Chapter 6

Side by side: How merely being with a close other can enhance well-being

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Abstract

The mere presence of familiar partners contributes to people's well-being in two ways. First, having familiar partners merely present as bystanders attenuates the appraisal and psychological impact of negative events. Second, merely co-experiencing pleasant activities (i.e., engaging in an activity simultaneously without communicating) with a familiar partner amplifies the pleasure of those experiences. While this chapter focuses primarily on the positive aspects of mere presence, mere presence can have a negative impact on people as well: whereas bystanding partners help attenuate the impact of threats, those partners sometimes absorb some of the stress in the process; whereas co-experiencing partners amplify pleasures, co-experiencing unpleasant experiences also increases people's displeasure. This chapter outlines how threats can be attenuated and joys can be amplified when people are merely in the presence of a familiar partner. And even though partners may pay a cost of being "there for us" by absorbing some of our own stress, understanding our distress likely strengthens relationships over the long run. All in all, the presence of familiar partners can change the way we perceive and interact with the world around us, and often for the better.

People ask close others to "just be there" as they face challenges. Many women, for instance, want a close partner and familiar medical and lay caretakers by their sides as they go through the childbirth process. Young children seek out parents during thunderstorms or when movies turn frightening, staying close to their parent until the danger has passed. It is also the case that people often want others to be with them when they experience something good. When people happen to see a beautiful sunset or taste a delicious confection, they often say things such as, "Come see this!" or "Taste this!" People making plans to go movies or concerts typically invite others to join them despite the fact that, once there, they will for the most part simply be siting side by side in a dimly lit venue without talking. Even when people engage in mundane pleasurable activities at home, such watching a TV show, they often urge a partner (romantic or otherwise) to watch along with them. People seem to believe that having familiar others with them in stressful situations will buffer them from stress. They also seem to believe co-experiencing pleasurable activities will make those activities more pleasurable.

Empirical research supports these intuitions. In this brief chapter we review research demonstrating the positive effects two types of "mere presence." Specifically: a) Merely having a familiar partner present as a bystander as one experiences a threat attenuates the threat, and b) Merely having a familiar partner co-experience something pleasurable enhances the experience. An example of the first type of mere presence is when a partner is present but silent, as when one is undergoing a medical examination. An example of the second type of mere presence is when a partner is sitting in the next seat over at a concert, experiencing the music simultaneously. As a whole, the extant evidence will lead us to conclude that, usually but not always, the mere presence of familiar others buffers us from momentary, day-to-day stressors and that, usually,

but not always, merely co-experiencing pleasant stimuli with familiar partners amplifies their impact upon us.

Basic Assumptions

The idea that the mere presence of familiar by-standing partners dampens the impact of threat as people move through daily life, and the idea that merely experiencing pleasant events simultaneously with familiar others boosts pleasure both rest on some theoretical assumptions that are well-grounded in extant research. First, people are fundamentally social, interdependent beings (Beckes & Coan, 2011). They are motivated to connect with and become familiar to one another. They forge social ties for many reasons, including such as things as a desire to mate and a need to engage in economic exchanges (Bugental, 2000; Clark & Mills, 2012; Fiske, 1992), but most importantly for purposes of this paper people forge social ties with others to form coalitions or communal relationships – that is, to provide one another with mutual, non-contingent responsiveness (Bugental, 2000; Clark & Mills, 1979; 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Reis & Clark, 2013). Forging such ties, in turn affords people with a sense of security.

As attachment theorists have suggested and documented that such ties, especially when they are strong, result in partners serving as safe havens in times of stress and as secure bases from which to explore (Bowlby, 1962). Whereas developmental attachment theorists (Bowlby, 1962; Ainsworth, 1979) emphasized the very strong bonds that infants ideally forge with primary and responsive caretakers, and adult attachment theorists (Hazan & Shaver, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) have emphasized the strong bonds adults ideally often have with romantic partners, the protective and beneficial bonds we discuss here are broader. These relationships may vary in communal strength (Clark & Mills, 2012; Mills, Clark, Ford & Johnson, 2004) and, include people who are just familiar and friendly (e.g. Coan & Maresh, 2015). What is key for us

and for this particular paper is that people feel comfortable with one another and implicitly trust one another and feel that one another is beneficent.

