protesting behavior. For example- expressing disappointment through anger, tantrums, or blaming because expressing through vulnerability invites emotional risk and response anticipation of rejection. Similarly, response anticipation from the responder ends can also come from insecure or secure base which in turn either generates emotional safety or unhealthy communication dynamics. For example- A partner shares having a bad day, and is feeling sad, the response of the partner as “you need to stop taking things so personally”, or the response such as “I am sorry you are going through a tough day, do you want to talk about it” (Menanno, 2021). Therefore, the attachment style can hinder the healthy dynamics, and underpinnings of responsiveness in the relationship. This can either create a vicious cycle, or give opportunity to repair, connect, and transform together.

In order to have a healthy relationship with someone, an individual must be self-aware and understand their own needs and that of the other person. However, negative response anticipation, or discrepancy between received, or expected response leads to conflicts, and futile conversations. Response anticipation can lead to holding back of real feelings, needs, wants, desires, settling for bare minimum, or negative interpretation of the relationship, as well as the partner. Therefore, response anticipation when not communicated, or

received properly can lead to conflicts based on their perception about self, other and the relationship.

Julie Menanno, psychotherapist and licensed family and marriage counsellor have illustrated the process of relationship trigger and how it leads to the response (Menanno, 2021) based on individuals attachment style. All relationships have threats which are referred to as relational threats and relationship trigger is a response to that threat. The transitional phases from trigger to response are marked as four internal experiences that leads to a response i.e., attachment fear, vulnerable emotions, self-belief, and protective feelings. It has been shared that relationship trigger is not because of the event but the meaning we make of that event. For example: *event-* my partner complained about the misunderstanding that occurred from my end, *meaning of the event-* it is my job to convince him to see that I am still worthy and to fix it without making him angry, *attachment fear-* I will be seen as worthless and non-deserving of his love, *vulnerable emotions-* fear, shame, *self-belief-* I need to prove that I am good enough by making him hear me out and fix this problem right away and *protective feelings-* sense of over-responsibility, frustration, overwhelmness, anxiety and then *response* which would vary from one attachment style to another. Therefore, the relationship trigger cycle is the process of making meaning of an event going through the internal experiences of emotions leading to a response. This cycle also corresponds with the risk regulation models self-protective goals, as people with lower self-esteem tries to minimize the perceived relational threat i.e., the risk of rejection (Luerssen et al., 2017), and that can lead to the confusion between emotional reactivity and emotional vulnerability.

One of the studies (Horan, & Booth 2013) also found the existence of deceptive affection in various participants' relationships. It concluded that the volunteers for the study were involved in the inauthentic expression of affection in the form of verbal and non-verbal cues. The reason for deceptive affection was mainly to withhold affection, avoid or manage conflicts, emotional management, or preserve relational stability. This argument has also been supported by

various researchers (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; DePaulo et al., 1996). However, Butterfield 2011 claimed the risks that come along with inauthentic/ deceptive expression of affection transmission between couples. He mentioned that it can alter the relationship quality, and satisfaction and cause conflicts if deception is detected. If deception goes unnoticed, it can cause the sender psychological discomfort. Thus, providing affection without the presence of that emotion is deceptive. Even though some researchers argue that it can still provide benefits, it is pivotal to highlight the failure of relationships due to inauthenticity in relationships. It can also alter the way people perceive and give affection, handle conflicts, or communicate their real feelings or thoughts.

Antidote to response anticipation

It is but natural to feel terrified when sharing, or expressing something that entails one's personal stories, share something that is important for them, or having tough conversations. This is further influenced by two things- conditioning/ response interpretation, and past downplaying of their feelings. On the other hand, it is natural to have expectation of responsiveness when sharing something personal whether mere self-disclosure, or from a space of vulnerability. However, having a stable yet malleable sense of one's identity is crucial for enjoying the unity that comes with a solid relationship; without it, one risks surrendering oneself for the sake of love (Erikson, 1968; Prager et al., 2013). Looking at response anticipation from expresser, as well as responders' point of view, it is important to understand the relationship dynamics that influence the communication patterns taking place within a couple such as, expressing disappointment from a defensive position, or responding from the position of anger and disregard can lead to sabotaging of intimacy, or expressing with openness, consideration and empathy can welcome the partner to respond from the same place and if not, it is the emotional risk one needs to be willing to take to set the tone of the relationship or else it can lead to unhealthy/unsafe relationships. Working as a couple together on knowing how to reach and respond to each other, it would establish long-

lasting and fulfilling relationships. As intimacy through responsiveness is achieved when couples feel most connected to their partner i.e., It's important for partners to feel heard and understood by one another; this means responding to their partners' feelings in a way that is constructive, reassuring, and promote intimacy or closeness. The expresser (speaker's) perception of being understood is bolstered by active listening, a communication strategy in which the listener restates the message in their own words to check for understanding (Weger et al., 2014). Recent studies have also found a connection between empathic accuracy (Elliot et al., 2011) and shared meaning in supportive communication (MacGeorge et al., 2014), that can improve both actual and perceived comprehension.

Therefore, to handle negative response anticipation it is vital for couples to co-create safe space by focusing on the patterns they portray in the relationship, and intentionally communicate with empathy, understanding and vulnerability while focusing on each other's attachment histories. Hence, learning to be responsive over reacting is a relational skill that needs to be learned as that influence the process of response anticipation, and communication processes especially during conflicts, or while bringing up a tough conversation.

Conclusion

Responsiveness can be understood as a transactional process that occurs between relationship partners. According to the hypothesis put forward by Reis and Shaver (1988), the formation of intimate relationships occurs as a result of an interpersonal process in which actors' reactions to partners impact partners' perceptions of actors' responsiveness. Importantly, Reis and Shaver hypothesize that the objectives, intentions, desires, and concerns

of both individuals in a romantic relationship both contribute to and result from responsiveness in the relationship. That is to say, people's goals and objectives influence their relationship behaviors, as well as how they interpret the behaviors of their partners, which, in turn, feedback to anticipate people's goals and motives. The formation of needs itself, and the way needs are communicated is based on, first, the relationship one has with themselves (Swann et al., 1994) which sets the stage of the relationship, and second, the way past adult or childhood relational memories have made one feel about having and communicating needs. Therefore, the need to connect, feel understood, belonged, and be validated is seen across most theories as to human needs for satisfying relationships (e.g., Reis & Patrick, 1996; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The meeting of these needs not only enhances romantic relationships but also contributes to personal emotional and psychological health (Patrick et al., 2007). However, understanding response anticipation from the self, and other standpoint in a couple, can help in understanding the ways it can show up in personal relationship for example, during emotional expression, setting expectations, and receiving the response. Future research can study how response anticipation function as a process in healthy vs. unhealthy types of relationship as that would reflect the how, why and under what circumstances the perceptions, and other dynamics gets influenced. It can also help in developing interventions for people entering romantic relationships, healing from toxic relationship, and for mental health professionals to facilitate their clients towards working on healthier communication patterns while focusing on self-awareness and emotional regulation.

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