Maintaining Interpersonal Relationships

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Learning Objectives

In this chapter, readers will explore how individuals maintain their interpersonal relationships. By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to

- Understand key elements of relationship maintenance and the differences between positive and negative relationship maintenance behaviors
- Identify the role of interpersonal communication in the commitment and intimacy processes
- Explain how empathy and social support contribute to relationship maintenance
- Describe challenges of relationship maintenance, including restoring equity, geographic distance, and interactions via mediated channels
- Apply strategies for competent relationship maintenance communication

Introduction

In his acceptance speech after winning Best Picture at the 2012 Academy Awards for the film *Argo*, actor and director Ben Affleck thanked his wife, actress Jennifer Garner, by saying "I want to thank you for working on our marriage for 10 Christmases. It's good. It is work, but it's the best kind of work, and there's no one I'd rather work with" (Zadan & Meron, 2013). This seemingly innocent statement instantly ignited a firestorm, with many reporters and media outlets criticizing Affleck's choice of words and some even going so far as to question whether Affleck and Garner's marriage was in trouble.

However, the very notion that marriage—and any other close relationship—does not require work is inaccurate. Melissa Wall, a blogger for the online dating website HowAboutWe.com, wrote a post that stood up for Affleck and Garner the next day, calling his statement "moving and authentic" (2013, para. 1). Wall (2013) continued her post by noting that individuals who decide to get married make an enormous "emotional leap of faith" upon conducting an analysis of the costs versus benefits of marriage and decide that the positives are greater than the negatives. She goes on to describe the rewards that we hope to garner from marriage:

> But at no point can we ever assume that these rewards will come without putting in the work to achieve them. We're signing up for a daily struggle—some days it's a small struggle, some days larger—and a distinct set of tasks that must be completed in order to keep the whole thing from falling apart. . . .Large or small, it's still work—there is no way around that. And failing or refusing to do this work means the death of the relationship, maybe not today, but eventually. (Wall, 2013, paras. 7–8)

As we have discussed throughout this text, one of the most fundamental human needs is to experience close, mutually caring, and supportive relationships. They are safe havens in times of trouble and can provide comfort and support in times of need. To some degree, you have been shaped and molded by your relationships with your parents, siblings, and other family members, as well as with your romantic partners, friends, and professional colleagues. You will most likely maintain a number of these relationships throughout your life because they provide you with innumerable positive experiences. The excerpt from Wall's blog post emphasizes many of the concepts that we are going to discuss in this chapter, including relationship maintenance behaviors, equity, social support, and commitment. Most importantly, Wall highlights the importance of putting in consistent effort to sustain a relationship that is important to us.

Your interpersonal communication skills are some of the most important tools when building a strong relationship. Effective and appropriate communication patterns and skills are important characteristics of a quality relationship. Other specific factors that contribute to building and maintaining strong relationships include the following (Lang, Fingerman, & Fitzpatrick, 2003):

- Commitment to one another
- Willingness to work together to maintain the relationship
- Exchanges of social support
- Intimacy
- Empathy

In this chapter, we build on concepts discussed in Chapter 7 related to initiating interpersonal relationships. We will explore how you maintain relationships, and how each of the above relationship and communication concepts factor into relationship maintenance We will also discuss a number of things that can challenge our ability to maintain a relationship, along with strategies for improving your relationship maintenance competence.

8.1 Relationship Maintenance

As we have just noted, relationship maintenance is crucial but is too often overlooked or viewed merely as work—a word that often has a negative connotation. Until just over 20 year ago, communication and social psychology researchers also ignored relationship maintenance processes in favor of understanding how relationships were formed and ended. However, communication researchers Laura Stafford and Daniel Canary first formally established relationship maintenance as a distinct and important form of interpersonal communication in 1991. Since then, hundreds of studies have increased our understanding of how we use communication to preserve our relationships. How do you show your relational partners that you care about them? Do you help your romantic partner by washing the dishes before they get home from work? Do you post a link about an inside joke on your best friend's Facebook wall? Do you call your parents on their wedding anniversary to tell them that you are thinking of them? When we behave in these ways—actions that sustain or preserve our relationships in a state that we desire—we are engaging in **relationship maintenance** (e.g., Dindia & Canary, 1993).

