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Walking a Security Tightrope:

Relationship-induced Changes in Attachment Security

Ximena B. Arriaga

Madoka Kumashiro

Purdue University

Goldsmiths, University of London

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Corresponding author: Dr. Ximena Arriaga, 703 Third Street, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2081, [Arriaga@purdue.edu](mailto:Arriaga@purdue.edu), (765) 586-2892.

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## Abstract

Little is known about how romantic relationships enhance long-term attachment security. Change is likely to involve revising deep-seated beliefs and expectations regarding one's self as being unworthy and others as untrustworthy (insecure internal working models). When individuals become anxious, partners can provide immediate reassurance, but the path to long-term security may hinge on addressing the individual's insecure self-perceptions; when individuals become avoidant, partners can "soften" interactions that involve relational give-and-take, but long-term security may hinge on instilling positive associations with interdependence and trust. As described in the Attachment Security Enhancement Model (ASEM), relationships can afford optimal interactions that involve two processes working in tandem: mitigating momentary insecurity, and fostering secure working models over the long-term.

## Walking a Security Tightrope:

## Relationship-induced Changes in Attachment Security

The universal desire to be accepted and valued by close others is not always attainable. Some individuals experience momentary insecurity, whereas others experience chronic tendencies, captured by the attachment insecurity dimensions of anxiety (hyperactivated concerns over being abandoned) or avoidance (distancing oneself from intimacy and dependence). Attachment-anxious adults cling to relationships and perpetually seek care and support; attachment-avoidant adults become distant or detached during emotional interactions or situations involving support. Others who are relatively secure (i.e., low on anxiety and avoidance dimensions) experience intimacy without fearing abandonment, feel comfortable seeking and providing support, and balance needs for autonomy and dependence [1].

Achieving attachment security has numerous interpersonal and intrapersonal benefits [2, 3]. How, then, can people attain such security? Although attachment security has been shown to fluctuate throughout the lifespan and change in romantic bonds [4-6], less is known about how to actively promote security. Current interventions achieve temporary security (e.g., priming effects; [7, 8, 9]) or require comprehensive therapy [10, 11].

Romantic relationships provide an optimal context for enhancing attachment security [12,13]. They may revise specific deep-seated beliefs, feelings, and expectations, encapsulated into internalized mental representations, or “internal working models,” concerning oneself and close others. A new line of thinking suggests how partners may target and revise *specific internal working models* depending on an individual’s specific insecurity [12], and how changes in one mental model may have ripple effects on another mental model.

We briefly review the origins of adult insecure orientations, which suggests how they might change in relationships. We then detail how individuals who primarily exhibit anxious responses may become more secure through experiences that improve their stable beliefs and expectations about themselves (internal working model of self), which in turn may reduce their worries about abandonment (internal working models of others); individuals who primarily exhibit avoidant responses may become more secure through experiences that instill positive beliefs about close and emotional interactions (internal working models of close others), which in turn may promote positive self-perceptions (internal working model of self).

### **Origins and Features of Insecurity**

Consistent with the development of other personality tendencies, people form attachment orientations from interactions that reveal information about themselves and others [14-17]. Chronically anxious individuals have a history that has reinforced excessive dependence on others. They yearn for acceptance because close others occasionally met their needs but generally were inconsistent or inept in their care. Others receive intrusive care, robbing individuals of opportunities to develop an autonomous, efficacious, and competent sense of self [18].

As Table 1 conveys, these anxiety-inducing experiences reinforce doubts about one's self-worth (negative model of self) and ambivalence towards close relationships (ambivalent models of others). Anxious adults become preoccupied with maintaining close relationships, are quick to perceive relationship threats, and internalize threats as evidence of being unworthy [19, 20]. The constant search for reassurance has a self-fulfilling effect of straining relationships and leaving little room for personal development [20, 1].

Chronically avoidant adults, in contrast, have a history of consistent neglect/rejection, enough to warrant disengaging from others to protect their emotions. They increasingly become self-reliant out of necessity and construct their own self-worth rather than deriving it from others [1]. As Table 1 conveys, individuals internalize these experiences, mistrusting others (negative models of others) and creating a fragile model of self (often excessively positive on the surface to mask deeper insecurity). Interactions that involve emotional intensity or the exchange of support trigger emotional distancing, which has a self-fulfilling effect of undermining closeness [2] and trust and reinforcing negative models of others.

