

Affection

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Affection

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On virtually every list of fundamental human needs, one finds mention of affection. Humans are a supremely social species, and along with food, water, oxygen, and sleep, we need close relationships in which we can give and receive affection and love. Affection is so fundamental to the human experience, in fact, that its importance is often taken for granted. Social science, however, has done much to identify and illuminate what affection is, how it is communicated, why it matters for close relationships and even for our health, and how it can be explained theoretically.

Affection and Affectionate Communication

To understand affection, it is useful both to define it and to differentiate it from the behaviors through which it is communicated. As defined by Kory Floyd and Mark Morman in “The Measurement of Affectionate Communication” (1998), affection is an emotional state of fondness and intense positive regard that is usually, although not always, directed at a living or once-living recipient. Affectionate feelings are often directed at people with whom one has a meaningful personal relationship, such as romantic

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How is affection adaptive (i.e., advantageous to the survival of our species) according to the affection exchange theory and according to the tend and befriend theory?
- Is it possible to reap the health benefits of engaging in affectionate behaviors without genuine feelings of affection? Why or why not?
- Considering the somatosensory affectional deprivation theory and from a survival standpoint, why might infants require sufficient affectional stimulation for healthy development? What are likely outcomes when infants are deprived of physical affection?
- How might exposure to companions and service animals be beneficial for hospitalized individuals?

partners, family members, close friends, and neighbors. One can certainly also feel affection for pets and even for other entities held in positive regard (e.g., affection for God, affection for a favorite hobby or pastime).

Affection is different from some other emotional experiences in that it requires a specific recipient. One may feel joy, sadness, fear, or surprise without necessarily directing that emotion to anyone, but affection is always felt for someone or something. In this way, it is best classified as a social emotion, akin to love, hatred, jealousy, and empathy. The emotional experience of affection is distinguishable from affectionate communication, which comprises the behaviors through which affectionate feelings are encoded and displayed. This distinction is consequential because humans are able to separate the experience and the expression of affection (and, indeed, of many emotions). For instance, one may feel affection for another but choose not to express it, perhaps out of concern that the expression would be misinterpreted or unreciprocated. Conversely, one may express affection without genuinely feeling it, perhaps in the service of politeness or perhaps as a manipulative technique to gain a favor.

Floyd and Morman (1998) proposed a tripartite model in which affectionate expressions comprise verbal statements, direct nonverbal gestures, or socially supportive behaviors. Verbal statements include any expressions of affection that are spoken or written, including statements such as “I love you” and “I care about you.” Direct nonverbal gestures are defined as nonverbal actions with obvious

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affectionate implications. In many cultures, these include behaviors such as kissing, hugging, and hand-holding. Floyd and Morman proposed, however, that affection can also be conveyed through socially supportive behaviors, which may not necessarily carry obvious affectionate implications. Indeed, people often show their affection for others by offering favors, such as lending a helping hand on a project, or by showing support for each other, such as by making time to be with one another. In some relationships, socially supportive behaviors are not only the most common means of expressing affection but also the most valued.

Why Affectionate Communication Matters

Individuals vary in their affection needs. Floyd (2014) demonstrated that receiving less affection than one desires is associated with detriments for wellness. When affection needs are fulfilled, however, individuals benefit in terms of their relationships and their health.

Relational Benefits. The exchange of affection is associated with many benefits for close relationships. Expressing affection is often a significant turning point in relational development (Owen 1987). In romantic partnerships, affectionate behavior correlates with higher levels of intimacy, satisfaction, commitment, and love. Affection shared between parents and children also explains significant variance in closeness, self-disclosure, and communication satisfaction, as well as children's emotional health in adulthood. Finally, affectionate communication contributes to relational quality among platonic friends, between siblings, and even in newly forming relationships.

Health Benefits. Extensive research has shown that, besides benefiting relationships, giving and receiving affection also benefit individuals' physical health and mental well-being. Floyd (2002) demonstrated that the tendency to express affection is positively related to mental health, happiness, and self-esteem, and negatively related to chronic stress and depression. Conversely, being deprived of affection is associated with a higher risk of mental distress and a greater likelihood of having been diagnosed with a mental disorder.

Exchanging affection also contributes to physical wellness, and one of the most potent ways is by tempering the stress response. Research has shown, for instance, that the tendency to express affection predicts healthy variation in twenty-four-hour levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which is adaptive for responding to stressful events as they occur. Highly affectionate people are also buffered from the negative effects of stressors. When individuals encounter stress-inducing events, those who are highly affectionate (as a behavioral trait) respond with a less-pronounced increase in heart rate, blood pressure, and stress hormones, compared with their less-affectionate counterparts; thus affectionate people do not overreact to the stressor.

