

Stress and Couple Relationships: Is Couples' Relationship Functioning a Protective Resource or a Mechanism of Decline?

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Recognizing that stressors from outside the home can shape couples' relationship well-being, prominent theories within the close relationships literature have incorporated a focus on the interplay between couples' external stressors and their relationship functioning. Yet, despite decades of research exploring this idea, there is continued debate regarding the precise nature of this interplay. Whereas some theoretical perspectives argue that couples' ability to support one another and manage problems effectively buffers relationship well-being during stressful times, other perspectives suggest that couples' capacity to engage in these positive relationship behaviors deteriorates under conditions of stress. The current chapter provides a brief overview of the empirical evidence supporting each of these perspectives and proposes multiple promising avenues for integrating these two seemingly contradictory views. The practical implications of these differing theoretical perspectives for interventions designed to improve relationship quality are also discussed.

Keywords: Stress spillover; Stress Buffering; Couple Relationship Quality; Couple Relationship Interventions; Attributions; Structural Amplification

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Over the course of their relationship, most couples will encounter stressful life events that test the durability of their bond. Ideally, when these stressful circumstances occur, partners should serve as an essential source of comfort and support for one another, enabling the relationship to overcome adversity. Yet, growing research highlights a rather unfortunate reality: although couples' ability to effectively cope together becomes especially critical for protecting relationship well-being during difficult times (Falconier et al., 2016), managing stress can unravel the connection between partners. Indeed, compared to couples facing fewer stressful life events, couples coping with more life stressors (e.g., work difficulties, financial problems, caring for sick loved ones, being the target of discrimination, natural disasters, etc.) typically experience greater declines in their relationship satisfaction over time (Barton & Bryant, 2016; Karney et al., 2005) and are at increased risk for relationship dissolution (Bodenmann & Cina, 2006). Thus, some life contexts appear to render it more difficult for partners to maintain a satisfying relationship than do others. The good fortune of living in a relatively stress-free environment facilitates the likelihood of a healthy relationship, whereas stressful environments often prove quite toxic for relationship quality.

Recognizing that stressors arising from the broader context in which couples are embedded can alter couples' relationship dynamics in the home—a phenomenon referred to as *stress spillover* (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009)—the field has seen an explosion of research focused on understanding relationship processes in the context of external stress. The goal of this chapter is to provide a general overview of some of the major themes emerging from this work during the past fifteen years. Specifically, we highlight ongoing debates regarding when and why couples' relationships may deteriorate under conditions of stress, as well as emphasize the practical implications of differing theoretical perspectives for interventions designed to improve relationship quality. We also identify the critical questions that must be addressed in order to develop a more complete understanding of couples' ability to weather stressful experiences.

Stress and Couple Functioning: Comparing Stress-Buffering vs Stress-Corrosion Models

Several prominent theories agree that the manner in which relationships develop over time hinges on the interplay between couples' adaptive process, defined as the ways in which partners interpret and respond to one another in their interactions, and their external stressors (Hill, 1949; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Yet, despite decades of research exploring this idea, there is continued disagreement regarding the precise nature of this interplay. Some theoretical perspectives suggest that adaptive processes are a key resource for protecting relationship well-being during difficult times; that is, if couples are generally able to

communicate well, support one another, and manage problems effectively, they should be less vulnerable to experiencing the harmful effects of stress (Hill, 1949; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Conversely, rather than buffering the relationship from stress, other theoretical perspectives argue that couples' adaptive processes may be the mechanism through which stress undermines relationship satisfaction over time (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Neff & Karney, 2017). Namely, communicating well, supporting one another, and managing problems effectively may prove more difficult under conditions of stress.

Before reviewing the literature supporting each perspective, it is worth noting that studies vary in their conceptualizations of stress. Some studies take a broad approach by asking participants to report whether they experienced stressors in a variety of life domains (e.g., work, finances, health, etc.) and then aggregating responses across those domains to create an index of general stress. Other studies focus more narrowly on the effects of a specific stressor on couples' relationship outcomes. These studies may either ask participants about the extent to which they are experiencing stress in a particular area (e.g., financial problems, minority stress) or will recruit a select group of participants who are presumed to be experiencing that stressor (e.g., low-income couples, same-sex couples). As this chapter aims to provide a broad overview of the spillover literature, both types of studies will be included in our review. However, for more in-depth discussions regarding the potential distinct effects of specific stressful experiences such as financial strain or discrimination experiences on couples' relationships, we encourage readers to review Chapters 20, 22, and 24 in this volume.