### **Relationship-Based Security**

It is increasingly evident that experiences in romantic relationships affect adult attachment orientations [6, 12-13, 21-23]. Relationship-based changes need not occur within conscious awareness. As shown in Figure 1, the Attachment Security Enhancement Model (ASEM; [12]) suggests that relationships may elicit greater security when partners (1) effectively regulate moments of relational tension, and (2) create opportunities to instill positive working models. Security-enhancing processes are likely to vary depending on which insecure orientation prevails, and skilled partners may (intentionally or unintentionally) enact strategies that target specific insecure responses [13, 23]. Even individuals with chronically elevated anxiety *and* avoidance typically exhibit either anxiety or avoidance in the immediate moment. Partners may shift their strategies as distinct insecurities unfold in a given interaction. In calmer times, partners can foster secure internal working models, as we detail below.

We discuss relationship-induced pathways to security, but also how active efforts to enhance security may backfire. Partners must (metaphorically) “walk a tightrope” as they

balance several issues. Relationship-induced security becomes unlikely among partners who prefer the status quo, resist change, or have entrenched insecurities requiring therapy [11].

**Reducing attachment-anxious responses.** As Table 1 suggests, when anxious individuals fear relationship threats, partners may prevent further insecurity by enacting strategies that convey “safety” in their relationship ([12] and see “safe strategies” in the Table 1 note). Skilled partners provide reassurance and convey strong commitment, for example, by exaggerating affection and avoiding criticism, addressing an anxious person’s hurt feelings by expressing remorse, and combatting an anxious person’s jealousy through intimate touch [24-26].

However, excessive reassurance from a partner may not be sufficient to enhance security. Partners become dissatisfied when they must provide constant reassurance [24, 25]. Moreover, partner reassurance may soothe immediate insecurity without changing the underlying negative model of the self that sustains anxiety. Although improving relationship satisfaction predicts reduced attachment anxiety [27], it remains unclear whether this is mediated through relationship features (e.g., exchange of support) or changes in self-perceptions (e.g., feeling valued).

Ultimately, changing deep-seated beliefs to be more secure may require combining reassurance with encouraging opportunities to bolster self-efficacy and autonomy. Attachment anxiety is likely to decline as individuals not only feel safety in their relationship but also gain self-confidence in their own abilities to navigate life challenges, much as children develop secure tendencies through feeling a safe-haven with a caregiver while also gaining self-confidence in their own pursuits [28].

How might partners create conditions to encourage greater autonomy and confidence?

As Table 1 suggests, partners can encourage anxious individuals to begin with small steps toward independent pursuits; gradually partners may amplify successes and encourage new challenges. Skilled partners also minimize their own role, and help anxious individuals learn to attribute successes to their own efforts – for example, through partner compliments that connect an individual’s accomplishments to broader positive qualities [29]. Feelings of personal competence are likely to breed self-confidence.

To be effective at enhancing security, partners must “walk a tightrope”, balancing various issues. One issue concerns providing encouragement that is authentic and objectively verifiable; anxious individuals often feel indebted when partners encourage them [30] and may attribute partner praises as “charity” rather than to their own competence. Another issue concerns identifying challenges that afford confidence *and* can be conquered, without being intrusive [31]; failures may cause anxious individuals to feel renewed inadequacy and dependence.

As anxious individuals gain a sense of competence, positive self-worth, and autonomy, their increased personal confidence breeds relational confidence, reduced demands and dependence on a relationship, and smoother interactions. Boosts to one’s self-model thus may ripple into greater security in models of close others.

**Reducing attachment-avoidant responses.** As Table 1 shows, when individuals are reluctant to be highly interdependent or disengage from emotional interactions, partners buffer such avoidance through “softening” strategies (see Table 1 note). Skilled partners are careful not to exacerbate avoidance. For example, partners of avoidant individuals may tone

down emotional-laden interactions, manage their requests for the avoidant person to sacrifice something desired, and acknowledge and value the avoidant person's autonomy needs [32-34], which can buffer and even bolster avoidant individuals' commitment and trust [35].