To better understand the complexity of what is involved in relationship maintenance, Kathryn Dindia and Daniel Canary (1993) conducted an analysis of how researchers defined relationship maintenance. They determined that there are four common relationship maintenance definitions, identified in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1: Common definitions of relationship maintenance

Definition	Explanation	Example
Keeping a relationship in existence	Partners sustain the presence of the relationship and avoid its termination	Keeping up agreed-upon daily routines and tasks, such as taking out the trash or making sure to ask how the partner's day was
Keeping a relationship in a specific condition or state	Partners believe certain qualities and aspects are important for maintenance so that the relationship is not terminated	Agreeing with a friend that you are "just friends" and nothing more
Keeping a relationship in a satisfactory condition	Partners experience satisfaction, in addition to stability, and desire to maintain this status	Feeling consistently content with the partner and the relationship
Keeping a relationship in repair	Partners keep a relationship in working condition or fix a relationship that is in disrepair	Being willing to talk about issues if the relationship begins to have problems

Source: Adapted from Dindia, K., & Canary, D. J. (1993). Definitions and theoretical perspectives on maintaining relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 10,* 163–173.

Overall, these definitions of relationship maintenance can overlap with one another and are applicable to relationship maintenance in a variety of relationships, including romantic, friend, family, and professional. The first, keeping a relationship in existence, is the most basic definition of relationship maintenance because it only involves sustaining the presence of the relationship and avoiding its termination (Dindia & Canary, 1993). This definition thus does not acknowledge the changing and shifting nature of relationships, nor does it account for the variety of maintenance behaviors partners can use. The second definition, keeping a relationship in a specific condition or state, includes the relationship qualities or aspects that the partners believe are important for maintenance, including intimacy, trust, stability, and commitment so that the relationship is not terminated. The third definition emphasizes the belief that relationships can be maintained when

the individuals keep their partnership in a satisfactory condition. In other words, in this defini-tion, one or both partners must experience satisfaction, in addition to the basic stability that is the focus of the second definition, for relationship maintenance to occur. The fourth and final relationship maintenance definition is to keep it in repair. There are two aspects of this definition: fixing a relationship that is in disrepair and keeping a relationship in working condition (Dindia & Canary, 1993).

It is important to understand how relationship maintenance is defined, but it is also crucial to determine what behaviors or messages assist in the maintenance process. **Relationship main-tenance behaviors** are defined as the actions and tasks that assist with maintaining, managing, or repairing a relationship (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000). These behaviors are conscious and strategic and specifically involve how to define and establish the parameters of the relationship and manage the tensions and threats to the relationship's integrity and existence (Burleson et al., 2000; Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). There are many benefits to using relationship maintenance behaviors. For example, the more a spouse engages in relationship maintenance, the greater the marital satisfaction (Stafford & Canary, 2006). In addition, the more romantic partners employ maintenance behaviors, the less likely they are to terminate their relationships (Guerrero, Eloy, & Wabnik, 1993). As with the definition of relationship maintenance, these behaviors can occur in a number of close relationship contexts.

The next sections will identify the variety of behaviors and messages that we can employ to maintain our relationships. There are both positive and negative behaviors for maintaining close relationships, which suggests that relationship maintenance is a complex interpersonal interac-tion that is not just confined to happy, satisfied couples. In other words, we may choose or even be required to sustain and preserve a relationship that we have with another person.

