

The Buffer Zone: Romance and Insecurity

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Let's call them Linda and Max. They've been a committed couple for some years now, but Max brings a lot of emotional baggage to the relationship. Previous girlfriends treated him shabbily, and as a result he's insecure about Linda, not entirely convinced she loves him. On occasion this persistent fretting makes him act like a . . . well, a jerk.

You know Linda and Max. I know I do—or at least versions of them. Most people would say they're doomed as a couple, yet they last. Somehow, when Max is threatened, Linda knows to give him the reassurances he needs. She intuitively helps him control his emotions and feel safer, and as a result he behaves better. Over time, Max has come to feel better about himself, and as a couple they are happier than ever.

This dynamic is known as “partner buffering,” and it's very common in relationships. In fact, couples use it every day without even being aware of what they are doing. Yet as commonplace as buffering is, it remains poorly understood—unstudied really. Even relationship specialists have tended to focus on individuals—how Max's insecurities shape him as a partner—ignoring the whole couple's interplay of emotions and actions.

This is changing, thanks in large part to psychological scientists Jeffry Simpson of the University of Minnesota and Nickola Overall of the University of Auckland. Simpson and Overall have been working for some time on a dyadic model that they believe better illuminates how real couples deal with insecurity issues every day.

First, a bit of theory—namely, attachment theory, which provides the foundation of this work. According to attachment theory, there are two basic kinds of insecurity. Max is what's called “anxiously attached,” which means he has received inconsistent emotional support from caregivers during his life. He craves acceptance and closeness, yet he worries that he will be abandoned or hurt. As a result, he is hypervigilant for emotional signals—signals of love and rejection both. “Avoidantly attached” people, by contrast, have experienced rejection by early caregivers. They believe that they cannot trust or depend on anyone, and so learn to suppress their need for intimacy. These people appear as rigidly independent and self-reliant, distancing themselves from their partners emotionally.

Both types of insecurity destabilize relationships, especially during conflicts, but partners of insecure individuals have the ability to protect relationships with buffering. But buffering is successful only when it matches the insecure partner's style of insecurity. That is, avoidantly attached people benefit from buffering that allows them to maintain their autonomy and independence, while anxiously attached people like Max benefit from buffering that reassures them that they are loved and supported.

At least that's the theory, which Simpson and Overall have been testing in a series of studies. In one study, for example, they videotaped married couples discussing traits and habits they wanted the other to

change. This kind of frank discussion can be very threatening to anxious people—and that was the idea, to elicit fears of rejection. The scientists then measured each partner’s emotional reactions and had trained judges take note of any attempts at accommodation—calming the anxious partner, for example, or refraining from retaliating.

The findings clearly supported the buffering theory. Anxious partners felt more negative emotions and were less accommodating, but their partners displayed more accommodating strategies if they were themselves more committed to the relationship. And these accommodations led the anxious partner to become more accepting and positive during the tense conversation. In other words, buffering had immediate benefits, allaying fears and creating a more constructive emotional dynamic.

Simpson and Overall ran a similar study of avoidant individuals experiencing relationship conflict. In this case, the more secure partner had identified a particular problem, something he or she wanted the insecure partner to change. This kind of discussion is highly stressful for people who prize their autonomy, and as predicted, they became angrier and more withdrawn. But *some* partners buffered these avoidant defenses by softening their demands, validating the partner’s viewpoint, and acknowledging the partner’s good qualities. When this buffering occurred, the insecure partner responded with less anger and less withdrawal—and in the end the conversations were more fruitful.

Scientists have been following some of these insecure individuals since childhood, and are now observing how their attachment difficulties are playing out in their adult relationships. In yet another study, couples discussed a major relationship problem, after which they “cooled down” by talking about the best aspect of their relationship. The scientists assessed how quickly and completely each partner “recovered” from the conflict. The partners who had been insecure since childhood had much more trouble getting over the conflict, and they were more likely to reengage in the argument while cooling down. However, when their partners recovered quickly from the conflict, they also became more positive about the relationship. What’s more, these couples were more likely to be together two years later.

These are just some of the findings that Simpson and Overall reported this week at the 26th convention of the Association for Psychological Science, in San Francisco. Taken together, the studies highlight the critical role that partner buffering plays in protecting relationships, especially relationships with insecure partners. Emotional insecurity may not be our romantic ideal, but it need not spell doom.

Follow Wray Herbert’s reporting on the 26th convention of the Association for Psychological Science in The Huffington Post and on Twitter at @wrayherbert.