Ultimately, however, long-term declines in attachment avoidance may require more than deflecting momentary avoidant thoughts and feelings. Relationships eventually require interdependence. When partners must perpetually soften their requests, they grow frustrated from "diluting" the inevitable give-and-take of relationships [36] and foregoing opportunities to enjoy positive aspects of mutual dependence.

As Table 1 shows, avoidant individuals may become more secure through experiences that create positive associations with dependence, countering their negative expectations. For example, if they inadvertently enjoying a caregiving experience, this model-discrepant event may cause them to revise their models of others, as revealed among avoidant fathers of newborn infants who became less avoidant after providing support to their spouses [37].

Avoidant individuals do not actively seek positive interactions with others but nonetheless benefit from interpersonal closeness and validation [38]. For example, avoidant individuals assigned to couples' yoga and an engaging self-disclosure task (Aron's "fast friends" paradigm; [39]) became more secure one month later, relative to control-condition participants [40]. Importantly, the self-disclosure was by choice and unanticipated (i.e., for a study they opted to do, involving unforeseeable activities). Even if previously they had resisted direct partner requests for intimate self-disclosure, the study provided new and model-discrepant experiences that revised their working model of relationships to be more positive.

Partners of avoidant individuals must balance various issues. One issue is that overt partner efforts will likely backfire if avoidant individuals perceive threats to their autonomy, feel manipulated, or receive partner requests that are not sufficiently softened [32]. Providing support also may cause issues; partners must judge how much advice to provide without giving blatant emotional support, which causes avoidant individuals to become distant [34, 41].

New experiences that instill positive associations with dependence and emotional closeness (working models of close others) may positively affect the model of self. As avoidant individuals learn to trust others and derive benefits from others' support and love, this may ripple into self-perceptions that are authentically positive rather than defensively-bolstered.

### **Take-away Messages and Future Directions**

The ASEM propose ways of leveraging the power of relationships to achieve greater security, through specific and targeted changes in internal working models. Anxious individuals are overly concerned with defending their relationship but may become less anxious as partners guide them to derive self-esteem and self-efficacy from their independent activities and goal pursuits, suggesting a transition from being relationship-focused to positively self-focused. Avoidant individuals are focused on defending their independence but may become less avoidant as partners guide them to trust others, suggesting a transition from being self-focused to positively relationship-focused. Future research is needed to examine how individuals makes these transitions, and whether targeted changes to one model have a knock-off effect on promoting security across mental models.

Change is challenging, and it remains to be determined whether changes are viable and lasting. Nevertheless, if partners skillfully “walk the tightrope,” the reward could be an upward spiral in which greater security and relationship satisfaction mutually reinforce each other.

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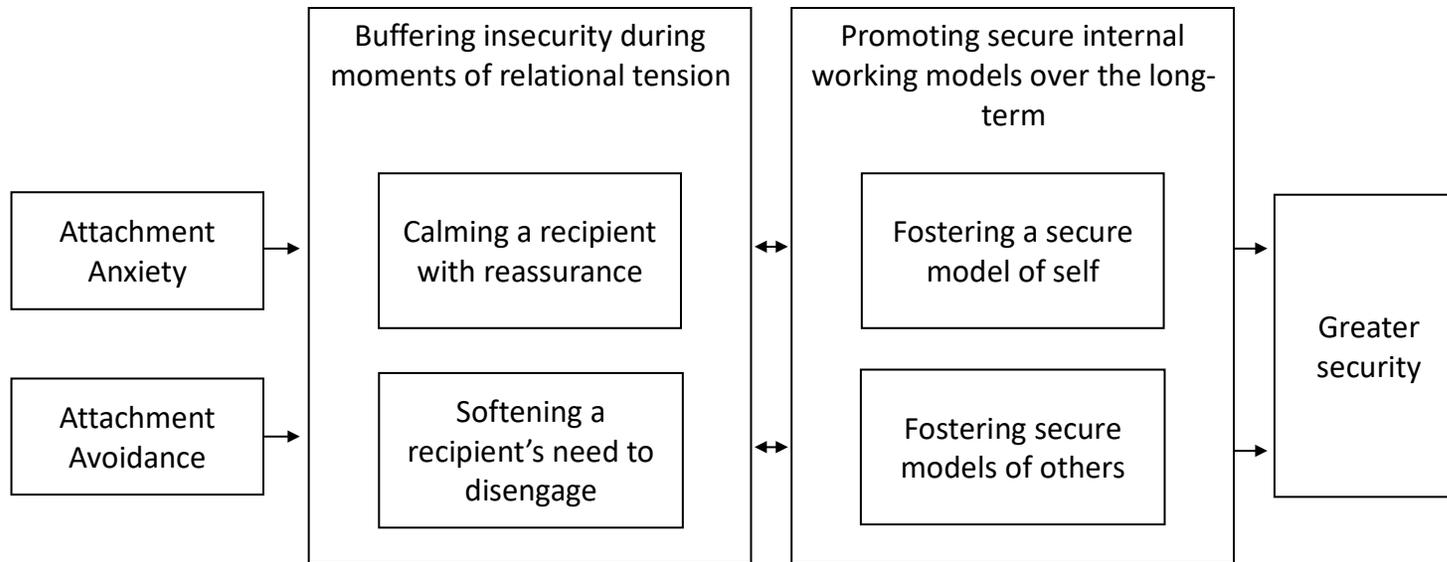
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**Table 1.** Sample features of insecurity, partner efforts to prevent reinforcing insecurity, and situations that foster secure working models