Positive Relationship Maintenance Behaviors

Wall's (2013) blog post about marriage, described at the beginning of the chapter, highlights the importance of relationship maintenance behaviors in a successful marriage. The same is true for other types of relationships. Conscious actions, such as cheerfully saying "good morning" to your colleagues at work or supporting a friend or loved one when a parent passes away, are examples of positive maintenance behaviors. There are seven positive or constructive behaviors that can be strategically used to maintain relationships. The first five behaviors were identified by Stafford and Canary (1991), and the remaining two behaviors were added by Stafford and colleagues (2000):

- **Positivity**: being optimistic, cheerful, pleasant, refraining from criticism, and showing affection and appreciation for the other person and the relationship
- **Openness**: balancing self-disclosures and honest communication about the relationship
- **Assurances**: expressing commitment, love, faithfulness, emotional support, and messages that imply that the relationship has a future
- **Social networks**: seeking support from common family and friend networks
- **Sharing tasks**: performing one's fair share of joint jobs and responsibilities in the relationship
- **Advice**: expressing partner-related emotions and cognitions and the willingness to com-municate opinions
- **Conflict management**: using constructive and positive behaviors such as cooperating, listening, and apologizing when in conflict or disagreements with the partner

Let's consider these positive maintenance behaviors in relation to the communication between Sidney and Jamie, a couple who have been married for 12 years. Sidney and Jamie have two children, and both work full-time. In addition, Jamie is taking online business courses in order to move up in her company. In other words, they are a typical busy adult couple. However, despite all of these family and professional responsibilities, Sidney and Jamie make conscious efforts to maintain their relationship. They engage in all of the above positive maintenance behaviors: They tell each other "thank you" when one does something nice for the other (positivity), and they discuss issues and are truthful and kind to each other when they disagree (openness and conflict management). Sidney and Jamie try to be clear about who completes which task, such as emptying the dishwasher or running errands (sharing tasks), and they ask Sidney's sister, who lives nearby, for help with the kids when Jamie is working on her courses (social networks). Finally, Sidney and Jamie make sure to tell each other that they love their spouse, and they express that love by offering support and by seeking out and listening to each other's advice when work or parenting issues arise (assurances and advice).

Using these positive maintenance behaviors in your close relationships can have a number of positive payoffs. Stafford and her colleagues (2000) examined the connections between positive relationship maintenance behaviors and the relationship characteristics of commitment, liking, satisfaction, and **control mutuality**, or the extent to which partners share responsibilities. Spouses who liked each other, experienced control mutuality, and were satisfied with their marriages reported using all seven of the above relationship maintenance behaviors more often (Stafford et al., 2000). In addition, spouses who were more committed to their relationships also used maintenance behaviors more frequently (Stafford et al., 2000). It certainly seems that Sidney and Jamie have a close, committed, and satisfying marriage, in large part because they treat each other with respect and kindness by virtue of the above seven positive maintenance behaviors.

Using assurances is most strongly related to positive relationship characteristics (Stafford et al., 2000). In addition, in both heterosexual and same-sex romantic relationships, the most frequently used relationship maintenance behavior is sharing tasks (e.g., Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Haas, 2002). Positive maintenance behaviors thus help both partners preserve a satisfying relationship.

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▲ Using positive relationship maintenance behaviors can help partners preserve a satisfying relationship.

Negative Relationship Maintenance Behaviors

Though it is preferable to focus on the positive behaviors that we can use to maintain our relationships, sometimes partners use negative behaviors. For example, jealousy or avoidance can be used to retain a specific relationship status. Marianne Dainton and Jamie Gross (2008) explored such behaviors and identified six negative, antisocial behaviors that can be used to maintain romantic relationships:

- **Jealousy induction**: flirting with and commenting on others' attractiveness to elicit the partner's jealousy
- **Avoidance**: sidestepping discussions about a specific topic or evading the partner
- **Spying**: checking up on the partner by looking at the partner's e-mails and phone or talking to others for information
- **Infidelity**: flirting with others and engaging in affairs to keep from being bored and dissatisfied with the relationship
- **Destructive conflict**: being controlling, starting a fight, and bossing the partner around
- **Allowing control**: giving the partner control in the relationship by not seeing other people and letting the partner make decisions