We propose that the mere presence of familiar others activates three intrapersonal psychological processes and that these processes, in turn, result in the "mere presence" phenomena we discuss in this chapter. First, when people are in the presence of someone familiar, and, especially when they are in the presence of an established, caring, relational partner they are *less* prone (than when alone or with strangers) to be in a state of vigilance and to be wary of environmental threats to the self. Thus, they are less likely to be focused on protecting themselves from potential dangers. In support of this idea are findings showing that when partners spend time together, especially when they are satisfied with their relationship, they show enhanced alignment in their respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA), a biomarker of feeling safe (Helm, Sbarra, & Ferrer, 2014).

Second, we note that the mere presence of familiar and safe partners is often characterized by a state of shared attention. That is, each person's attention to stimuli in the environment pulls the other's attention to the same stimuli (Shteynberg & Apfelbaum, 2013; Shteynberg, Hirsh, Apfelbaum, Larsen, Galinsky & Roese, 2014). This process is likely facilitated by the fact that being in a safe relationship not only seems to heighten RSA but heightened RSA is further associated with greater cognitive flexibility and an ability to shift attention toward tasks at hand (Helm et al., 2014; Thayer & Lane, 2000). Partners can jointly be focused on one person in the relationship, as is often the case when the self has a need or desire for which the partner can provide support or the partner has a need or desire which the person can provide support. Alternatively they can both be focused on outside activities or stimuli when neither person has pressing individual needs or desires (Clark, Graham, Williams & Lemay,

2008). Clark et al. (2008) have called these *relational self focus*, *relational partner focus*, and *relational activity focus* respectively, and the ability and fortitude to shift attention away from the self and to where ever it is needed most is heightened by the presence of safe, familiar partners. Third, and not entirely separately from the relational foci of attention just discussed, the mere presence of a close relational partner triggers mentalizing and empathy with that partner (Batson & Schoenrade, 1987; Batson, Eklund, Hakansson, Chermok, Hoyt, & Ortiz, 2007; Batson, Lishner, Cook & Sawyer, 2005). This empathy can lead people to be especially aware of what their partner needs or desires, what their partner is attending to or thinking about, and how their partner may be concerned with supporting them. These three assumptions, taken together, form the basis of the mere presence effects we outline next.

A first benefit of partner mere presence: Attenuated threat perception

Consider first how the mere presence of familiar, close others can and often does buffer reactions to and judgments of physical threats to an individual's well-being. When a person is alone, a threat is appraised as something the person must face alone. However, based on the assumptions just outlined, when a person faces a threat or challenge and a familiar or close other is nearby, that person's appraisal will include knowledge of that the partner's presence, attention, and the enhanced safety it affords. The person will still appraise the objective threat but now the person should take not only his or her ability to cope with the threat (a secondary appraisal according to Lazarus) but also the fact that partner presence is a resource that contributes to safety. The upshot is that appraisals of threat should, quite automatically, be attenuated when familiar or close others are present.

Extant research by a variety of researchers demonstrates that the mere presence of partners does indeed dampen people's judgments of risk, burdens, and cares (e.g., Chou & Nordgren, 2016). Coan and his colleagues (Coan et al., 2006) provide what is, perhaps, the best known example of this. They recruited women and their spouses for a study in which the women would be placed in a fMRI scanner and would received auditory signals that they might soon experience an electric shock. Women who expected to be shocked (and thus to experience pain) showed lower neural threat responses when holding a stranger's hand than when holding no one's hand, and lower neural threat responses when holding a spouse's hand compared to when holding a stranger's hand.