Stress-Buffering Perspectives: Adaptive Processes as a Protective Resource

According to some of the earliest theories of family functioning, the experience of stressful life events serves as a critical litmus test for the relationship. Family stress models, such as the ABC-X model (Hill, 1949; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), argue that although couples facing more stressful life events are vulnerable to experiencing negative relationship outcomes, stressful circumstances need not instigate declines in relationship quality for all couples. Rather, the effect of stressors on relationship well-being (X) should depend on the interaction between the stressful event (A), the couple's coping resources (B), and the meaning that couples attribute to the event (C). Put another way, as long as the couple's coping efforts are sufficient to effectively meet the demands of the stressor, the relationship should emerge relatively unscathed.

Building upon the tenets of family stress models, myriad studies demonstrate that the impact of stress on relationship outcomes largely depends on the adaptive processes couples enact when coping with challenging life circumstances. In essence, examinations of couples facing difficulties such as immigration stress (Falconier et al., 2013), combat-induced post-traumatic stress (Lambert et al., 2015), COVID-19 related stress (Randall et al., 2022), and daily hassles (Hilpert et al., 2018) reveal that positive coping efforts mitigate the spillover of stress onto the relationship, whereas negative coping efforts exacerbate stress spillover. For example,

relationship quality is more likely to be preserved during stressful periods if individuals make benign attributions for their partner's inconsiderate behaviors, rather than viewing their partner as culpable for those actions (Diamond & Hicks, 2012; Graham & Conoley, 2006; Neff et al., 2022). Likewise, a meta-analysis of data collected from 72 samples around the world revealed that couples who report engaging in more cooperative communication behaviors when managing stress, such as providing one another with understanding, empathy, and validation and working together to generate solutions for problems, maintain greater relationship happiness compared to couples lacking in these communication skills (Falconier et al., 2015). Studies directly observing couples' communication in lab settings also have found that the detrimental effects of stressful circumstances on partners' feelings of relationship distress are lessened among couples who exhibit more cooperative support and effective problem-solving skills during their discussions (Neff & Karney, 2007; Pietromonaco et al., 2022). Conversely, individuals observed to exhibit more hostility toward their partners, such as rejection or contempt, when coping with external stressors experience greater declines in relationship well-being compared to individuals who express less negativity (Nguyen et al., 2017, 2020). Together, these findings corroborate a stress-buffering model, in which good relationship skills enhance couples' resilience to stressful life circumstances.

Practical Implications of the Stress-Buffering Perspective

The idea that possessing a strong foundation of relationship skills can buffer relationships against the threat of external stressors has formed the basis for many preventive relationship interventions. These prevention programs often target specific populations who are expected to experience higher levels of stress, with the purpose of equipping these couples with improved communication skills that they can use to deal with the stress that arises from their challenging life events and circumstances.

One of the most prominent intervention programs to take this approach is the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI), a United States federal policy initiative aimed at improving outcomes for low-income couples and families (Administration for Children and Families Archives, n.d.). The HMI identified families living with socioeconomic adversity as being particularly at-risk for family instability and allocated federal funds toward relationship skill-based interventions aimed at this population. Evaluations of HMI programs have documented some positive effects of the interventions on relationship outcomes, but a meta-analysis of these programs found that the effect sizes ($d = .11$) have been much lower than those observed when the same interventions were applied to a more affluent, and therefore presumably less stressed, population ($d = .31$; Hawkins et al., 2008, 2022).

Another population of couples who are expected to be under a great deal of stress are those experiencing the transition to parenthood. Consequently, a large number of prevention

programs also have been developed specifically for these couples, many of which focus on promoting positive interactions between the partners in order to help couples successfully navigate this stressful period (Mitnick et al., 2009). A meta-analysis of relationship skills interventions delivered during the transition to parenthood found a positive effect on couple relationship outcomes, though the magnitude of the effect was very small ($d = .13$; Pinquart & Teubert, 2010).