Affectionate communication also accelerates recovery from stress. In their research, Floyd and colleagues (2007) exposed participants to a series of standard laboratory stressors to elevate their stress and then assigned them randomly either to write an affectionate letter to someone they cared about, to think about someone they cared about, or to sit quietly for twenty minutes. Compared to the latter two groups, those who expressed affection to a loved one in the wake of elevated stress showed quicker recovery of their cortisol levels.

Besides helping the body manage stress, affectionate behavior also correlates with other indices of health and wellness, including lower blood glucose levels, more circulating oxytocin, and a decrease in alpha-amylase, a protein enzyme indicative of stress and sympathetic nervous system arousal. Affection has also been associated with calming and relaxing effects, indexed by negative associations between an individual's level of trait affection and his or her resting heart rate and resting blood pressure. Research has also shown that trait levels of affectionate behavior predict immunoglobulin M, a component of the immune system that helps the body recognize pathogens, and the toxicity of natural killer cells, which protect the body against virally infected cells and tumors.

Given the health benefits of exchanging affection, it is unsurprising that being deprived of adequate affection is associated with important health detriments. Research shows that when individuals fail to receive a sufficient level of affection in their relationships, they are more susceptible to stress, more likely to experience chronic pain and disordered sleep, and more likely to have been diagnosed with a secondary immune disorder.

Relevant Theories

Multiple theories offer guidance as to why humans share affection in the first place and why it is associated with health and relational benefits. This section reviews four such theories. To date, most empirical research on affectionate communication has been grounded in affection exchange theory, although tend and befriend theory, the need to belong, and somatosensory affective deprivation theory also provide relevant principles.

Affection Exchange Theory. Affection exchange theory (AET) is a social scientific theory proposed by Floyd (2006) to explain why humans communicate affection to one another and with what consequences. AET's fundamental assumptions are that (1) procreation and survival are superordinate human goals; (2) communicative behaviors can serve one or both superordinate goals, even in non-evident ways; and, (3) individuals need not be consciously aware of the evolutionary goals their behaviors serve.

AET comprises five propositions. First, the need and capacity for affection are inborn, meaning that the ability for humans to feel and need affection is innate. This proposition

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contains two implications: (1) the need for affection is instinctive, not learned, and (2) the need for affection is cardinal to human homeostasis. The second proposition parses the differences between affectionate behavior and the emotional experience connected with the behavior by proposing that affectionate feelings and affectionate expressions are distinct experiences that often, but need not, covary. This distinction is apposite for two reasons: (1) humans can feel affection without expressing it, and (2) humans can display affectionate behavior without genuinely feeling affection.

The heart of AET is embodied in the third proposition that affectionate communication is adaptive with respect to human viability and fertility. Within this proposition lay two sub-propositions: (1) access to necessary material resources (e.g., food and shelter) and emotional resources (e.g., social support) increases when affectionate behavior creates and maintains significant pair-bonds, and (2) an individual's affectionate communication can cause a potential mating partner to view that individual as a viable companion and successful parent. AET also suggests that the motivation to feel and display affection covaries with physiological characteristics, such as decreasing stress and strengthening immunocompetence, because such behaviors contribute to survival and procreation. By way of adaptation, affection is physically pleasurable, like other fundamental survival behaviors such as sleeping, eating, and having sex.

However, in the wrong situations or contexts, affectionate communication can inhibit these motivations. The fourth and fifth propositions state that humans vary in their optimal tolerances for affection and affectionate behavior, and that affectionate behaviors that violate the range of optimal tolerance are physiologically aversive. For example, some humans dislike touch even from intimate partners, and most humans, if not all, react negatively when affection is displayed by someone with whom they are uncomfortable. In contrast to the typical positive outcomes of affectionate behavior, in those kinds of situations, AET posits that exchanges of affectionate behavior may impede one's survival or procreation motivation.

Tend and Befriend Theory. Tend and befriend theory (TBT) was introduced in 2000 by Shelley Taylor and colleagues as an alternative to the fight-or-flight model of stress management. The theory acknowledges that either fighting environmental threats or fleeing from them have been evolutionarily adaptive for men but suggests that these strategies have been less adaptive for women because they would have left offspring unattended and vulnerable. Women, instead, have benefited from adopting two separate strategies: tending and befriending.

