



# Positive Relationships

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Most research in the realm of relationships has examined that which can go wrong in relationships (e.g., conflict, infidelity, intimate partner violence). I summarize much of what has been examined about what goes right in a relationship and call these positive relationship deposits. Some research indicates that relationships need five positive interactions for every negative interaction. Active-constructive responding, gratitude, forgiveness, and time spent together are some sources of positive deposits in one's relational bank account. These kinds of deposits can reduce the negative effects of conflict on marriage and strengthen relationships.

## Learning Objectives

- Understand some of the challenges that plague close relationships today.
- Become familiar with the concept of positive emotional deposits.
- Review some of the research that is relevant to positive emotional deposits.
- Describe several ways people make positive emotional deposits.

## Introduction

The status of close relationships in America can sometimes look a bit grim. More than half of marriages now end in divorce in the United States (Pinsof, 2002). Infidelity is the leading cause of divorce (Priviti & Amato, 2004) and is on the rise across all age groups (Allen et al., 2008).

Cybersex has likely contributed to the increased rates of infidelity, with some 65% of those who look for sex online having intercourse with their “Internet” partner offline as well. Research on intimate partner violence indicates that it occurs at alarmingly high rates, with over one-fifth of couples reporting at least one episode of violence over the course of a year (Schafer, Caetano, & Clark, 1998). These and other issues that arise in relationships (e.g., substance abuse, conflict) represent significant obstacles to close relationships. With so many problems that plague relationships, how can a positive relationship be cultivated? Is there some magic bullet or ratio? Yes, kind of.



Many people consider romantic attachments one of the most significant relationships and invest them with time and resources. [Image: Ly Thien Hoang (Lee), <https://goo.gl/JQbLVe>, CC BY 2.0, <https://goo.gl/BRvSA7>]

## The Magic Formula

Of course, no research is perfect, and there really is no panacea that will cure any relationship. However, we do have some research that suggests that long-term, stable marriages have been shown to display a particular ratio between positive and negative interactions. That ratio is not 1:1, in fact, 1:1 is approximately the ratio of couples who were heading toward divorce. Thus, in a couple where a spouse gives one compliment for each criticism, the likely outcome is divorce. Happier couples have five positive interactions for every one negative interaction (Gottman, 1994).

What can you do to increase the ratio of positive interactions on a regular basis?—through positive relationship deposits. Naturally, making positive relationship deposits will boost your

overall positive emotions—so by making positive relationships a priority in your life you can boost your positive emotions, becoming a flourishing individual.

## Positive Relationship Deposits

In *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey (1989) compared human relationships to actual bank accounts—suggesting that every day we make deposits or withdrawals from our relationship accounts with each person in our lives. He recommended that to keep an overall positive balance, we need to make regular positive deposits. This will ultimately help buffer the negatives that are bound to occur in relationships. Keeping this metaphor of emotional capital in mind could be beneficial for promoting the well-being of the relationships in one's life.



Research suggests that if you focus on the positive aspects of a relationship you are more likely to stay in that relationship.

[Image: adwriter, <https://goo.gl/Hz9BOJ>, CC BY-NC 2.0, <https://goo.gl/tgFydH>]

Some research suggests that people, on average, have more positive than negative experiences (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Thus, there are far more opportunities for deposits than for withdrawals. Conversely, even though there may be fewer negatives, Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) argue quite persuasively that bad events overpower good events in one's life, which suggests that the negative withdrawals are more salient and more impactful. This further accentuates the need to ensure that we have a healthy store of positive deposits that can help to counteract these more impactful account withdrawals. Positive deposits that accumulate over time should provide a buffer against the withdrawals that happen in every relationship. In other words, the inevitable occasional conflict is not nearly so bad for

the relationship when it occurs in a partnership that is otherwise highly positive. What opportunities does relationships science suggest are effective opportunities each day to make positive relationship deposits?

## Common Opportunities for Daily Positive Deposits

An individual's general sentiment of his or her partner is dependent on ongoing interactions, and these interactions provide many opportunities for deposits or withdrawals. To illustrate how much daily interaction can give opportunities to make deposits in relationships, I will describe research that has been done on capitalization and active-constructive responding, gratitude, forgiveness, and spending time together in meaningful ways. Although there are several other ways by which positive relationship deposits can be made, these four have received quite a bit of attention by researchers. Then I will discuss some evidence on how an accumulation of such daily relationship deposits seems to provide a safeguard against the impact of conflict.

## Building Intimacy Through Capitalization and Active-Constructive Responding

Intimacy has been defined as a close and familiar bond with another person. Intimacy has been positively related with satisfaction in marriage (Patrick, Sells, Giordano & Tollerud, 2007) and well-being in general (e.g., Waltz & Badura, 1987; Prager & Buhrmester, 1998). On the other hand, lacking marital intimacy is related to higher severity of depression (Waring & Patton, 1984). Thus, achieving intimacy with one's partner is essential for a happy marriage and happiness in general and is something worth seeking.

