**Relationship growth in the context of COVID-19: The role of approach relationship goals in shaping leisure activities in the face of stress**

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**Background**

Satisfying romantic relationships are significant predictors of people’s happiness, physical health, and mortality. However, external factors like stress can undermine close relationships and lead to poor individual and relationship satisfaction (Holman & Jacquart, 1988). Mounting evidence shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased stressors in couples’ lives – including greater childcare responsibilities (Carlson et al., 2020 *under review*), high rates of unemployment (UN Labour Agency, 2020), and the closure of public spaces (WHO, 2020). One way that stressors might be insidiously shaping people’s relationships is by limiting their growth by impeding fun and exciting leisure activities together. Based on previous research, we hypothesized that stress will be associated with a lower quality of shared leisure time (i.e., less exciting and more familiar activities engaged in with the partner). Furthermore, relationship motivation will moderate the relationship between stress and relationship outcomes such that people with higher approach-motivated goals will engage in more exciting partnered activities.

**Methods**

This research used data collected as part of a larger 6-week longitudinal study assessing relationship experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eligible participants completed an intake questionnaire assessing demographic factors, pandemic experiences, relationship experiences, and individual differences. Participants then completed 5 weekly surveys with measures related to their pandemic experiences, relationship experiences, friendships, and individual differences.

**Results**

As predicted, we found that perceived stress and approach relationship goals predicted engagement in exciting activities at intake. Higher perceived stress was also linked with engaging in fewer exciting activities at later time points, including spending less time in exciting activities, reporting fewer exciting activities with one’s partner, and rating those activities as less exciting. Although approach goals were linked with spending more time in exciting activities at intake, we did not find evidence for the moderating effect of approach relationship goals on perceived stress and engagement in exciting activities. In other words, we did not find evidence for the buffering effect of approach relationship goals on the relation between stress and shared leisure time.

**Discussion**

We conclude that higher levels of perceived stress are linked to spending less time in exciting couple activities, as well as rating activities as less subjectively exciting. However, we did not find evidence for the buffering effect of approach relationship goals on the relation between stress and shared leisure time. This research implies that stress and approach motivation both influence engagement in exciting activities, but further research should explore these relations.