


Perceiving Relationship Success Through a Motivational Lens: A Regulatory Focus Perspective

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Abstract

The current research examined the hypothesis that the relative importance of growth- and security-related relationship qualities in establishing successful relationships depends on the motivational orientation—regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997)—of the individual. Across four studies, we found that individuals in a promotion focus, whether chronic (Studies 1-2, 4) or temporarily induced (Study 2), prioritized the presence of relationship growth versus security in perceiving relationship success (Studies 1-2), rated their own relationship well-being higher when growth (but not security) qualities were present (Study 3), and experienced heightened relationship well-being when room for growth was manipulated to appear abundant versus limited (Study 4). In contrast, prevention-focused individuals did not place as much emphasis on growth relative to security (Studies 1 and 3) and, when forced to choose, preferred a relationship characterized by security versus growth (Study 2). These findings suggest the value of considering motivational orientations in understanding how relationship success is experienced.

Keywords

close relationships, regulatory focus, motivation, relationship well-being

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Relationships are critical for health and happiness. Successful social relationships enhance various aspects of personal well-being such as physical health (Cohen, 2004), happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002), work productivity (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008), and even life span (King & Reis, 2012). It is critical, then, to understand what leads individuals to feel that their relationships are successful. Relationship science has emphasized the role that security (stability, consistency, predictability) and growth (fun, excitement, and relationship development) play in fostering successful romantic relationships (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). However, we propose that there may be important (and systematic) individual variability in how growth versus security contribute to perceptions of relationship success. Using insights from regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), we propose that whether a relationship characterized by security versus growth contributes to relationship success is shaped by people's motivational orientations.

and well-being of relationships (Cavallo, Murray, & Holmes, 2013; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Murray et al., 2006). Feeling a sense of security involves trusting in a partner's care and love and feeling that one's relationship is stable—that is, consistent, predictable, and reliable (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). For example, attachment theory posits that experiencing a sense of security and trust with early caregivers fosters the formation of secure attachment, which in turn engenders interpersonal well-being with other relationships across the life span (e.g., Ainsworth, 1979; Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Feeney, 1996).

More recently, relationship researchers have emphasized the importance of growth or advancement as another critical contributor to relationship success, above and beyond the need for security (e.g., Aron & Aron, 1997; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Reis et al., 2010). Relationship growth is conceptualized as the

Security and Growth as Key Features of Relationship Success

Existing theorizing in close relationships has long emphasized the importance of maintaining security for the success

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presence of positive characteristics such as fun and excitement that facilitate relationship and personal development. Although security and stability are required at some minimum level to maintain a relationship, growth-related characteristics capture the need for progress and gains (including adopting new values, standards, and experiences) within a relationship.

Indeed, the underlying assumption of self-expansion theory is that continued growth is integral to relationship success (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991) as people are motivated to broaden their sense of self by adopting others' traits and values and developing new perspectives (Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013; Aron, Norman, & Aron, 1998; Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2014). Research has shown that novel and exciting experiences have many benefits for romantic relationships, including greater satisfaction and commitment (Aron, Norman, Aron, & Lewandowski, 2002; Graham, 2008), and lower likelihood of dissolution (Aron et al., 1992; Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010; Tsapelas, Aron, & Orbach, 2009).

While it has been well established that security and growth are both critical to fostering successful relationships, it remains unclear whether the presence of relationship growth and security (e.g., having a relationship that is fun and exciting vs. having a relationship that is reliable and secure) are valued equally by all individuals. Past work has found that there are motivational differences in how positive versus negative relationship factors contribute to relationship satisfaction (Gable & Poore, 2008; Impett et al., 2010), demonstrating that chronically approach-motivated people are happiest in their relationships when positive thoughts and feelings are present (reward features), whereas chronically avoidance-motivated people are happiest in their relationships when negative feelings are absent (i.e., when they do not feel rejected; threat features). Researchers have concluded that approach-motivated relationship goals (approaching positive end states) are generally adaptive, while avoidance-motivated relationship goals (avoiding negative end states) are maladaptive (e.g., Gable, 2006; Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; see Gable & Gosnell, 2013, for a review).

The current research, instead, examines if there are differences in the particular *kinds* of positive relationship experiences that lead to perceptions of relationship success (i.e., growth or security qualities—both of which are positive, adaptive, and can be motivated by approach or avoidance). Given that there are important motivational differences in how people define and experience success generally (Higgins et al., 2001; Higgins & Tykocinski, 1992; Scholer & Higgins, 2013), there may also be important motivational differences in the importance of growth versus security when evaluating the success of their relationships.

Individual Differences in Emphasizing Growth and Security

Regulatory focus theory posits there are two distinct self-regulatory systems—prevention and promotion (Higgins, 1997). Both systems are independent constructs that autonomously pursue divergent goals.¹ The prevention system regulates security, safety, and responsibility needs. Goals are viewed as duties and obligations, and there is a sensitivity to approaching non-losses (the absence of negatives) and avoiding losses (the presence of negatives; Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins et al., 2001). In contrast, the promotion system regulates nurturance and growth needs and is concerned with the pursuit of hopes and dreams. In the promotion system, goals are viewed as ideals and hopes, and there is a sensitivity to approaching gains (the presence of positives) and avoiding non-gains (the absence of positives; Higgins et al., 2001; Scholer & Higgins, 2013).

Critical to the current research, the distinct concerns of each system result in different definitions of success and failure (Scholer & Higgins, 2013; Scholer, Zou, Fujita, Stroessner, & Higgins, 2010; Zou, Scholer, & Higgins, 2014). Within the prevention system, success is characterized by the maintenance of security and non-loss (positive deviations from loss to a satisfactory state; Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Freitas, Liberman, & Higgins, 2002; Higgins, 1997; Scholer & Higgins, 2008, 2012; Scholer et al., 2010). In contrast, within the promotion system, success is characterized as gains or growth toward positive change (positive deviations from the status quo; Zou et al., 2014).

It is important to note that promotion and prevention focus are distinct from approach and avoidance orientations (see Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008, for a review). Promotion and prevention each involve both approaching desired end states and avoiding undesired end states (e.g., Higgins, 1997), and their distinction can also be found in their links to relationship outcomes. While approach-motivated people tend to have higher relationship well-being and avoidance-motivated people tend to have poorer relationships (e.g., Gable, 2006; Gable & Gosnell, 2013), both promotion and prevention concerns have been shown to foster relationship well-being (Molden & Finkel, 2010; Molden, Lucas, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2009; Winterheld & Simpson, 2011).