Given that 60% to 80% of the time, people disclose their most positive daily experiences with their partner (Gable et al., 2004), this becomes a regular opportunity for intimacy building.

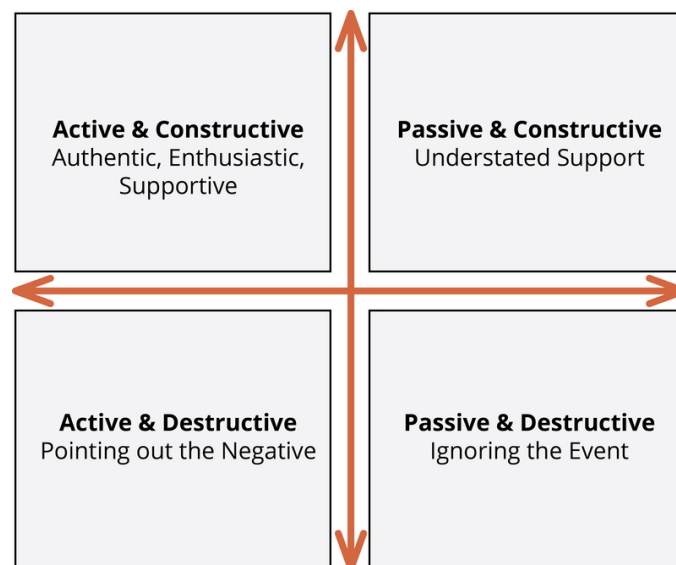


Figure 1. Types of Responding (figure used with permission from thecoachinghouse.ca)

When we disclose certain private things about ourselves, we increase the potential intimacy that we can have with another person, however, we also make ourselves vulnerable to getting hurt by the other person. What if they do not like what I have disclosed or react negatively? It can be a double-edged sword. Disclosing positive news from one's day is a great opportunity for a daily deposit if the response from the other person is positive. What constitutes a positive response?

To achieve intimacy we must respond positively to remarks our partner makes. When a person responds enthusiastically to a partner's good news, this fosters higher levels of intimacy (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Thus, responding in a positive manner to a relationship partner's good news provides frequent opportunities to make deposits in the relationship bank account. In fact, most people are presented the chance to make this kind of relationship deposit almost every day. Most research has focused on support (partners' responses to negative events), however, one study found that responses to positive events tend to be better predictors of relationship well-being than responses to negative events (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006).

When one person seeks out another person with the intent to share positive news, it has been called capitalization (Gable et al., 2004). The best, supportive response to someone who shares good news has been termed active-constructive and is characterized by enthusiastic support. These active-constructive responses are positively associated with trust, satisfaction, commitment, and intimacy. On the other hand, when the listener points out something negative about what is said, it is called active-destructive responding. Ignoring what is said is termed passive-destructive, and understating support is called passive-constructive. All of these types of responses (see Figure 1) have been related to adverse relationship outcomes (Gable et al., 2004).

If partners listen and are enthusiastic about the good news of the other, they build a stronger relationship. If they ignore the good news, change the subject, devalue the good news, or refocus the good news to be about themselves, they may make a withdrawal from the account. Being aware of this research and findings can help individuals to focus on better providing helpful responses to those they care about.

## Gratitude

Relationship researchers report that expressing gratitude on a regular basis is an important means by which positive deposits may be made into relationship bank accounts. In a recent study, participants were randomly assigned to write about daily events, express gratitude to



a friend, discuss a positive memory with a friend, or think grateful thoughts about a friend twice a week for three weeks. At the conclusion of the three weeks, those who were randomly assigned to express gratitude to their friend reported higher positive regard for their friend and more comfort voicing relationship concerns than did those in the two control conditions (Lambert & Fincham, 2011). Also, those who expressed gratitude to a close relationship partner reported greater perceived communal strength (e.g., caring, willingness to sacrifice) than participants in all control conditions (Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010). Similarly, Algoe, Fredrickson, and Gable (2013) found that benefactors' positive perceptions of beneficiaries were increased when gratitude was expressed for the benefit, and these perceptions enhanced relationship quality. These studies suggest that expressing gratitude to someone you are close to is an important way of making positive relationship deposits.