Think back to the example of Sidney and Jamie. Consider what their relationship might look like if they used negative maintenance behaviors instead of positive ones. For example, instead of being kind and respectful in their everyday interactions and when they are arguing, Jamie instead seeks to control and manipulate Sidney by threatening him and saying negative things about him to their children (destructive conflict). Jamie also accesses Sidney's e-mail and mobile phone to see who else he is talking to and what they are discussing (spying). To keep the peace and keep their marriage and family intact, Sidney tries to generally avoid Jamie and lets her make most major household decisions (avoidance and allowing control). In essence, Jamie and Sidney are maintaining their marriage with these negative maintenance behaviors but doing so in a much more destructive manner.

Overall, as you might predict, using these methods of negative relationship maintenance is related to decreased liking, commitment, control mutuality, and respect, and such behaviors tend to be used more by individuals who are insecure and have negative views of themselves (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011; Goodboy, Myers, & Members of Investigating Communication, 2010). In addition, the more partners use these negative relationship maintenance behaviors, the less satisfied they are with their relationships (Dainton & Gross, 2008). In the case of Jamie and Sidney, if they rely on negative relationship maintenance behaviors, they are likely to view each other, as well as themselves, with dislike and disrespect and be dissatisfied with the very marriage they are trying to preserve. Thus, it is advisable to avoid consistently using these negative actions to maintain your close relationships; instead, try to integrate more positive maintenance behaviors into your communication with those to whom you are closest. (Read *Everyday Communication Challenges* for a look at how popular media depict romantic relationships.)

EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

Romantic Relationship Ideals in Popular Media

As a culture America is entranced by epic romances in film, music, and television. The drama and travails of such couples as Romeo and Juliet, Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara, and even Ross and Rachel from the television series *Friends* capture and hold our attention like few other things can. But think about how these romances are usually depicted: how the couple meets, falls in love, faces relationship challenges and adversity, and (sometimes tragically) breaks apart. Less important, or

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even completely ignored, is how these star-crossed lovers interact on a day-to-day basis. In other words, what happens once the romance is established?

Consider the conversation between Carrie Bradshaw and Mr. Big—who many consider to be another recent epic romance in the media—in an early scene of the 2008 movie *Sex and the City*:

> *Carrie:* I used to write about love. Now I want to write about what happens after you find it.
>
> *Mr. Big:* Interesting. So what happens?
>
> *Carrie:* Mm. Stay tuned.

We then watch as the rest of the film plunges Carrie and Mr. Big's relationship into tumult, along with the romances of Carrie's friends Miranda and Samantha (her friend Charlotte is mercifully spared significant relationship drama until the sequel). What might this imply? According to the media, what happens after you find love isn't as interesting as the beginnings or the complications. But how much do these media depictions of romance impact our own beliefs about romantic relationships?

A 2013 study conducted by interpersonal communication and media scholars Veronica Hefner and Barbara Wilson attempted to determine the extent to which popular, romantic comedy movies—the most viewed type of movie (Hall, 2005)—influenced our romantic ideals: that love is powerful, instantaneous, and can overlook flaws and obstacles, and that romantic relationships can be perfect. Examples of romantic ideals include love at first sight, love conquers all, and that we each have a soul mate or one and only partner for us. To what extent does viewing romantic comedies relate to a viewer's endorsement of these romantic ideals? Hefner and Wilson's (2013) study analyzed the 52 highest-grossing romantic comedies from 1998 to 2008 for the presence of idealistic themes such as finding a soul mate and love conquering all. They found that 98% of these movies depicted at least one romantic ideal, with an average of 7.2 ideals across films (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Clearly, romantic ideals are very common in romantic comedies. The next question that Hefner and Wilson (2013) asked was the extent to which these ideals impacted viewers. Surprisingly, they found that there was very little effect of heavy, repeated viewing of romantic comedies on the endorsement of romantic ideals.