Given the relevance of growth and advancement within the promotion system, and security and maintenance within the prevention system, we predicted that what “counts” toward relationship success for promotion- versus prevention-focused individuals may depend on whether their relationship is characterized by growth or security. Indeed, previous research has shown that concerns with promotion and prevention shape perceptions in close relationships in critical ways (e.g., see Molden & Winterheld, 2013, for a review). While stronger promotion concerns lead people to focus on achieving personal hopes and aspirations within the

relationship, people with stronger prevention concerns attend to the fulfillment of personal responsibilities and standards within the relationship (e.g., Finkel, Molden, Johnson, & Eastwick, 2009; Hui, Molden, & Finkel, 2013; Molden & Finkel, 2010; Righetti, Finkenauer, & Rusbult, 2011; Winterheld & Simpson, 2011, 2016; see Luchies, Finkel, & Fitzsimons, 2011). For instance, promotion-focused people are more likely to forgive their partners when there are perceived benefits to be attained by repairing the relationship (Molden & Finkel, 2010). In contrast, for prevention-focused people, one's commitment to maintaining a relationship more strongly predicts forgiveness (Molden & Finkel, 2010).

Past work has also demonstrated factors that predict relationship well-being differently for promotion- versus prevention-focused people. Perceived partner support for one's personal promotion-focused goals (i.e., ideals, hopes), but not prevention-focused goals (i.e., obligations, duties) predicted relationship well-being for people in promotion-oriented relationship contexts (i.e., unmarried couples; Molden et al., 2009). Furthermore, perceived partner support for personal needs affects relationship well-being differently for promotion- than for prevention-focused people (Hui et al., 2013). Support for basic needs of autonomy (e.g., feeling support for one's freedom of choice) is critical for relationship well-being for promotion-focused, but not prevention-focused individuals, because it gives them the independence to achieve their own aspirations apart from the priorities of their partner.

These studies provide evidence that concerns with advancement and growth broadly shape how promotion-focused individuals think and behave in romantic relationships, but are less influential for those with a prevention focus. Furthermore, they shed light on how motivational orientations interact with different types of personal support (e.g., support for individual needs, personal goals) to predict relationship well-being, but not how characteristics within the relationship predict relationship well-being. The current research examines an unexplored phenomenon: how the presence or absence of growth- versus security-related relationship qualities (e.g., a relationship characterized by fun and excitement versus stability and reliability) affects perceptions of relationship success as a function of motivational concerns.

In the current research, we contend that the extent to which a relationship is characterized by growth versus security will affect relationship well-being differently for promotion- versus prevention-focused people. Because promotion-focused people (a) define success through the presence of growth and gains more broadly, and (b) value partner support for growth needs in their relationship, we predict that promotion-focused people will also experience higher relationship well-being when growth-related relationship qualities are more versus less present in their relationship. Building on Aron et al.'s (2000) description of the kinds of experiences that promote growth and expansion in close

relationships (Aron et al., 2013), promotion-focused people may especially value growth in their relationships such as experiencing fun and excitement. It may also be reflected in the need for novelty and connection that contribute to a sense of positive progress toward relationship gains. In contrast, we predict that growth will not be linked to perceived relationship success for prevention-focused individuals, given that prevention success is primarily about maintaining non-loss.

In contrast, we predict that prevention-focused people may be particularly likely to value relationships characterized by the presence of security. However, although the self-regulation literature makes a clear case for prevention-focused individuals valuing security (e.g., Crowe & Higgins, 1997), research in close relationships suggests that security may be so fundamental in the interpersonal context that it will be difficult to detect differences in its importance (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Security in close relationships has also been argued to serve as a necessary precondition for experiencing growth (Feeney & Thrush, 2010; Green & Campbell, 2000). Thus, taking into account both self-regulation and close relationship findings, we predict that the link between security and prevention success, if it emerges, will be more likely to become apparent when examining the *relative* importance of security versus growth in relationships. If forced to consider the relative value of security versus growth qualities to their overall relationship success, prevention-focused (but not promotion-focused) individuals may place relatively greater value on security.

This work advances relationship science because it challenges a "one size fits all" approach and, instead, provides a framework for understanding the qualities that predict experiencing relationship success. This research has the potential to make significant contributions to both relationship and self-regulation science with practical implications for designing interventions to improve people's romantic relationships.

The Present Research

The current research examined whether individual differences in regulatory focus shape the extent to which growth- versus security-related relationship qualities contribute to evaluations of relationship success. We tested the hypothesis that experiencing growth in one's relationship is particularly important and beneficial for promotion-focused, but not prevention-focused individuals. We also examined how the presence of security in relationships (or security relative to growth) may be related to perceptions of relationship success for prevention-focused individuals. The first two studies examined how chronic differences in regulatory focus predicted the importance of growth- and security-related relationship qualities (Study 1) and preference for relationships comprised of growth- versus security-related relationship characteristics (Study 2). Study 3 manipulated regulatory

focus and examined the primary hypothesis that promotion, but not prevention-focused individuals would rate their relationship well-being higher when their relationships were characterized by more growth (but not security). Study 4 tested our prediction that a manipulation of growth potential would affect relationship well-being for those high in promotion (but not prevention) focus.

Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to investigate whether the importance people place on growth- or security-related relationship qualities would be differentially predicted by regulatory focus. Participants completed a measure of chronic regulatory focus and rated the importance of relationship growth and security in their own relationships. We examined the extent to which regulatory focus predicted both the absolute and relative importance ratings for growth and security. We hypothesized that promotion focus would positively predict the importance of growth-related (e.g., fun, excitement) but not security-related (e.g., stability, reliability) relationship qualities. Specifically, we expected promotion focus to predict the importance of growth at both an absolute level and relative to the presence of security. In contrast, we predicted that prevention focus would not predict the importance of growth. In addition, we explored whether prevention focus would predict the importance of security for both absolute and relative ratings.