Similar results have been reported by Coan, Beckes, & Allen (2013), by Conner, Siegle, McFarland et al. (2012), and by Lougheed, Koval, & Hollenstein (2016). Coan et al. (2013), for instance, used a paradigm similar to that used by Coan et al. (2006) but with young adults rather than married women. The young adults were placed in a scanner and threatened with shock. Each participant was accompanied to the research session by a platonic friend of the other sex. While in the scanner participants held the hand of that platonic friend, the hand of an anonymous experimenter of the other sex, or no one's hand. Controlling for maternal support and neighborhood social capital, holding hands with a friend reduced neural threat responses relative to holding a stranger's or no one's hand. Interestingly, the presence of friends interacted with participants' relational histories. Current friends only reduced threat for those who had a good history of maternal support. Moreover, the nature of the communities from which participants came also made a difference. Holding hands with a stranger actually exacerbated threat responses of participants coming from communities generally characterized by low support presumably because such participants have more reason than others to mistrust strangers.

Conner et al. (2012) found that anxious youths and other adolescents (with a mean age of 9.5 years) who elected to have a caregiver present during a task involving exposure to threatening words (e.g. ghost, embarrassed) as well as to non-threatening words while in a scanner showed lower neural threat responses to the threatening words in the presence of the parent than when alone. Indeed, physiological indications of threat responses for anxious participants were attenuated to levels comparable to those of healthy control participants when caregivers were merely present. Lougheed et al. (2016) conducted a study in which adolescent girls were asked to complete a public-speaking task. Those girls allowed to hold their mothers' hands showed less physiological arousal than those not allowed to hold their mother's hand. Furthermore, and paralleling results reported by Coan et al. (2006), for those daughters reporting the highest quality relationships with their mothers, the mothers' presence reduced physiological stress relative to being along even in the absence of hand-holding. In addition, Kamarck, Manuck & Jennings (1990) had participants engage in mental arithmetic alone or in the presence of a friend and found that the were presence of a friend resulted in reduced heart rate reactivity to both tasks and attenuated rises in systolic blood pressure for one. Finally, Edens, Larkin & Abel (1992) report evidence that when people are asked to complete stressful math tasks and mirror-tracing tasks, the presence of a friend (relative to being alone or with a stranger) was associated with lower reactivity captured in heart rate and systolic blood pressure and with a trend in the same direction for diastolic blood pressure.

The company one keeps can impact not only people's felt stress but also judgments of an environmental threat, namely how steep a hill appears to be (Schnall, Harber, Stefanucci, & Profitt, 2008). Participants in one study estimated the steepness of a hill at which they were gazing (both by verbal report and by adjusting a physical apparatus to visually depict the slope)

to be greater when they were alone than when accompanied by a friend. Participants in a second study who had been assigned randomly to think of a supportive friend, imagining how they looked and acted and the feelings and thoughts the person elicited in tem before judging the steepness of a hill perceived the hill to be less steep than those who had randomly been assigned to think of a neutral person or of someone whom they disliked in the same situation.[1]

The results of these studies additionally show that the quality of the relationships in question matter. In the Coan et al. (2006) study, hand holding by spouses was more effective than that of strangers, and hand holding by spouses with whom women were satisfied was more effective than hand holding by spouses with whom women were less satisfied. In the Schnall et al. (2008) work, feeling especially close to and experiencing warmth and happiness with the particular person imagined in study 2 correlated negatively with the judged steepness of hills.

Two caveats. Whereas the mere presence of familiar others does seem to attenuate threats for people we hasten to add two caveats to this point. First, for these mere effects to emerge the bystanding partner must have the ability to provide care. If the partner does not provide such support, the effect should disappear. Moreover, if the partner does not provide support and instead one bears considerable responsibility *for them*, the effects actually may reverse in nature. The threat to us cannot be buffered by familiar others who cannot care for us, but a threat to us constitutes a threat to our ability to care for and protect them and, thus, may

[1] Related effects have been reported Lee and Schnall (2014) who found evidence linking having a sense of power over others to reduced judgments of the weight of boxes filled with books. They found this whether they measured people's chronic sense of power over others (e.g. "In my relationships with others, I can get people to listen to what I say" (study 1) or manipulated a sense of power over others by having people power pose (or not) (study 2) or recall (or not) a time when they had such power. Whereas in this chapter we focus on the effects of having safe, familiar peers present, it appears that other forms of ensuring that one will be socially secure (in this case safety that power affords) may have similar effects.

loom even larger. Second, whereas bystanding partners can buffer perceived threats to a person, there may be personal and/or physiological costs to the bystander.