Hefner and Wilson (2013) speculated that this lack of relationship may be because "romantic ideals are so pervasive in Western culture that such films alone have little impact on beliefs" (p. 169). In other words, we are so inundated with portrayals of idealized romances—ones that do not typically depict how relationships are maintained—that focusing on one type of medium is not enough to observe an effect. How can we combat these idealizations of romantic relationships? An important first step is to be aware of them. In addition, idealizing a romantic partner has been found to be beneficial to romantic relationships (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). In fact, troubles only arise when expectations become unrealistic. Thus, although some romantic idealization is OK, do not rely on it or ask too much of your partner based upon these beliefs.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Think of some movies or TV shows that you watch that present romantic ideals such as the ones discussed above. How do these ideals make you feel about your own romantic relationship?
2. Aside from being aware of romantic ideals, what else can we do to combat romantic relationship idealizations?
3. Do you think that these idealizations have a particular impact on younger people who are just starting to form their first romantic relationships? How can this be problematic?

8.2 How Communication Helps Support Commitment and Intimacy

In addition to relationship maintenance, commitment and intimacy are two essential factors for building and fostering interpersonal relationships (Lang et al., 2003). Communication is important because it allows partners to express how they feel about each other and the relationship that they share. The next sections thus discuss how communication supports commitment and intimacy.

Commitment

If you are committed to a relationship, you are dedicated to your partner and are unlikely to leave if something goes awry. In other words, **commitment** is one's "long-term orientation toward a relationship, including feelings of psychological attachment and intentions to persist through good and bad times" (Cox, Wexler, Rusbult, & Gaines, 1997, p. 80). Partners in a committed relationship make the extra effort to work at and improve their relationships, and, in turn, this increased commitment benefits the relationship because it is associated with increased relationship quality (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004).

However, if you are not committed to a relationship, you are unlikely to protect it if difficulties arise. For example, romantic partners who are more committed to the relationship are less likely to give each other the silent treatment and are more likely to admit that they are upset (Wright & Roloff, 2009), which can then initiate discussions about an upsetting issue. In the next sections, we explore commitment in two different forms: first, as a central component of a theory about relationship maintenance and second as a motivating force for how you communicatively respond to dissatisfaction in your interpersonal relationships.

The Investment Model

One of the primary theories used to understand how and why individuals remain in and work to maintain close relationships is the investment model (Dindia, 2000). The investment model predicts that our commitment to a relationship is the most accurate relationship characteristic for understanding if a relationship will continue and remain stable or will deteriorate and end (Rusbult, 1980). Specifically, Caryl Rusbult (1980) stated that relationship commitment is enhanced by three relationship components:

- High **relationship satisfaction**, which involves positive emotion and attraction toward the relationship
- High **investment** in the relationship, which involves tangible and intangible resources such as children, property, or shared feelings and experiences that improve the relationship
- Low **quality of relationship alternatives**, which are options other than the relationship, such as other partners, spending time with friends, and even being alone, that could be viewed as more appealing than being in the relationship

Research has determined that the structure of the investment model can help explain elements of heterosexual and homosexual romances and friendships; it is also applicable in other situations and contexts—such as professional organizations and educational settings—where commitment is relevant (Le & Agnew, 2003). Think again about the example scenarios for Sidney and Jamie. In one scenario, the couple is maintaining their relationship with positive behaviors such as sharing tasks and assurances. As we noted, these positive relationship maintenance behaviors help Sidney and Jamie feel more satisfied and committed to their marriage. According to the investment model, the more satisfaction and investment in Sidney and Jamie's relationship, and the fewer perceived quality alternatives to their relationship, then the more committed Sidney and Jamie are to their relationship.

In fact, in a meta-analysis that examined 52 previously published research studies that included over 11,000 study participants, Benjamin Le and Christopher Agnew (2003) found that these three relationship variables predicted commitment with "outstanding consistency" (p. 50). Of the three components, relationship satisfaction was the strongest predictor of relationship commitment. Relationship commitment, according to the investment model, thus predicts various aspects of relationship maintenance and stability. Commitment is positively associated with relationship-enhancing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, such as willingness to sacrifice for a romantic partner, and negatively related to destructive relationship patterns, such as the decision to end the relationship (Le & Agnew, 2003).