Method

Participants. Based on effect sizes from previous research examining regulatory focus and relationship outcomes (Hui et al., 2013), it seemed reasonable to expect an effect size in the small to medium range ($\eta_p^2 = .04$). We had the resources to collect a large sample of 400 participants with a conservative estimate of a small effect size for this study. A G*Power analysis suggested that a sample of approximately 80 participants would give us .8 power to detect an effect size of $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Our sample of 405 participants gave us >99% power to detect an effect size of $\eta_p^2 = .04$. We recruited 405 (222 females, 182 males, one unspecified) U.S. participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Participants were required to be in romantic relationships ($M = 8.14$ years, $SD = 9.42$) and were given financial payment for their time. Participants were between 18 and 74 years of age ($M = 35.80$, $SD = 12.22$). Participants were generally quite satisfied with their relationship ($M = 6.05$, $SD = 1.11$; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000b; $\alpha = .94$).

Procedure and measures. Participants first completed the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ; Higgins et al., 2001) to assess chronic promotion and prevention focus, followed by a series of other filler personality measures.² The RFQ is an 11-item measure that captures chronic regulatory focus

orientations by assessing participants' history with promotion and prevention success. Using a 5-point scale from 1 (*never or seldom*) to 5 (*very often*), participants answered six promotion focus and five prevention focus items. Sample promotion focus items included "Do you often do well at different things that you try?" and "How often have you accomplished things that got you 'psyched' to work even harder?" Sample prevention focus items included "How often did you obey rules and regulations that were established by your parents?" and "Not being careful enough has gotten me into trouble at times (reversed)." The internal reliability of the prevention scale was good ($\alpha = .82$) and adequate for the promotion scale ($\alpha = .67$). Although the promotion scale reliability is lower than ideal, given the established validity of the RFQ (Haws, Dholakia, & Bearden, 2010) and its wide use across many investigations of regulatory focus (e.g., Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Hui et al., 2013), we proceeded to compute the subscales as traditionally done.

Next, participants were asked to rate the importance that they place on various relationship qualities. Embedded in the questionnaire were both growth- and security-related relationship qualities (which were randomly ordered). We included nine items to capture growth-related qualities in relationships and nine items to capture security/stability-related qualities (1 = *not at all* and 7 = *extremely*).

To capture growth in relationships, we adopted Aron et al.'s (2000) conceptualization of growth through self-expansion and emphasized qualities that allowed for the potential for relationship growth (advancement beyond a satisfactory state, progress, and the possibility for gains), such as fun, excitement, novelty, and connection. Growth-related items included "I care a lot about having excitement in my relationship" and "I want to have adventures with my partner that we can look forward to." The subscale capturing security and stability focused on qualities necessary to maintain a satisfactory non-loss state, such as stability, predictability, and consistency, which are not directly linked to the possibility for gains and growth. Sample items included "I want my relationship to be reliable and consistent" and "I want to be able to predict what my partner will do in most situations." Both the Growth ($\alpha = .89$) and Security ($\alpha = .89$) subscales had good reliability.

Results and Discussion

We conducted a repeated measures analysis of importance of relationship growth/security as a within-subjects factor, and promotion and prevention focus as between-subjects covariates. There was no main effect of prevention focus, $F(1, 402) = .05$, $p = .827$, $\eta^2 < .01$, and a significant positive main effect of promotion focus, $F(1, 402) = 22.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$. There was a main effect of quality type; participants rated the importance of growth more highly ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 0.90$) than security ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.80$), $F(1, 402) = 535.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .57$. Critically, the interaction between

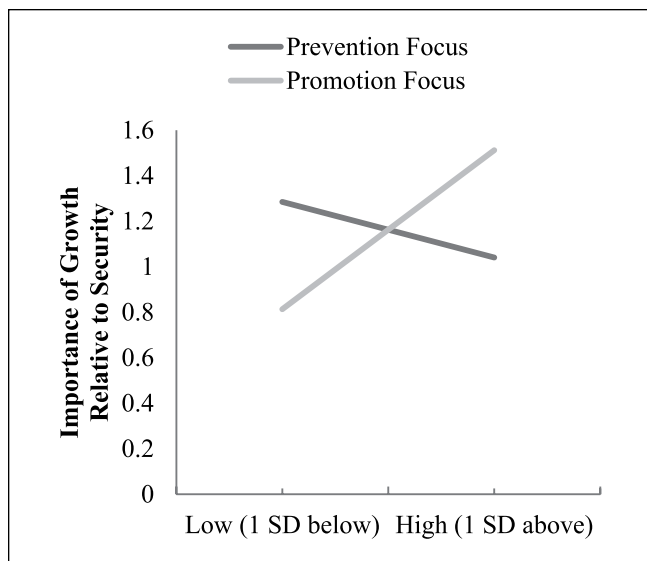


Figure 1. Importance of growth relative to security qualities for people low (-1 SD) and high ($+1$ SD) in prevention and promotion focus.

Note. Chronically high ($+1$ SD above the *mean*) versus low (-1 SD below the *mean*) promotion-focused individuals prioritized the importance of relationship growth relative to security. Compared with people low in prevention focus, highly prevention-focused people were less likely to prioritize the importance of relationship growth relative to security (Study 1).

relationship qualities type and promotion focus, $F(1, 402) = 46.39, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$, and the interaction between relationship qualities type and prevention focus, $F(1, 402) = 5.60, p = .018, \eta^2 = .01$, were both significant in the predicted directions.³ To examine the pattern of the interactions, we conducted two sets of follow-up analyses. First, we examined how regulatory focus predicted the importance of growth and security at an absolute level. We then examined how promotion- and prevention-focused individuals *prioritized* the importance of growth relative to security.

We first examined how promotion and prevention focus predicted the importance of growth and security separately, at an absolute level. We conducted two multiple regression analyses: one with importance of growth as the dependent variable and the other with importance of security, both with promotion and prevention focus (standardized) as simultaneous predictors. Consistent with our predictions, promotion focus significantly predicted the importance of relationship growth, $\beta = .33, t(402) = 7.73, 95\%$ confidence interval (CI; all subsequent analyses refer to 95% interval) = [.25, .42], $p < .001$, but not relationship security, $\beta = -.02, t(402) = -.45, CI = [-.10, .06], p = .650$. Prevention focus did not significantly predict the importance of growth, $\beta = -.07, t(402) = -1.59, CI = [-.15, .02], p = .113$, or security, $\beta = .05, t(402) = 1.31, CI = [-.03, .13], p = .190$.