Overall, the pattern of results obtained from interventions which take a stress-buffering approach suggest that improving relationship skills may provide some buffer against the detrimental effects of various stressors. At the same time, the small magnitude of the effects suggests that improvements in relationship skills may be inadequate on their own to fully protect couples from external stressors.

Stress-Corrosion Perspectives: Adaptive Processes as the Mechanism for Decline

Other theoretical perspectives question the assumption that simply having the proper skills in one's "relationship toolbox" will ensure that couples are able to apply those skills when needed. The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model (VSA; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; McNulty et al., 2021) builds on family stress models by proposing a reciprocal association between couples' adaptive processes and their external circumstances. Similar to family stress models, the VSA model acknowledges that the adaptive processes couples exhibit in the face of stress may intensify or alleviate the effects of stressful life experiences on relationship well-being. Importantly, however, the VSA model offers the additional insight that stressful experiences also make it more difficult for couples to engage in positive relationship functioning. Thus, stressful contexts may undermine relationship satisfaction and stability by impeding adaptive processes within the relationship.

Supporting this perspective, a wealth of research demonstrates that stressful life circumstances can harm couples' relationship functioning in two ways (Neff & Karney, 2017). First, stress can destabilize relationships by reducing opportunities for activities that cultivate intimacy within the relationship, while simultaneously increasing opportunities for tensions to occur. For example, couples' shared time together provides key opportunities for partners to connect and invest in the relationship (Campos et al., 2009). When couples' shared time is filled with positive moments, such as pursuing leisure activities together, discussing the events of one's day, or engaging in expressions of affection, their relational bond is strengthened (Feeney & Lemay, 2012; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013). Unfortunately, stressful contexts give rise to issues that often command attention and require time to resolve, which constrains both the quantity and quality of couples' shared time. A study using a nationally representative sample of married individuals from the American Time Use Survey revealed that as household income increased, couples' amount of shared time increased exponentially (Williamson & Schouweiler, 2023).

Unlike lower-income couples, who typically experience more daily stressors outside the relationship that consume their time (e.g., longer commutes; Roy et al., 2004), higher-income couples not only experience fewer stressors, but also can protect their shared time by spending money on time-saving services (e.g., grocery delivery; Whillans et al., 2018). These results suggest that time spent managing stress limits the time available to spend with one's partner.

In addition to reducing the amount of shared time couples have, stressful experiences also appear to change how couples spend the limited time they do have together. When managing greater stress, individuals often experience increases in their anxiety, irritability, and/or exhaustion (Buck & Neff, 2012; Story & Repetti, 2006), which can leave them less interested in social interaction. For example, on days in which individuals encounter more daily hassles, such as increased demands at work, they often modify their behavior at home by becoming psychologically distant and withdrawn from their partner (Repetti et al., 2009; Schulz et al., 2004; Story & Repetti, 2006). Consequently, when recuperating from a stressful day, individuals are less likely to report engaging in shared positive moments that can promote togetherness in the relationship, such as joint leisure activities and physical intimacy (Bodenmann et al., 2010; Milek et al., 2017). Moreover, the negative mood states generated by stressful experiences may color individuals' perceptions of their exchanges with their partner. Consistent with research indicating that individuals become more attuned to negative stimuli following exposure to stress (Mogg et al., 1990), one study found that spouses experiencing more stressful circumstances were especially sensitized toward noticing day-to-day changes in their partner's negative behaviors, but not their partner's positive behaviors (Neff & Buck, 2023). Perhaps not surprisingly, then, other research has found that individuals living in more stressful contexts evaluate their shared time with their partner as more taxing (Williamson & Schouweiler, 2023).

If managing stress can create problems within the relationship by diverting couples' time and attention away from activities that nurture intimacy, then successfully weathering stressful periods requires that couples respond constructively to this increase in relational challenges. Yet, a second way stressful life circumstances can destabilize relationships is by draining individuals of the energy and cognitive resources necessary for effective support provision and problem-solving (Neff & Karney, 2017). This argument is based on evidence from both naturalistic and experimental studies indicating that coping with stress taxes individuals' cognitive functioning (Hammond, 2000; Hobfoll, 1989). Individuals experiencing greater stress exhibit impaired attention and memory (Lichand & Mani, 2020) as well as reduced perspective-taking abilities (Tomova et al., 2014). As these basic cognitive processes are essential for facilitating smooth and productive interpersonal interactions (Baker et al., 2020; Verhofstadt et al., 2008), impairments in these areas may increase the likelihood of stressed individuals enacting more insensitive behaviors within their relationship.