As the term implies, *tending* refers to women's efforts to care for and display affection toward their children. This is considered an adaptive response because calming

children in the wake of stress can increase their chances for survival. The second strategy, termed *befriending*, focuses on creating and maintaining social relationships, such as with friends and relatives, that can provide resources and protection for the mother and her children, particularly under stressful circumstances.

The Need to Belong. Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995) suggest that frequent and meaningful interaction is fundamental to the human condition. Feeling and expressing emotions, particularly positive emotions such as affection, is crucial to human motivation. These authors contend that the need to belong is so fundamental that it cannot be satisfied either by love without interaction or by interaction without love. The lack of interaction, including the lack of affection, produces maladies in humans and emphasizes the importance not only to feel loved but also to reciprocate and communicate love with others.

To support their claim that the need to belong is fundamental, Baumeister and Leary (1995) articulated nine critical observations: (1) it operates in a wide variety of settings; (2) it guides cognition; (3) it guides emotion; (4) it produces ill effects when it is unsatisfied; (5) it can be met by a variety of people and social groups; (6) it is not limited to certain people or circumstances; (7) it is not derived from another fundamental motivation; (8) it affects a wide and diverse range of behaviors; and (9) it has implications that extend beyond psychological functioning.

Somatosensory Affectional Deprivation Theory. Somatosensory affectional deprivation theory, proposed by James W. Prescott (1980), focuses on the saliency of physical affection displays, including touch, smell, and motion. This theory proposes that when infants are deprived of this type of sensory stimulation, they experience two long-term maladaptive consequences: (1) an impaired ability to form secondary affectional bonds, particularly sexual bonds, in adulthood, and (2) an inability to provide affection to their own children. Although the theory focuses on affectionate behavior rather than affectionate emotion, Prescott concedes that intimate emotional bonds often accompany somatosensory stimulation.

Specifically, Prescott (1980) asserted that healthy infants require sufficient affectional stimulation in three sensory areas: (1) the vestibular-cerebellar system, involving constant movement; (2) the somesthetic system, involving frequent tactile or haptic stimulation; and (3) the olfactory system, involving smell and the ability to identify caregivers by their unique scent. This theory predicts that aberrant behavioral patterns, such as drug abuse and violence, as well as delays in physical development, are predictable outcomes of affection deprivation.

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Conclusion

It can be easy to overlook the importance of affection in life. Whereas humans feel hunger when they have inadequate food and fatigue when they have inadequate sleep, no immediate physiological sign warns of inadequate social connection. Affection and affectionate communication are so important to human health and the maintenance of close relationships, however, that being deprived of affection is highly detrimental. Conversely, when their affection needs are met, humans are better able to engage each other socially and they benefit physically in the form of better mental health, better stress management, and stronger immunocompetence.

SEE ALSO *Communication; Deceptive Affection; Love; Touch.*

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Affluence

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Affluence confers a wide range of benefits to adults and children, but in some respects it can be a mixed blessing. On many dimensions, affluent individuals (annual family incomes above \$135,600; see Fry and Kochhar 2018) enjoy significant privileges as compared to their less well-off counterparts. These benefits include access to well-funded public education (and independent school alternatives), safe neighborhoods, and high-quality physical and mental health care. At the same time, there are increasing signs that there can be negative associations between affluence and social-emotional outcomes.

Children in affluence reveal worrying elevations in several dimensions of maladjustment, not unlike their counterparts in poverty (see Luthar, Barkin, and Crossman 2013; Luthar and Kumar 2018). Children in relatively high socioeconomic status (SES) communities manifest higher rates of serious internalizing and externalizing problems and substance use as compared with middle-SES groups. Studies of large national data sets have shown U-shaped links between school- or community-level affluence and incidence of children's adjustment problems, especially substance abuse (Coley et al. 2018; Lund, Dearing, and Zachrisson 2017). As is the case with poverty, higher rates of psychological disturbance not only are disruptive to affluent children's current relationships; they also have the power to disrupt the functioning of their relationships with future spouses and children, and also have the potential to perpetuate. Furthermore, the individuals in question are ones who, because of their affluence, will have both material and social impact on the culture at large. Thus, there has been an increasing emphasis on the need to understand, via systematic research, not only how high-achieving, affluent settings can engender maladjustment but also what kinds of interventions might serve to temper the effects of affluence (Geisz and Nakashian 2018).

Current Evidence: Pathways Implicated

There is one major vulnerability that is common to all children in affluent communities: a pervasive pressure to succeed—in both academics and multiple extracurricular activities—and all with an eye to gaining admittance to top-rated universities. This pressure builds from early childhood, with parents placing children on lengthy waiting lists for