To examine regulatory focus differences in the relative importance of growth versus security, we created an index of relative prioritization. We calculated a difference score by

subtracting security ratings from growth ratings. We regressed the difference score on promotion and prevention focus simultaneously. Consistent with our hypothesis, promotion focus positively predicted prioritization of growth over security, $\beta = .33, t(402) = 6.81, CI = [.25, .45], p < .001$. In contrast, prevention focus negatively predicted prioritization of growth over security, $\beta = -.11, t(402) = -2.37, CI = [-.22, -.02], p = .018$ (see Figure 1).

Consistent with our theorizing, Study 1 provided evidence that people chronically high in promotion focus perceived growth-related qualities to be more important in relationships than people low in promotion focus. Furthermore, promotion focus did not predict the importance of security-related qualities. Indeed, these data from this study suggest that promotion-focused people place relatively more importance on growth- versus security-related relationship qualities. In contrast, we observed that although prevention focus did not predict the value of security qualities at an absolute level, prevention-focused individuals did place relatively less importance on growth *relative* to security. In the current study, we did not ask participants to explicitly indicate how they would prioritize growth versus security concerns, which may have more directly revealed their fundamental concerns with security relative to growth. We address this in Study 2, in which we examined prioritization of growth versus security when these experiences were directly pitted against one another.

Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine how promotion- versus prevention-focused people would prioritize growth or security using a more rigorous methodology to assess relative importance. Specifically, we adopted a forced-choice paradigm in which participants had to indicate the extent to which they would value growth *versus* security. In this study, individuals were presented with a dichotomous choice between a relationship characterized primarily by excitement and growth versus a relationship characterized primarily by security and stability. We hypothesized that promotion-focused people would more strongly prefer the couple that displayed growth-related qualities, while prevention-focused people would more strongly prefer the couple that displayed security-related qualities.

Method

Participants. We recruited 201 (91 females, 110 males) U.S. participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Participants were between 18 and 74 years of age ($M = 32.25, SD = 10.87$).

Procedure and measures. Participants first completed the same RFQ (Higgins et al., 2001) as in Study 1 to assess chronic promotion and prevention focus. The internal

reliabilities of the Prevention scale ($\alpha = .83$) and the Promotion scale ($\alpha = .74$) were adequate.

Next, participants read vignettes of two couples—Sarah and John, and Amy and Dan, which appeared in counterbalanced order (no order effects were found). Participants were told that both couples were highly satisfied in their relationship and that they loved and cared for one another. However, the description of Sarah and John's relationship reflected the presence of growth-related qualities, emphasizing excitement and trying new things. In contrast, the description of Amy and Dan's relationship reflected the presence of security-related qualities, emphasizing routine activities and stability.

Finally, participants indicated which relationship they would rather have using a forced-choice paradigm. Participants answered either "I would rather have a relationship like Sarah and John's" or "I would rather have a relationship like Amy and Dan's."

Results and Discussion

Our analyses began with a chi-square test revealing that both couples were attractive to participants; neither couple was overwhelmingly preferred (52.7% of participants chose the growth-relevant couple, $\chi^2 = .602, p = .481$). We then tested our prediction that promotion and prevention focus would differentially predict the relative importance placed on growth- versus security-related qualities by conducting a binary logistic regression with the preferred couple as the dependent variable (0 = preference for security-related couple, 1 = preference for growth-related couple), and both promotion and prevention focus as simultaneous predictors. Consistent with our predictions, we found that promotion focus significantly positively predicted relationship choice (odds ratio [OR] = 1.37, $p = .036$, 95% CI = [1.02, 1.8]), indicating a preference for the growth couple's relationship. In contrast, we found that prevention focus significantly negatively predicted relationship choice (OR = .63, $p = .003$, 95% CI = [.47, .86]), indicating a preference for the security-related couple's relationship.

The results of this study provided evidence that people high (vs. low) in promotion focus preferred a relationship that emphasized growth versus security (given the same level of relationship well-being). This study also provided evidence that, in this forced-choice paradigm, prevention-focused individuals prioritize security over growth qualities.

Study 3

Study 3 was designed to build on Studies 1 and 2 by examining how perceptions of relationship well-being are affected by the presence of growth and security differently for individuals in a promotion- versus prevention-focused state. Study 3 also built on Studies 1 and 2 by manipulating, rather than measuring, regulatory focus to provide increased confidence in the

proposed causal model. Although people can be chronically promotion-focused or prevention-focused, each system can also be situationally induced (Freitas & Higgins, 2002; Higgins et al., 2001; Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994).

Participants in this study evaluated the presence of growth- and security-related relationship qualities in their romantic relationship and then reported their relationship well-being. We predicted that people induced into a promotion-focused state would evaluate their relationships more positively when their relationship had more (vs. less) growth-related qualities, but that their relationship quality would be unaffected by the presence or absence of security-related relationship qualities. In contrast, we predicted that the presence or absence of growth-related qualities would not affect relationship well-being for those induced into a prevention focus. We predicted that the relationship well-being of participants in a prevention-focused (vs. promotion-focused) state would be related to the relative weight of security versus growth qualities, rather than to the absolute presence of these qualities.

Method

Participants. Based on previous studies examining regulatory focus and relationship outcomes with effect sizes in the medium range (Hui et al., 2013), a G*Power analysis suggested a sample of approximately 80 participants, giving us .8 power to detect an effect size in the small to medium range (R^2 for the interaction term = .10). In Studies 3 and 4, we aimed to obtain as large a sample as possible over the academic term. Our sample of 90 participants gave us 84% power to detect an effect size of $R^2 = .10$. A total of 98 (76 females, 22 males) undergraduate students participated in an online study in exchange for course credit. Eight people were excluded from the analyses because they did not meet the eligibility criteria specified in the recruitment ad (they were not in exclusive romantic relationships), leaving a total of 90 (72 females, 18 males) participants. In the final sample, participants were between 17 and 58 years of age ($M = 22.76, SD = 7.33$) and were in exclusive (i.e., exclusively dating, common-law, and/or married) romantic relationships (M length = 3.64 years, $SD = 6.99$).⁴

Procedure and measures. To manipulate regulatory focus, consistent with the self-regulation literature, we adopted Higgins et al.'s (1994) established Regulatory Focus Manipulation. In the promotion induction condition, participants were asked to write brief essays on their current aspirations, hopes, and ideals, and how these have changed over time since childhood. In the prevention condition, participants wrote brief essays on their current obligations, duties, and responsibilities, and how these have changed over time since childhood.