Not all familiar relationships cause attenuation of perceived threats. The effects just described obtain in peer relationships characterized by people who feel and expect mutual responsibility for one another's safety and well-being. However, sometimes we feel responsibility for the welfare of someone from whom we do not expect the same responsiveness because he or she simply does not have the ability to take responsibility for our own needs. Such is the case for parents of newborns or young children, for those taking care of a child with a disability, or for an adult taking care of elderly or disabled parents. In such cases the assumptions outlined above lead us to a different prediction. No matter how affectionate the partner is toward us, that person's mere presence or salience means that one must watch out not only for oneself but also for the partner. Thus, their presence or salience should cause threats to be exaggerated rather than attenuated.

Indeed, that is what the empirical literature shows. Specifically, in contrast to studies showing that the mere presence of close, responsive peers reduces how threatening situations seem, research also suggests that when one has responsibility for a helpless other (who cannot reciprocate that responsiveness) the mere presence of that helpless other increases judgments of threats and challenges. Drottz-Sjoberg & Sjoberg (1990), for example, found that parents who have dependent children present in their lives judge nuclear energy to be more dangerous than do non-parents. Fitting well with this finding, Eibach and his colleagues found that parents' judgments of how of how dangerous the world is spiked during the particular year their child was born (Eibach, Libby, & Gilovich, 2003). Moreover, in some experimental work Eibach and his colleagues asked (or did not ask) participants whether they were parents right before asking them

to make judgments regarding of the dangerousness of extreme sports, the risk of criminal victimization, and the trustworthiness of strangers. They found that reminders of parenthood resulted in greater judgments of danger and risk. Reminding people they are parents also leads them to make safer/less risky decisions in economic games (Eibach & Mock, 2011; Eibach et al., 2012). Finally, Fessler, Holbrook, Pollack, and Hahn-Holbrook, (2014), in two different studies, found that parents who read vignettes about potential aggressive person (study 1) or viewed photographs of such a person (study 2) judged the person to be more formidable than did non-parents, effects that were mediated by increases in the person's judged formidability (study 1).

The second caveat is that whereas the mere presence of a caring bystanding partner who can be responsive to one can and often does attenuate perceptions of threat, the bystanding partner may pay a price. Monin, Schultz, Matire, Jennings, Lingler & Greenberg (2010) recruited married couples, one of whom suffered from osteoarthritis, for a study. The spouse with osteoarthritis carried heavy logs across a room while the participant stood by and watched. The experimenters collected measures of systolic, diastolic and heart rate the by-standing spouses during a baseline/habituation period and while watching the log carrying task. Merely watching the partner perform the painful task increased the by-standing spouse's systolic blood pressure, diastolic blood pressure, and heart rates above baseline levels. Further, Manszak, DeLongis, & Chen (2016) recently reported having studied 247 parent-adolescent pairs. They took baseline measures of systemic inflammation (from blood samples during a laboratory visit) and obtained two weeks of daily diary reports of empathy and emotion regulation. Parental empathy was significantly associated with both better emotion regulation and less systemic inflammation (indexed by interleukin 1-ra, interleukin 6, and C-reactive protein) among the adolescents—

results that fit well with the other buffering effects of partner presence, which we have reviewed. However, the empathic parents themselves showed higher indices systemic inflammation.

The mere by-standing presence of a familiar other may enhance pleasures.