In fact, growing research suggests that coping with stress may interfere with partners' efforts to provide responsive support to one another. Providing effective support is a complex,

multi-step process in which individuals must first attend to their partner's cues of support needs, decide to give support, and then enact support behaviors that might be helpful in those circumstances (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). Stress can compromise individuals' capacity to engage in each of these steps. Specifically, and consistent with the notion that stressed individuals may be less attuned to the emotional states of others (Tomova et al., 2014), husbands reporting greater chronic stress were less accurate in identifying their wife's day-to-day support needs over a two-week period (Neff et al., 2021). Moreover, even when husbands correctly noted that their wife desired support, they were less likely to provide support if they were coping with their own stress that day. In other words, when stressed, husbands seemed to have difficulty mustering the energy to act on that knowledge and engage in supportive behaviors.

Further studies indicate that when stressed individuals do offer their partner support, that support is often of poor quality. Compared to unstressed men, experimentally stressed men and men experiencing greater financial strain have been observed to provide lower quality support (i.e., support that was less warm, affectionate, and empathetic) during lab discussion tasks (Bodenmann et al., 2015; Clavé et al., 2017). Finally, men facing greater stress are less likely to offer support that matches the recipient's desired support (Brock & Lawrence, 2014). Notably, in each of these support studies, women's stress did not predict their support provision. Though additional work is needed to understand the gender differences emerging within this literature, these findings underscore the possibility that individuals can simply be too stressed to accurately perceive and appropriately respond to their partner's support needs.

Couples' capacity to effectively resolve conflict also may be diminished during periods of heightened stress. Observational studies of couples' conversations indicate that, compared to individuals facing fewer stressors, individuals confronting more external stressors are less likely to offer warmth and encouragement and more likely to enact hostile and contemptuous behaviors when discussing relationship problems with their partner (Barton et al., 2015; Barton & Bryant, 2016; Falconier & Jackson, 2020). Similarly, daily diary studies indicate that individuals report expressing more negativity toward their partner, such as showing anger or impatience and voicing criticism, on high stress versus low stress days (e.g., Buck & Neff, 2012; Timmons et al., 2017). Attesting to just how corrosive a stressful context may be, one study identified stressful life events as a stronger predictor of couples' hostile communication than family-of-origin experiences, depression, and relationship happiness (Williamson et al., 2013). In sum, evidence suggests that couples' capacity to engage in positive relationship functioning may be constrained by the stressful elements of their environmental context.

Practical Implications of the Stress-Corrosion Perspective

The stress-corrosion perspective calls for an intervention strategy that is markedly different from that of the stress-buffering perspective. If adaptive processes deteriorate when stressors are encountered, then trying to improve adaptive processes as a way to help couples

combat stress may not be entirely effective. Therefore, efforts to improve couple relationships in the face of stress should focus on eliminating the stressor itself. Given the difficulty of this task, only a few studies have addressed this possibility.

For example, a recent study addressed the question of whether directly alleviating financial strain via increases in the minimum wage can improve relationship outcomes for low-wage workers. Using a difference-in-difference approach to compare states in the U.S. that increased their minimum wage to those that did not, results indicated that a one-dollar increase in the state minimum wage predicted up to a 15% decline in divorce over the following two years (Karney et al., 2022). This result is suggestive of an indirect improvement in relationship functioning brought about by a decrease in financial strain, although the population-level data was unable to address this theorized mechanism.