Next, participants were asked to indicate the presence of various relationship qualities. They read "How much is your

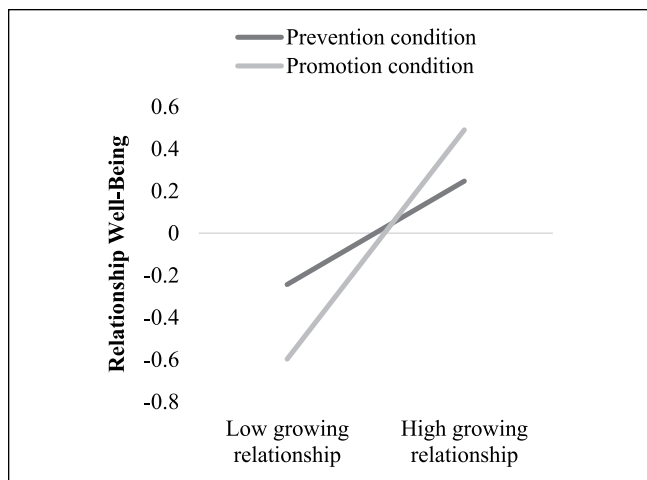


Figure 2. Relationship well-being as a function of regulatory focus condition and the presence of relationship growth qualities. Note. People induced into a promotion (vs. prevention) state rated their relationship well-being highest when growth-related relationship qualities were more (+1 SD above the mean) versus less present (-1 SD below the mean; Study 3).

current relationship with your partner . . .” and indicated on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) scale their agreement with both growth-related items (fun, exciting, full of new adventures, passionate, always growing, full of laughter and humor; $\alpha = .93$) and security-related items (stable, secure, reliable, consistent; $\alpha = .91$).⁵

Finally, participants rated the overall well-being of their relationships.

Relationship well-being measure. To capture overall relationship well-being, we administered several established scales that assess critical aspects of relationship well-being, such as satisfaction and commitment, and combined those scales for a reliable index of overall relationship well-being.⁶ First, six items ($\alpha = .94$) adapted from Norton’s (1983) Marital Quality Index assessed participants’ relationship quality (e.g., “We have a good relationship”; 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*). Participants then completed an 18-item Perceived Relationship Quality Scale (e.g., “How satisfied are you with your relationship?” and “How committed are you to your relationship?” Fletcher et al., 2000b; 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *extremely*; $\alpha = .94$). Five items ($\alpha = .93$) adapted from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998) provided an additional measure of satisfaction (e.g., “I feel satisfied with our relationship”; 1 = *do not agree at all* and 9 = *agree completely*). Participants then reported their relationship commitment on a seven-item scale ($\alpha = .78$; Rusbult et al., 1998; for example, “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner”; 1 = *do not agree at all* and 9 = *agree completely*). We created a composite measure of relationship well-being by averaging the above measures ($\alpha = .91$), each transformed to a z score.

Results

To examine how regulatory focus interacted with the presence of growth versus security at an absolute level, we first regressed perceived relationship well-being onto regulatory focus condition (-1 = prevention, 1 = promotion), the presence of growth-related relationship qualities (standardized), the presence of security-related relationship qualities (standardized), and the two-way interactions of interest (Regulatory Focus \times Presence of Growth, Regulatory Focus \times Presence of Security).⁷ There was no effect of regulatory focus, $\beta = -.03$, $t(84) = -.59$, $CI = [-.12, .07]$, $p = .556$. Not surprisingly, both main effects of the presence of growth and security relationship qualities were significant in the positive direction, $\beta = .44$, $t(84) = 7.17$, $CI = [.29, .50]$, $p < .001$; $\beta = .55$, $t(84) = 8.45$, $CI = [.39, .64]$, $p < .001$, respectively. Consistent with our hypothesis, there was a Regulatory Focus \times Growth Relationship Presence interaction, $\beta = .17$, $t(84) = 2.55$, $CI = [.04, .26]$, $p = .008$, suggesting that relationship well-being was rated highest when growth relationship qualities were more (vs. less) present for promotion-focused participants relative to prevention-focused participants (see Figure 2). We examined the simple slopes in each condition at 1 SD above and below the mean for the presence of relationship growth. As predicted, relationship well-being was higher when growth qualities were more (+1 SD) versus less present (-1 SD) in the promotion induction condition, $\beta = .63$, $t(84) = 3.65$, $CI = [.32, .56]$, $p < .001$. This was also the case in the prevention condition, $\beta = .30$, $t(84) = 7.94$, $CI = [.34, .57]$, $p < .001$. When relationships were characterized by having more (+1 SD) growth, there was no difference in relationship satisfaction for individuals in a promotion- versus prevention-focused state, $\beta = .11$, $t(84) = 1.36$, $CI = [-.09, .45]$, $p = .177$. However, when relationships were characterized by having fewer (-1 SD) growth qualities, promotion-induced participants felt less satisfied than did prevention-focused participants, $\beta = -.17$, $t(84) = -2.16$, $CI = [-.60, -.02]$, $p = .034$ (see Figure 2).

The Regulatory Focus \times Security Relationship Presence interaction was not significant, $\beta = -.03$, $t(84) = -.40$, $CI = [-.15, .10]$, $p = .692$. That is, prevention-focused participants’ relationship well-being ratings were unaffected by the absolute level of security qualities present in their relationships, consistent with the general pattern observed in Study 1. Next, we examined how regulatory focus interacted with the relative presence of growth versus security qualities to predict relationship well-being. Consistent with Study 1, we created a difference score by subtracting the presence of security-related relationship qualities from the presence of growth-related relationship qualities. We regressed relationship well-being onto regulatory focus, the difference score, and their interaction term. There was no effect of regulatory focus, $\beta = -.01$, $t(86) = -.05$, $CI = [-.19, .18]$, $p = .960$, or the difference score, $\beta = .03$, $t(86) = .28$, $CI = [-.17, .22]$, $p = .778$. However, as predicted, the interaction was significant, $\beta = .30$, $t(86) = 2.91$, $CI = [.09, .48]$,

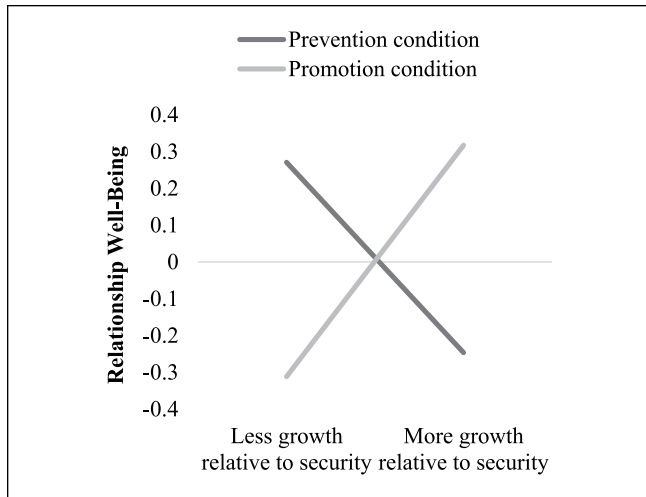


Figure 3. Relationship well-being as a function of regulatory focus condition and the relative presence of relationship growth versus security qualities.