Whereas there is considerable evidence suggesting that the mere presence of a familiar other downregulates perceptions of threat in the environment, we could find no clear evidence for another effect that we suspect exists. The effect would be that the mere presence of an observing familiar other, especially a trusted, established, caring partner, would upregulate the pleasure a person derives from his or her good fortune. For instance, we imagine that having familiar others present and observing one's successes in athletic, artistic or academic domains would upregulate the pleasure the person him or herself derives from those positive events. This might occur because, as already noted, social partners serve as resources. In the event of good fortune they are the ones who may capitalize on your success for you, feeling good for you, celebrating with you etc. (Gable & Reis, 2010). Or it may be that a person who experiences good fortune in the presence of a partner sees the good fortune through the partner's eyes as well as his or her own eyes, and that this vicarious experience could magnify the positivity one feels. However, whether mere presence during a positive moment, *without communicating*, has this upregulation effect for pleasurable experiences remains to be seen.

A second benefit of partner mere presence: Co-experiencing pleasant stimuli enhances the pleasure of positive experiences

Psychologists long have known that people are driven to share experiences with those to whom they are close. Moreover, research suggests that this inclination pays off. For example,

when couples share novel and challenging activities (Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993; Aron, Norman & Aron, 1998; Aron, Norman, Aron, & Lewandowski, 2002) their relationship satisfaction rises. Sharing good news with a close other maximizes positive affect and life satisfaction (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004; Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006, Gable & Reis, 2010; Lambert et al., 2013) and it is with close others help us find meaning in life and establish a shared sense of reality (Przybylinski, & Andersen, 2015; Rossignac-Milon, 2015). Reis, O'Keefe & Lane (2016) also recently reported two diary studies in which people reported on their fun activities, and the researchers found that these activities involved more positive affect when others were involved.

These effects may be due, at least in part, to the mere presence of the partner but they also may be dependent upon deliberative actions or acts of communication partners take which heighten the pleasure derived from such experiences. Is there evidence that the *mere presence* of a familiar partner who co-experiences stimuli enhances how pleasurable experiences are? We recently have conducted a series of experiments ourselves (together with Leigh Smith and John Bargh) the results of which reveal the answer to be yes.

Instead of investigating how the mere presence of observing partners (or reminders of such partners) influences perceived threat or risk, we investigated how merely *co-experiencing* stimuli with partners, that is, engaging with them simultaneously without interacting, influences people's judgments of those stimuli. In a first set of studies (Boothby, Clark, & Bargh, 2014) people performed an ice-breaker task during which they became familiar with one another and then tasted and rated a chocolate at the same time as their partner, and again tasted and rated a chocolate while their partner was engaged in a different but equally pleasant activity (looking at

paintings).[2] (Unbeknown to the tasters the chocolates they tasted were identical in the two conditions.) Pleasant chocolates were better liked and more flavorful when they were co-experienced with the familiar partner than when tasted alone (while the partner sat nearby and looked at art). Boothby, Smith, Clark, & Bargh (2016) replicated this effect directly twice and also showed that it disappears if co-experiencers are complete strangers rather than people who had become familiar with one another. Providing further support for the finding that a pleasant experience improves when shared with a familiar partner, Boothby, Smith, Clark, & Bargh (2017) found that pleasant pictures were judged to be more pleasant when co-viewed with a friend than when viewed alone or with a stranger.

We suggest that amplification of sensory experiences as a function of merely co-experiencing them occurs, in part, because people's attention is drawn to the focus of familiar and safe others' attention (Friesen, Moore & Kingstone, 2005, Samson, Apperly, Braithwaite, Andrews, & Bodley-Scott, 2010; Shteynberg, 2015). In addition, we believe co-experiencing stimuli leads one to think about and empathize with familiar and liked co-experiencers (Beckes, Coan, & Hasselmo, 2013; Bouchard et al., 2013; Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, & Ortiz, 2007), to take their perspective and to automatically simulate their experiences (Smith & Mackie, 2014; Miles, Griffiths, Richardson, & Macrae, 2010; for a review see Chartrand & Lakin, 2013). Enhanced attention to external stimuli (made possible, in part, by devoting less attention to being vigilant to threat and self-protection) and empathy/mind-reading together, we believe, produces the observed amplification effects because the more one focuses on something the greater the opportunity that stimulus has to affect that person (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008).