Overall, the investment model has been a useful theoretical structure for understanding a variety of interpersonal communication situations and contexts. The model has helped researchers identify connections between commitment and predicting the continuation of different types of relationships in the following situations:

- Why dating partners communicate shortly afterward and forgive each other for committing relationship transgressions such as infidelity, deception, and dating or flirting with someone else (Guerrero & Bachman, 2008, 2010)
- How friends communicate with one another (Eyal & Dailey, 2012)
- If supervisors use verbal aggression toward employees at work (Madlock & Dillow, 2012)

However, relationship satisfaction was found to be a more useful factor than commitment in situations of betrayal (Ferrara & Levine, 2009) and romantic jealousy expression (Bevan, 2008), which is at odds with the central premise of the investment model. In the relationships that are important to you, you can apply the tenets of the investment model by considering your levels of satisfaction and investment and the extent to which you perceive that you have alternatives to the relationship. How does each of these contribute to your overall commitment to the relationship? Could focusing on improving one specific relationship factor—such as becoming more invested in the relationship—increase your commitment? What might this mean for the relationship and your communication with your partner? (The *Web Field Trip* gives you a chance to put the investment model into practice.)

WEB FIELD TRIP

Applying the Principles of the Investment Model

The Science of Relationships (http://www.scienceofrelationships.com/) is a website that features content edited and written by academics who study, research, and teach about different aspects of relationships. The editors and contributors to this site, who hold advanced degrees in many different fields of study, emphasize the importance of presenting readers with information and advice that is backed by scientific evidence. Search for an article titled "Why Do Victims Return to Abusive Relationships?" Consider the information presented, assessing how the content relates to the material in this chapter and then address the following questions.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. What specific types of resources and opportunities (i.e., alternatives to the abusive relationship) could be provided to women to increase the likelihood that they will not return to the abusive relationship?

2. In what other ways could the investment model be applied to other relationship situations?

Communicative Responses to Dissatisfaction

Rusbult and her colleagues next sought to extend the utility of the theories behind the investment model by examining how relationship commitment connects with communication when a partner is unhappy or dissatisfied in the relationship (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982). They created a typology of four responses that is based on how partners communicated their dissatisfaction. The responses varied on two sets of related factors: (1) positive versus negative (i.e., how kind or constructive versus how hurtful or destructive one acts), and (2) active versus inactive (i.e., how direct or dynamic versus how avoidant or static one's behaviors are). Each of the typologies is identified and explained in Table 8.2.

Table 8.2: Responses to relationship dissatisfaction

Typology	Active versus Inactive	Positive versus Negative	Examples
Exit	Active	Negative	Breaking up, threatening to leave, or moving out
Voice	Active	Positive	Discussions, suggesting solutions, entering into therapy
Loyalty	Inactive	Positive	Being patient and waiting out problems that might arise
Neglect	Inactive	Negative	Ignoring the partner, refusing to discuss issues, or spending less time together

Based upon the above descriptions, Rusbult and her colleagues (1982) found that **voice** and **loyalty** behaviors were more likely when romantic partners were more committed to each other and had greater satisfaction with the relationship before the problems arose. Conversely, **exit** and **neglect** were less likely in committed and satisfied romantic relationships, and expressing dissatisfaction via voice or loyalty also resulted in positive immediate and later consequences, including greater satisfaction and commitment over the long term (Rusbult et al., 1982). In addition, Dan Farrell, and Rusbult (1992) found that using voice and loyalty—and not using exit or neglect—when expressing dissatisfaction in the workplace was also associated with higher employee job satisfaction.

The studies above indicate that using positive and active responses, specifically voice responses, are the best course of action when partners are dealing with issues but want to preserve their relationship. Whether active or passive in nature, positive messages are more direct and show consideration. Though loyalty behaviors can have the same benefits, such actions might go unnoticed because they are less direct and thus more difficult for a partner to detect (Drigotas, Whitney, & Rusbult, 1995).