Note. People induced into a promotion (vs. prevention) state rated their relationship well-being higher when their relationships had more growth-related to security-related qualities (Study 3).

$p = .005$ (see Figure 3). For people induced into a promotion state, relationship well-being was higher when growth (vs. security) qualities were more prominent in their relationship, $\beta = .39$, $t(86) = 2.51$, $CI = [.06, .55]$, $p = .014$. The reverse pattern emerged in the prevention condition, though this did not reach statistical significance, $\beta = -.22$, $t(86) = -1.62$, $CI = [-.39, .04]$, $p = .108$.

Discussion

Extending the findings from Studies 1 and 2, we found that individuals in a promotion (vs. prevention) focus rated their relationships more positively when they perceived growth (but not security) qualities present in their relationship. Although the presence of growth-related relationship qualities was beneficial, at least to some extent, for everyone, the presence and absence of growth was particularly critical for the relationship well-being of individuals primed with promotion focus. When growth was lacking, promotion-focused participants felt less satisfied in their relationships than did prevention-focused participants. This provides direct evidence that for promotion-focused people, relationship success may be especially influenced by the presence of growth-related (vs. security-related) relationship qualities. In contrast, and similar to Study 1, regulatory focus did not interact with security qualities at an absolute level, but it did at a relative level. Compared with promotion-induced participants, prevention-induced participants' relationship well-being was less affected by the presence of growth over security (and, if anything, began to show the reverse pattern).

In Study 4, we manipulated the presence or absence of *growth* potential and examined relationship well-being. We focused on manipulating growth in Study 4 because the previous studies demonstrated the robust and clear promotion effects consistent with our hypotheses, and manipulating growth directly would offer further support to our causal model. We predicted that the relationship well-being of promotion-focused individuals, but not prevention-focused individuals, would be affected by a manipulation suggesting that the potential for growth in their relationship was abundant versus limited.

Study 4

To further support our causal model positing that promotion-focused (but not prevention-focused) people's relationship well-being is influenced by the presence or absence of growth, in Study 4, we experimentally manipulated perceptions of growth potential within a relationship. We recruited people in exclusive romantic relationships, measured chronic promotion and prevention focus, and manipulated the feedback people received about their relationship growth potential. Participants either received feedback stating that their relationships had significant (or little) potential for further growth. We then examined people's perceived relationship well-being. We hypothesized that promotion-focused people would experience enhanced relationship well-being when made to feel their relationships still had room to grow. If given feedback that their relationship had reached its peak growth, however (direct growth threat), we expected people high in promotion focus to experience negative relationship consequences. In contrast, we expected the growth manipulation to have no effect on relationship well-being for prevention-focused people, given their insensitivity to growth. That is, prevention focus should not respond to any kind of threat, but rather only a threat relative to their system.

Method

Participants. A total of 103 undergraduates (75 female, 28 male; $M_{age} = 18.9$ years, $SD = 1.49$) who were currently in exclusive dating relationships (M length = 1.49 years, $SD = 1.26$) participated in a laboratory study in exchange for course credit.⁸

Procedure. Upon arrival to the laboratory, participants completed the same chronic regulatory focus measure as used in Studies 1 and 2 (RFQ; Higgins et al., 2001) to assess promotion ($\alpha = .60$) and prevention ($\alpha = .78$) focus. They were then told that they would be answering questions about their romantic relationships, and were told that their responses would be compared with results from a large database of undergraduate students who had previously participated in the study.

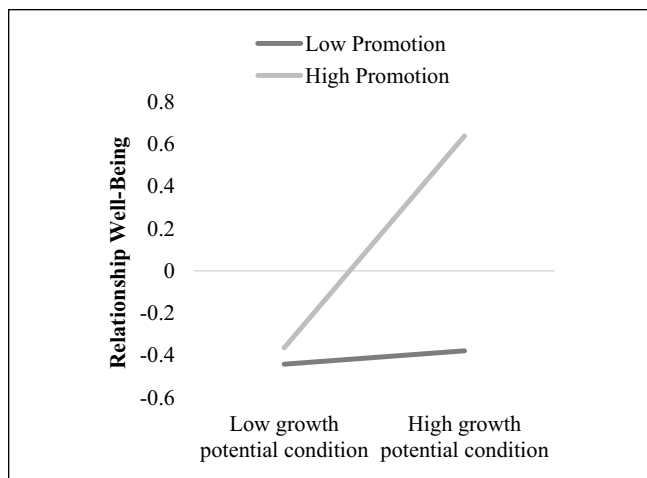


Figure 4. Relationship well-being as a function of growth condition and chronic regulatory focus.

Note. Chronically high (+1 SD above the mean) versus low (−1 SD below the mean) promotion-focused individuals rated their relationship well-being highest when given feedback that their relationship had ample growth potential compared with limited growth potential (Study 4).

Participants were presented with 53 activities and asked to indicate “yes” if they and their partner had experienced the event in their relationship and “no” if they had not. A wide range of events were presented such that they varied in typicality and familiarity. Whereas some items were relatively common (e.g., saw a movie), others were less common (e.g., bought a home) and less typical of day-to-day life (e.g., taken a hot-air balloon ride). This was done so that participants would vary their yes and no responses, making it difficult to infer their own “score” on the test. Participants also completed a bogus scale that was ostensibly part of an accompanying personality test (e.g., “I am the kind of person who corrects my partner’s flaws”).

Following this, participants were presented with a screen indicating that the computer was tabulating their score. They were told that a sophisticated statistical algorithm was being applied to compare their score with those obtained in a sample of 21,000 undergraduates, and a progress bar flashed for approximately 20 s. Participants were then presented with false feedback. Participants in both conditions first received a paragraph subtitled “Relationship Quality” in which they were told that testing revealed that their relationship quality was above average—in the 85th percentile.