[2] The order in which participants engaged in an activity that was shared vs. not was counterbalanced across participants.

A caveat. There is a downside to mere co-experience effects as well. Although merely co-experiencing pleasant experiences increases the pleasantness of those experiences, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that merely co-experiencing unpleasant experiences amplifies those experiences as well, making them even worse. Boothby et al. (2014) report a study in which participants co-experienced tasting unpleasant bitter chocolates either as the person with whom they had just become familiar did the same thing or as that person engaged in a different experience instead. The chocolate was liked less when it was eaten simultaneously compared to when it was eaten while one's partner was sitting next to them but engaged in a different activity. Shteynberg, Hirsh, Apfelbaum, et al. (2014) likewise observed that when classmates viewed sad videos and images together they felt greater unhappiness relative to the unhappiness they felt when viewing the videos and images alone. Furthermore, Martin et al. (2015) found that people who had been randomly assigned to engage in a cold pressor task simultaneously with a friend (meaning that both people placed their hands in a ice bath simultaneously) reported it to be more painful than did people who had been randomly assigned to participate alone or alone while a friend simply watched them do so. This all evidence tells a consistent story which is that unpleasant experiences become worse when they are merely co-experienced with a familiar or close other. Whereas merely co-experiencing pleasant stimuli appears to amplify pleasant experiences, so too does co-experience appear to amplify unpleasant experiences.

Summary. We have explored the impact on people of merely being with a familiar partner. We have emphasized that precisely because people are fundamentally social, easily form weak mutually supportive ties with one another and often form stronger communal relationships as well, and because these relationships guide attention and empathy, *the mere presence of others* in our day-to-day lives has the ability to systematically enhance our well-being in two ways.

First, others "have our backs" so we can reduce vigilance to potential threats with the implicit knowledge that we have access to assistance if we need it and, therefore, judgments of just how bad stresses and threats are are attenuated. Second, when we *co-experience* stimuli with a close other our reactions to those stimuli are amplified. Good chocolate tastes better, pleasant pictures appear more beautiful, happy videos make people happier. This too can enhance the positivity of our lives day-to-day.

Of course, we have pointed out some downsides to both mere presence effects as well. The mere presence of familiar others who need our support but cannot provide support to us (e.g. infants), may lead us to judge threats to be greater. Partners who are merely present when they down-regulate our negative experiences may themselves pay costs of empathy, feeling worse as we feel better. And engaging in an unpleasant or painful experience simultaneously can amplify people's negative reactions to stimuli.

Conclusions

In concluding we feel compelled to say that we believe we have only scratched the surface of understanding the mere effects of partner presence on people's well-being. There is certainly good evidence that mere partner presence can and often is beneficial to people as they face the moment to moment stresses, challenges, and pleasures of life. Yet do these effects, in part, account for why people feel their relationships are so valuable and why being socially integrated has proven to be so closely and consistently linked to people's overall well-being (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010)? We suspect so, at least when partners are peers and each person is approximately equivalently responsive to the other. The presence of partners will blunt moment-to-moment threats, hassles, and disappointments, and partners often join a person in

experiencing moments of pleasure, which together should make daily life more pleasant and less physiologically taxing. The benefits should be cumulative across days, weeks and months.

Will the benefits of mere presence outweigh the costs of mere presence? That is, at times one will be the bystanding partner who may suffer a bit while buffering one's partner and, at times, one's negative experiences will be amplified because they are co-experienced. We suspect the benefits outweigh the costs for two reasons. First people (and their partners) generally seek out pleasurable co-experiences (e.g. vacations, movies, good food, lovely walks, enjoyable sports activities) and will avoid unpleasant co-experiences (e.g. bad bitter food, ugly pictures, exposing one's limbs to ice water). Second, although suffering on behalf of or with one's partner will occur from time to time and cause one to be unhappier in the moment, in the long run, such negative experiences likely promote bonding and care-taking, strengthening the communal nature of partnerships and providing another and longer if, perhaps bumpier, route to happiness, but a route to happiness nonetheless.

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