In addition to financial strain, another stressor faced by many low-wage workers is a lack of paid sick leave (Goodman & Schneider, 2021). Again leveraging U.S. state-level policies, a recent study examined the impact of Washington state's 2017 law mandating paid sick leave on family outcomes (Schneider, 2020). Compared to similar workers in states without mandated paid sick leave, workers in Washington had a 28% increase in access to paid sick leave after the law went into effect. However, in contrast to expectations, workers with new access to paid sick leave did not experience reductions in work–family conflict (i.e., having flexibility in their work schedule to handle family needs, and their work schedule causing extra stress for their family [reverse-coded]). This evaluation was conducted only a few months after the law went into effect, which may mean that improvements in family life were not yet realized. However, it is also possible that paid sick leave alone is not enough to improve family life, in the context of a job that is still low-wage with unpredictable shift scheduling (Schneider & Harknett, 2017). Overall, much more research is needed to test the assertion that alleviating external stress can improve couples' adaptive processes and relationship outcomes.

Reconciling these Perspectives: When is Stress Likely to Erode Couples' Adaptive Processes?

The stress-buffering and stress-corrosion perspectives have both received strong support in the literature, yet when considered together they raise a puzzling question. How can couples' relationship skills counteract the harmful effects of stress if stress erodes those same relationship skills? Developing a complete understanding of the interplay between stressful circumstances and couples' relationship functioning requires integrating these two seemingly conflicting perspectives and determining the conditions under which adaptive processes are most likely to be weakened by stress. Though a comprehensive consideration of all such conditions is beyond the scope of this chapter, below we offer two promising avenues for future research to consider.

Structural Amplification: Evidence for a Dual Role of Adaptive Processes

One idea that can integrate the stress-buffering and stress-corrosion perspectives is a concept known within the sociological literature as structural amplification. Structural amplification occurs when difficult contextual conditions deteriorate the very resource that would otherwise buffer the damaging effects of those contextual conditions on individuals' well-being (e.g., Ross et al., 2001; Ross & Mirowsky, 2011). Consequently, individuals' resources may simultaneously moderate the effects of stress and worsen as a consequence of stress. Applying this idea to couples' relationships and stress, the degree to which couples' adaptive processes falter under stress may be moderated by couples' general ability to engage in positive relationship functioning. In this way, structural amplification suggests a situation where disadvantage breeds further disadvantage. Although individuals may exhibit worse adaptive processes at times when their stress level rises, this effect may be stronger among those couples who generally struggle with their relationship functioning. Likewise, the harmful effects of stress on individuals' adaptive processes may be lessened, or possibly even fail to manifest entirely, among couples who generally exhibit good relationship functioning.

The potential for relationship skills to play this "dual" role in the process of stress spillover has not yet received much empirical attention. However, a closer examination of prior work reveals some initial evidence supporting this perspective. A study of two generations of couples revealed that couples who reported having less efficacious problem-solving skills exhibited significant increases in their observed hostile communication in response to economic strain (Masarik et al., 2016). Couples who reported being highly effective problem-solvers, however, did not exhibit these same increases. A similar pattern of results emerged in a daily diary study assessing the spillover of workload stress to everyday marital behaviors (Story & Repetti, 2006). On average, spouses reported expressing greater anger and frustration toward their partner on days in which they experienced increased job stress. However, this spillover effect was particularly strong among couples who indicated that hostile communication patterns were more commonplace in the home. Thus, and consistent with the ideas of structural amplification, couples with better pre-existing communication skills appeared to experience stress buffering, whereas couples with poor pre-existing communication skills were susceptible to experiencing further corrosion of those skills when their stress intensified.

Structural amplification offers promising insights for fine-tuning theories of stress and adaptive processes by illuminating who might be most at risk for experiencing adverse outcomes. Contrary to the notion that even strong relationships may crumble in stressful environments (e.g., Berscheid, 1999), possessing better relationship skills may provide some protection against that corrosion. As such, identifying couples whose cognitive and emotional resources render them prone to poor relationship functioning (see McNulty et al., 2021) becomes imperative as these

fragile relationships are more likely to get caught in a cycle where stress erodes their already limited resources. Additional work examining these dual roles of relationship skills is needed.

Practical Implications of Structural Amplification

Additional empirical tests supporting the structural amplification model would further validate the use of relationship-skill based interventions as an effective strategy for helping couples cope with external stressors given that couples with poor communication skills should be especially susceptible to the corrosive effects of stress on their relationship. Thus, interventions that strengthen couples' adaptive processes should also serve to increase their resilience to stress. Before a strong recommendation can be made for continued provision of skill-based interventions, however, it is critical to test the structural amplification hypothesis in a clinical setting. This would entail explicitly examining whether intervention-induced improvements in communication buffer against the effects of stress on relationships. However, the intervention literature has typically focused on examining simple differences between the treatment vs. control group, without consideration for stress-buffering as a mechanism.