The second paragraph was subtitled “Relationship Growth.” Those in the *high growth potential* condition were told that their relationship had not reached its peak amount of growth, that they would likely experience new events in the future, and that they had room to grow with their partner. Participants were then shown a graph to illustrate the ostensible findings. This visual representation indicated that participants had currently experienced approximately 20% of the total growth they could potentially obtain.

In the *low growth potential* condition, participants were told that their relationship has likely reached its peak amount of growth and that the fundamental nature of their relationship is not likely to change. Participants were then presented with the same scatter plot, only the graph suggested that participants experienced approximately 80% of the total growth they could potentially obtain.

After receiving this feedback, participants completed measures of relationship well-being. To minimize any negative effects of our manipulation, participants were asked to describe something positive about their partner and relationship before being fully debriefed and thanked.

Relationship well-being measure. Six items ($\alpha = .81$) adapted from Hendrick (1988) assessed participants’ relationship satisfaction (e.g., “How satisfied are you with your relationship?”; 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *a great deal*). Five items ($\alpha = .87$) adapted from Rusbult et al. (1998) provided an additional measure of satisfaction (e.g., “Our relationship makes me very happy”; 1 = *do not agree at all* and 7 = *agree completely*). Next, a seven-item scale ($\alpha = .92$; Rusbult et al., 1998) assessed participants’ relationship commitment (e.g., “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner”; 1 = *do not agree at all* and 7 = *agree completely*). We created a composite measure of relationship well-being by averaging our measures of satisfaction and commitment ($\alpha = .94$), each transformed to a *z* score.

Results

We regressed the relationship well-being composite onto promotion and prevention focus (standardized), condition (−1 = low growth potential, 1 = high growth potential), and the two-way interactions of interest (Promotion × Growth Condition, Prevention × Growth Condition).

Analyses revealed no main effects of condition or prevention focus (β s < .15, t s < 1.60, p s > .12) on participants’ ratings of relationship well-being. There was a main effect of promotion, $\beta = .28$, $t(97) = 2.80$, $CI = [.08, .46]$, $p = .006$, indicating that promotion-focused people evaluated their relationships more positively. However, critical to our predictions, there was a significant interaction between condition and promotion focus, $\beta = .25$, $t(97) = 2.47$, $CI = [.05, .42]$, $p = .015$. As predicted, participants with strong promotion orientations reported feeling more positively about their relationship when they were told their relationship had high growth potential relative to those who were told their relationship had low growth potential, $\beta = -.49$, $t(97) = -3.10$, $CI = [-1.49, -.33]$, $p = .003$. In contrast, those with weak promotion orientations did not differ in their ratings of relationship well-being as a function of condition, $\beta = .17$, $t(97) = 1.10$, $CI = [-.25, .87]$, $p = .276$ (see Figure 4). As hypothesized, there was no two-way interaction between condition and prevention strength, $\beta = .08$, $t(97) = .80$, $CI = [-.11, .26]$, $p = .426$.

Discussion

The current study further demonstrates that how people feel about the quality of their relationships is shaped by one's motivational orientation. Specifically, promotion-focused people also need to anticipate *continued* growth in their relationships to feel most successful in their relationships. In contrast, and as expected, prevention focus did not moderate the effect of our manipulation, again revealing that the presence or absence of growth (or opportunities for growth) are not as closely tied to evaluations of relationship well-being for prevention-focused people.

General Discussion

Both security and growth have been identified as key contributors to relationship success. However, the current research suggests that individuals may place differential emphasis on growth depending upon their motivational orientation. Specifically, we found that both chronic (Studies 1-2, 4) and temporarily induced (Study 3) promotion-focused individuals rated growth (vs. security) related relationship qualities as particularly important (Study 1) and prioritized growth- versus security-related relationship characteristics (Study 2). Promotion-focused people also rated their own relationship well-being as lower when growth qualities were absent in their relationship (Study 3), and when room for relationship growth was made to feel limited versus abundant (Study 4). In sum, for promotion-focused individuals, the presence of relationship security is not enough; to feel most satisfied in their relationships, promotion-focused people need the presence of growth qualities.

In contrast, when examining the absolute value of growth, the presence of growth qualities was not relevant to perceptions of relationship well-being for prevention-focused individuals (Studies 1-4). While there was a clear and robust connection between promotion focus and growth, the connection between prevention focus and security was more nuanced. When examining security at an absolute level, prevention focus did not predict importance (Study 1) or well-being as a function of the presence of security (Study 3). However, prevention focus did consistently predict the relative weighting of security and growth. That is, we found evidence that prevention focus predicted relatively more valuation of security when individuals had to prioritize between growth and security. Study 2 provided the clearest evidence of this: When participants were forced to make a choice between a relationship characterized primarily by growth versus security, prevention focus significantly predicted security. Studies 1 and 3 provided further evidence that prevention (vs. promotion) focus predicted differential weighting of growth versus security qualities. In Study 1, when we asked participants to rate the importance of both growth and security qualities, increased prevention focus predicted reduced emphasis on growth relative to security. In

Study 3, participants induced into a prevention focus reported higher relationship well-being when they reported that their current relationships had relatively greater balance of security versus growth qualities.

The nuanced findings with prevention focus and relationship security suggest interesting implications for both self-regulation and relationship science. These findings may suggest that security is so fundamental to relationship well-being that individual differences are less influential in the extent to which security is seen as important and contributes to relationship well-being. It is also possible that the nature of the measures made it more difficult to detect prevention effects. More specifically, although we intended to capture system-neutral fundamental relationship qualities (satisfaction, commitment), some of the items appear more growth-relevant (e.g., "how passionate is your relationship?"), thus, potentially making them less sensitive to prevention motivation. In the online supplemental material, we present additional analyses suggesting that this is unlikely to fully account for these patterns. Nonetheless, there would be value in developing relationship well-being measures that are truly system-neutral. Furthermore, although regulatory focus theory would predict a clear prevention to security connection, our research suggests that in the current relational context, the role of prevention motivation is more nuanced: Prevention will give greater priority to security only when security is evaluated in relation to growth. It will be interesting for future research to explore if there are conditions under which the prioritization of security becomes even stronger for prevention-focused people. Generally, the participants in our samples scored quite high on relationship satisfaction, but it may be that prevention focus would be a stronger predictor of security in troubled relationships. In other domains, research has shown that motivational dynamics shift for prevention-focused individuals when in a loss versus status quo state (Scholer et al., 2010). More work is needed to unpack the relationship between prevention focus and security.