	Features of insecurity	Preventing further insecurity during moments of relationship tension	Fostering secure internal working models over time
Attachment Anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Negative model of self</li> <li>- Ambivalent models of others</li> <li>- Fear relationship threats, and hyper-activate efforts to assert dependence</li> <li>- Prone to negative attributions and affect, emotional intensity and increased drama in interactions</li> </ul>	<p><i>Sample “safe” partner behaviors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Providing reassurance when negative emotions are triggered</li> <li>- Conveying commitment, reasserting a strong and intimate emotional bond</li> </ul>	<p><i>Sample situations that instill confidence and foster a secure model of self</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Being complimented and appreciated (e.g., partner lauds recipient, helps recipient set achievable personal goals that gradually become more challenging)</li> <li>- Deriving a sense of self-efficacy during challenging or distressing personal situations (e.g., partner provides praise or encouragement as recipient handles a problem/issue)</li> <li>- Being encouraged (and learning) to attribute personal accomplishments to one’s own efforts.</li> </ul>
Attachment Avoidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fragile model of self</li> <li>- Negative models of others</li> <li>- Disengaged when others are emotional, dependent, or attempt to change them</li> <li>- Prone to low commitment in relationships</li> </ul>	<p><i>Sample “soft” partner behaviors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regulating others’ desire to avoid emotionally-charged interactions</li> <li>- Conveying how and why certain requests and needs in relationships are reasonable</li> </ul>	<p><i>Sample situations that create positive dependence and foster secure models of others</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feeling unexpectedly positive in interpersonal or caregiving situations assumed to be aversive</li> <li>- Experiencing fun or positive interdependence, which creates positive associations with closeness (e.g., fun activities with a partner)</li> <li>- Inadvertently attaining benefits from partner support, which weakens negative associations with dependence</li> </ul>

*Note:* Processes that prevent further insecurity in the second column also have been described as “partner buffering” against insecurity (ASEM [11]). “Safe strategies” are those that lessen the impact on attachment anxiety “soft strategies” allay attachment avoidance. Several recent papers describe these processes in further detail [11, 21, 22].



**Figure 1.** The Attachment Security Enhancement Model (ASEM)

The Attachment Security Enhancement Model (ASEM [11]) describes a dual-process model of how relationships can provide a platform for strengthening attachment security. The model proposes different pathways for achieving greater security within anxious versus avoidant insecure orientations, through specific changes to internal working models of the self and others. The left side of the model describes partner efforts to buffer insecurity during moments of relational tension when insecurities are activated; it specifies “safe strategies” to buffer anxiety and “soft strategies” to buffer avoidance. Buffering strategies soothe immediate insecurity but may not necessarily modify the most insecure internal working models. The right side of the model then describes how partners can promote secure working models over time when tensions are not activated, and suggests fostering security in the model of the self to change anxious thoughts and feelings and security in models of others to change avoidant thoughts and feelings. Targeting specific internal working models may have positive spill-over effects on other working models. The dual processes of the ASEM (see Table 1) are theorized to work in tandem.