Being grateful is one of the ways an individual contributes positively to a relationship. [Image: LarynDawn, <https://goo.gl/n1AJwg>, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://goo.gl/eLCn2O>]

## Forgiveness

Forgiveness is something else you can do regularly to aid relationship satisfaction (e.g., Fincham, 2000; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2003) and commitment (e.g., Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Karremans & Van Lange, 2008). Unresolved conflict can put couples at risk of developing the negative cycle of interaction that causes further harm to relationships. For instance, one study found that lack of forgiveness is linked to ineffective conflict resolution (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004). For instance, if Cindy cannot forgive Joe, Cindy will struggle to effectively resolve other disagreements in their relationship. Yet, those who do forgive report much better conflict resolution a year later (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007). It appears that forgiveness can be an important way of building emotional capital in the relationship. Not forgiving the people in your life can block positive deposits to the relationship bank account.

## Spending Time in Meaningful Ways



Do you and your romantic partner have similar hobbies? Research suggests that spending time in meaningful ways also positively contributes to your relationships. [Image: Lucky Sunny, <https://goo.gl/IADzgz>, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0, <https://goo.gl/FuDJ6c>]

relationship immediately afterward than control couples (Aron et al., 2000). The takeaway message here is that simply watching TV with one's romantic partner will not make nearly the magnitude of a deposit in a relational bank account as would a more engaging or challenging joint activity.

Some suggest that the best way to spell love is T-I-M-E. In our fast-paced society, many relationships are time deprived. In the beginning phases of a relationship, this rarely seems to be an issue given the novelty and excitement of the relationship, however, discovering new things about one's partner declines and couples can slump into relationship boredom. The self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1996) suggests that people naturally seek to expand their capacity and that intimate relationships are an important way by which they accomplish self-expansion. They have found that couples who engaged in more challenging and novel activities felt more satisfied with their

## Accumulated Positive Deposits and Conflict Management

When there is a positive balance of relationship deposits this can help the overall relationship in times of conflict. For instance, some research indicates that a husband's level of enthusiasm in everyday marital interactions was related to a wife's affection in the midst of conflict (Driver & Gottman, 2004), showing that being pleasant and making deposits can change the nature of conflict. Also, Gottman and Levenson (1992) found that couples rated as having more pleasant interactions (compared with couples with less pleasant interactions) reported marital problems as less severe, higher marital satisfaction, better physical health, and less risk for divorce. Finally, Janicki, Kamarck, Shiffman, and Gwaltney (2006) showed that the intensity of conflict with a spouse predicted marital satisfaction unless there was a record of positive partner interactions, in which case the conflict did not matter as much. Again, it seems as though having a positive balance through prior positive deposits helps to keep relationships strong even in the midst of conflict.

Relationships today are riddled with problems including divorce, infidelity, intimate partner

violence, and chronic conflict. If you want to avoid some of these common pitfalls of relationships, if you want to build a good relationship with a partner or with your friends, it is crucial to make daily positive deposits in your relationship bank accounts. Doing so will help you enjoy each other more and also help you weather the inevitable conflicts that pop up over time. Some of the ways that have been most explored by researchers as a way to build your positive relationship bank account are through building intimacy by active constructive responding, expressing gratitude to the others, forgiving, and spending time in engaging joint activities. Although these are not the only ways that you can make positive deposits in one's relationship bank accounts, they are some of the best examined. Consider how you might do more to make positive relationship deposits through these or other means for the survival and improvement of your relationships.



Don't neglect your relationship bank account. Make daily positive deposits and you'll be better prepared for the inevitable negative interaction. [Image: AndreaPerryAbbott, <https://goo.gl/8iTE7t>, CC BY-NC 2.0, <https://goo.gl/VnKlK8>]



## Outside Resources

### **A Primer on Teaching Positive Psychology**

<http://www.apa.org/monitor/oct03/primer.aspx>

### **An Experiment in Gratitude**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHv6vTKD6lg>

### **Positive Psychology Center**

<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/videolectures.htm>

### **Relationship Matters Podcast Series**

[http://spr.sagepub.com/site/podcast/podcast\\_dir.xhtml](http://spr.sagepub.com/site/podcast/podcast_dir.xhtml)

### **Understanding Forgiveness**

<http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/forgiveness/understanding-forgiveness>

## Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the main challenges that face relationships today?
2. How would you describe the concept of an emotional bank account?
3. What are some ways people can make deposits to their relationship bank accounts?
4. What do you think are the most effective ways for making positive relationship deposits?
5. What are some of the most powerful relationship deposits that others have made into your relationship bank account?
6. What would you consider to be some challenging or engaging activities that you would consider doing more of with a close relationship partner?
7. Are there relationships of yours that have gotten into a negative spiral and could profit from positive relationship deposits?

## Vocabulary

### **Active-constructive responding**

Demonstrating sincere interest and enthusiasm for the good news of another person.

### **Capitalization**

Seeking out someone else with whom to share your good news.

### **Relationship bank account**

An account you hold with every person in which a positive deposit or a negative withdrawal can be made during every interaction you have with the person.

### **Self-expansion model**

Seeking to increase one's capacity often through an intimate relationship.

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