Implications for Relationship Science and Practical Application

Past work has shown that relationship success can arise from the presence of relationship-specific desires (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000a) and that regulatory focus can predict relationship success when motivationally relevant personal goals are supported by a partner (e.g., Hui et al., 2013). However, the present work is the first to provide insight into how people differentially and systematically judge the success of relationship *experiences* in contributing to their relationship success. The current research provides evidence that the criteria for judging relationship success can arise from general self-regulatory orientations, leading to differential emphasis on even the most essential relationship qualities.

What does this research mean for day-to-day relationship maintenance? We suspect that although promotion-focused people may not need daily doses of novelty and excitement with their partner, it may be important that they perceive growth or anticipate continued growth with their partner. For instance, even a relatively mundane activity (e.g., cooking) could be construed in growth-enhancing ways—by cooking side by side, couples are creating something together, connecting, and perhaps engaging in intimate self-disclosure, for example. Promotion-focused people may be more likely to benefit from focusing on the growth aspects of these types of more mundane experiences. Furthermore, anticipating a novel or fun experience in the future (e.g., a booked excursion) may maintain perceptions of continued growth and sustain feelings of relationship success for promotion-focused people. Partners of promotion-focused people may also reap relational rewards by planning novel and exciting activities for their partners (or, at least, cooperate if their partner suggests them). Partners of prevention-focused people, however, would likely not benefit as significantly from enhancing growth experiences for their partners. These are exciting questions for future research.

Limitations and Future Directions

One strength of the current research is that we were able to demonstrate the observed patterns in the contexts of experiments in which we could carefully control and/or manipulate essential factors (e.g., regulatory focus, the perceived potential for growth). Although Studies 2 to 4 were adequately powered (power of at least .80) and consistent with Study 1 (more highly powered at .99), the relatively smaller sample sizes of Studies 2 to 4 are not ideal. Furthermore, another limitation of the current research is that we did not examine our predicted pattern longitudinally. Doing so would provide insight into how the presence of security and growth experiences manifest and affect relationship well-being—and longevity—over time. For instance, the importance of growth may remain high for promotion-focused individuals over the course of a relationship, but what counts as “growth” may change. On one hand, as individuals adapt to the opportunities for growth in their relationships, they may require even more intense experiences of growth to remain satisfied. On the other hand, perceptions of what counts as a growth may shift as resources and opportunities for new experiences change (e.g., going to a new restaurant may be perceived as less exciting early in a relationship than after the birth of a child).

The current perspective suggests new ways of thinking about the types of relationship interventions that may be most effective for promotion- or prevention-focused individuals. Although therapists may be more inclined to try to boost security to improve relationships (e.g., coach couples to increase predictability and dependability), or growth (e.g., encourage the pursuit of novel activities), our work suggests

that motivational tendencies need to be taken into account. An intervention that boosts growth, such as encouraging couples to pursue novel, exciting activities together (Aron et al., 2000), may be particularly beneficial for promotion-focused individuals. However, a growth intervention may be ineffective or even backfire for prevention-focused people's relationships. Future research should take motivational differences into account when developing effective relationship-enhancing interventions.

Conclusion

The current research demonstrates that general, non-relationship specific motivational orientations can exert a powerful influence over how people experience relationship success. In particular, the presence of growth-related relationship qualities is essential for the experience of relationship success within the promotion system, more than it is within the prevention system. Although a growing body of literature suggests the general importance of growth for relationship well-being (Aron et al., 1992; Gable et al., 2006), the current work highlights that some people may be particularly helped or hurt by the presence or absence of growth. In addition to exploring how regulatory focus motivations shape perceptions of relationship success, the current work suggests the interesting and important ways in which the intersection of motivational science and relationship science can provide new insights into what makes relationships work (and work better).

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Notes

1. At first glance, it may appear that prevention-focused goals are more extrinsically motivated, as outlined by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), because they are tied to duties and obligations. However, a key distinction between controlled motives and prevention-focused goals is that concerns with security are *authentic* for prevention-focused people and, importantly, do not lead to the same negative consequences as do controlled motives. If it was the case that prevention-focused

people simply adopted maladaptive controlled motives, they should also experience poorer well-being. However, there is no association reported in the literature between prevention focus and lower well-being. In fact, people high in prevention focus are effective self-regulators, and tend to succeed on their tasks and feel good about success on those tasks, especially when the tasks line up with their core values (meeting duties and obligations; for example, Scholer & Higgins, 2011). Instead, we argue that both promotion (attainment) and prevention (security) goals can at times be authentic and at other times be controlled.

2. Included in these questionnaires was a measure of self-esteem and attachment style. Self-esteem and attachment style measures were also included in Study 3. None of these variables moderated our results.
3. The three-way interaction between promotion, prevention, and quality type (growth vs. security) was nonsignificant, $F = .21$, $p = .647$.
4. We ran all of the reported analyses using the full sample. The direction and significance of the results were the same.
5. We also included six fundamental qualities (i.e., characteristics that are essential to maintain relationships): loyalty, trust, respect, support, dependency, and commitment in the list of characteristics. Unsurprisingly, these qualities were rated as highly important ($M = 6.07$, $SD = .95$) and were unaffected by condition, $t = -.23$, $p = .820$. Furthermore, controlling for these fundamental qualities did not change the direction or significance of the results.
6. The direction and significance of the results of each subscale were the same as the overall well-being measure reported in Studies 3 and 4, with the exception of the Regulatory Focus Condition \times Growth Qualities interaction dropping to nonsignificant in the absolute level analysis with the Rusbult Commitment Scale as the dependent measure in Study 3. The interaction in the relative analysis dropped to marginal ($\beta = .20$, $p = .064$). See Part 6 of the online supplemental material for detailed analyses.
7. The three-way interaction between condition, presence of relationship growth, and presence of relationship security was nonsignificant, $\beta < .01$, $p = .961$.
8. Four participants who indicated they were casually dating their partner were excluded. We ran the primary analyses on the full sample, and the pattern and significance of all results were the same.

Supplemental Material

Supplementary material is available online with this article.

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