One study that did consider whether a relationship education intervention can buffer against the impact of stress used daily diary data collected two and half years after the completion of the program (McCormick et al., 2017). All couples had a positive association between external stress and marital disagreements, such that they reported higher levels of disagreements on days when they experienced higher levels of stress. However, this association was attenuated among couples who received the intervention. Although this study did not explicitly test the structural amplification model because it did not examine whether communication skills gained as a result of the intervention were responsible for the buffering effect, it is suggestive that improving couples' adaptive processes can contribute to stress buffering.

Stressor Salience and Attributions: Evidence that Awareness Can Reduce Spillover

A second idea that may help integrate the stress-buffering and stress-corrosion perspectives can be found within the growing literature on stressor salience. Namely, when partners recognize that stress could be influencing their relationship functioning, they may take steps to correct their behavior, thereby reducing stress spillover (e.g., Tesser & Beach, 1998; Williamson, 2023). In fact, this reasoning has been used to explain why everyday hassles (e.g., difficult work day, getting stuck in traffic) are more consistently harmful to relationship quality compared to more severe major stressors (e.g., severe illness, natural disasters; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Daily hassles are rather insidious, as they can color partners' relationship thoughts and behaviors without their awareness, leading to the corrosion of relationship skills (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Major stressful events, however, are highly salient and often uncontrollable—qualities that may encourage partners to place blame for their relational

problems on their stressful circumstances (Clavél et al., 2017; Diamond & Hicks, 2012). Notably, this tendency to attribute problems to the stressor should serve to mobilize coping and support efforts between partners, as such responses are generally considered normative in the face of severe stressful events (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Consequently, to the extent that couples possess adequate existing skills for addressing the stressor, the harmful effects of stress should be contained. In sum, stress buffering may be more likely to occur when stress reaches a level that is salient, but not so taxing as to overwhelm couples' adaptive processes.

Several recent studies specifically examining couples facing highly salient, uncontrollable stressors support the notion that these stressors may mobilize adaptive coping efforts. For example, experiences of discrimination often take a tremendous toll on individuals' mental health, which can interfere with couples' adaptive processes (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Hou et al., 2018; Lavner et al., 2018). However, these experiences are also uncontrollable events unlikely to be blamed on the partner, and thus have the potential to create a sense of unity within couples. Indeed, some research on African American and Chinese American couples demonstrates that experiences of racial discrimination predict greater marital warmth and increased support in couples over time (Clavél et al., 2017; Hou et al., 2018). Likewise, studies of same-sex couples have found that although partners reported lower relationship quality on days in which they faced more common everyday hassles, daily experiences of sexual minority stress were not associated with same-day relationship quality (Totenhagen et al., 2017). Additional work sheds light on why this may be: namely, experiences of sexual minority stress can increase feelings of closeness and support between partners (Frost, 2013), as long as partners are low in internalized heterosexism (Meuwly & Davila, 2022).

Similar increases in relationship quality have been documented in the immediate aftermath of natural disasters. In the only study to leverage longitudinal data collected before and after a major hurricane, results indicated that couples did not experience increases in their conflict (Hammett et al., 2022); in fact, they experienced a temporary boost in their relationship well-being before returning to their pre-hurricane levels of relationship functioning (Williamson et al., 2021). Again, these results are consistent with the notion that highly salient, uncontrollable stressors may inspire partners to come together in the face of a common threat.

Notably, in the previously reviewed studies, it was assumed that partners' stress attributions may account for these mobilization effects. To date, however, only a small handful of studies have directly assessed the protective effects of blaming the stressor. One such study examined partners' attributions for their money problems during the Great Recession (Diamond & Hicks, 2012). Generally, financial stress is a robust predictor of poor relationship functioning (Falconier & Jackson, 2020). During the U.S. economic recession of 2007-2009, however, the national economic crisis was highly salient. Consequently, during this period, partners were more likely to blame the recession than each other for their financial problems, which weakened the link between partners' financial stress and relationship satisfaction (Diamond & Hicks, 2012).

Additional evidence for the salubrious effects of blaming the stressor emerged from studies of couples' relationship well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic created unprecedented stressful circumstances for many couples, the cause of that stress was highly salient and largely uncontrollable. Not surprisingly, then, some longitudinal evidence indicated that individuals' partner-blaming attributions declined from pre- to post-pandemic (Williamson, 2020). Indeed, during the early stages of the pandemic, individuals were more likely to blame the pandemic for their problems than they were to blame themselves or their partners (Neff et al., 2022). Moreover, this tendency to blame the pandemic weakened the link between women's daily stress and their likelihood of enacting critical behaviors toward their partner. Together, these findings suggest that the salience and uncontrollability of the pandemic may have encouraged partners to shift blame for their difficulties onto the stressor, which in turn enhanced their resilience to those stressful circumstances.

Overall, research on the implications of stressor salience emphasizes when spillover may be more likely to occur. Supporting key concepts proposed by family stress models (Hill, 1949; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), this evidence underscores the fact that not all stressors are alike, as some stressors encourage more adaptive interpretations of one's circumstances than do others. Continuing to unpack how and why the properties of the stressor can shape the meaning that couples make of their situation can further illuminate the conditions under which couples' adaptive processes are more likely to be mobilized rather than corroded in the face of stress. Moreover, and similar to the themes of structural amplification, this work points to the importance of couples' existing relationship skills. After all, the mobilization of coping efforts will only be beneficial if couples possess adequate skills for buffering stress.

Practical Implications of Stressor Salience

Multiple intervention programs have embraced the idea that it is helpful to make couples aware of the ways in which external stressors can affect their relationship. For example, the Protecting Strong African American Families (ProSAAF) program was designed with an explicit focus on the contextual stressors that rural African American couples experience, with each session focused on learning techniques for coping with a different stressor (e.g., work, racism, finances, extended families; Barton et al., 2018). Results of this program have been strong, with the intervention resulting in greater improvements in relational and parenting domains compared to a control group. Additionally, improvements from the intervention have been documented to have a buffering effect against the impact of COVID-19 pandemic related stress on depression, as well as buffering against the impact of discrimination on depression among youth whose parents participated in the program (Beach et al., 2023; Lei et al., 2021).

Similarly, the Better Together Programs (previously known as Strengthening Same-Sex Relationships) are a set of culturally sensitive relationship education interventions specifically designed for same-gender couples (Whitton et al., 2016; Whitton et al., 2017). These programs

address the impact of stressors unique to sexual minority couples, with therapeutic content focused on issues such as discussing expectations between partners about outness and relationship disclosure, dealing with discrimination and heteronormativity, and building supportive communities. Both versions of the program have only been tested in small pilot studies ($N = 20$ and $N = 37$ couples respectively) but the results indicate significant program effects on couple communication and relationship satisfaction over a 3-month follow-up.

Overall, therapeutic strategies that help couples recognize and combat stress spillover by identifying external problems that are the source of maladaptive processes occurring in their relationship seem to be a promising avenue for interventions that seek to protect relationships from stress.

Conclusion

Does couples' relationship functioning buffer the effects of stress or worsen as a consequence of stress? To date, most research examining relationship functioning in the context of stress addresses one of these possibilities in isolation, with little consideration for the alternative perspective. Consequently, the field has amassed a compelling body of evidence in support of the stress-buffering and the stress-corrosion perspectives, suggesting that the answer to this question is likely both. Moving the field forward and developing more effective interventions for strengthening couples' relationships requires a deeper understanding of how these perspectives may co-exist. A crucial point emerging from this review is that although external stressors can erode couples' adaptive processes, the extent of that erosion can be reduced if couples possess better relationship skills and recognize the toll stress may be taking on their relationship. In fact, promising evidence suggests that couples may benefit from interventions designed to raise awareness regarding the harmful effects of stress and equip couples with better strategies for working together to manage their stress. More work is needed, however, and as Berscheid (1999, p. 265) once noted, it will be imperative for relationship scientists examining the effects of stress to adopt "the perspective of civil engineers who typically calculate a structure's durability relative to the environmental forces it can withstand without disintegrating."

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