Intimacy

Relationships rarely remain static. One important change can be growth toward greater intimacy. The root meaning of the word *intimacy* is "making known to a close friend what is innermost" (Kasulis, 2002, p. 24). **Intimacy** involves growing closer by verbally and nonverbally sharing your innermost thoughts, feelings, and ideas with another person. All relationships—romantic, friend, family, and even professional—have the potential for intimacy. Social psychologist Karen

Prager (2000) even goes so far as to say that intimacy is "the distinguishing mark of a person's most important and valued relationships" contributing to the greatest levels of satisfaction, trust, closeness, and love (p. 229). Thomas Kasulis (2002), a scholar of philosophy and comparative studies, shares the following characteristics of intimacy in a relationship:

- Intimacy is personal rather than public and inseparable. In a romantic relationship, self and other belong together in a way that does not sharply distinguish the two.
- Interpersonal intimacy requires opening up our innermost thoughts, feelings, and motives and sharing them with the other person.
- Trust permeates the conversation between people who are intimates.
- The more profound the intimacy, the more that can be left unsaid.

As its definition suggests, communication is inherent in intimacy; in fact, Prager (2000) argues that intimate relationships become so as a result of intimate interactions that are characterized by frequent, emotional, and personal and private disclosures. Though we can have an intimate conversation with someone whom we do not know well, such as sharing personal information with a seatmate on an airplane or someone we meet on vacation, we cannot have intimate relationships without personal and private disclosures (Prager, 2000). In other words, intimate communication is a necessary condition for having an intimate relationship.

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▲ In an interpersonal relationship, intimacy can grow over time as partners begin to share more about their innermost thoughts, feelings, and motives.

What messages do you use when you want to convey intimacy to your close relational partners? Most likely it is a combination of words, gestures, facial expressions, and touch. Indeed, research consistently finds that verbal and nonverbal communication each uniquely contributes to our experiences in intimate relationships. Self-disclosure is the primary verbal message that characterizes intimacy. Not only does disclosing private and personal information about you foster intimacy, it also serves as a tool for building intimacy in newly formed relationships (Prager, 2000). Self-disclosure can particularly amplify partners' intimacy when

- It focuses on topics that are particularly personal and private.
- It uncovers feelings, emotions, and meanings of events, in addition to the events themselves.
- It involves immediacy behaviors that show that both partners are attentive to and focusing upon the interaction.
- It is met with verbal responsiveness and interest from the listener (Prager, 2000).

Nonverbal communication is also important for building and sustaining intimacy. Prager (2000) points out that **involvement behaviors**, which show that you are attentive, interested, and active in the conversation, are important when showing intimacy. Examples of specific nonverbal involvement behaviors that convey intimacy include

- Sharing mutual eye gaze
- Having open body posture
- Leaning forward toward your partner
- Gesturing
- Smiling and being facially animated
- Nodding your head while speaking and listening
- Touching your partner, particularly on the face or the torso area of the body (Prager, 1995)

In the sections we have just concluded, we illustrated the importance of interpersonal communication in commitment and intimacy processes. Quite simply, we cannot experience intimate, committed relationships without engaging in personal disclosures and close, involved nonverbal behaviors. We turn now to the role of empathy and social support in maintaining interpersonal relationships. (The *IPC Research Applied* feature gives you some insight into how interpersonal relationship research is conducted.)

I P C   R E S E A R C H   A P P L I E D

How Do Researchers Measure Interpersonal Relationship Variables?

As you read this chapter, you might wonder how researchers who study interpersonal relationships are able to determine just how committed, satisfied, and intimate individuals are. How can researchers say that more commitment is related to more satisfaction, which are both fairly abstract and subjective terms? It is indeed a challenge for scholars to study and measure things that they cannot physically observe. The best way (though certainly by no means the perfect way) is to ask individuals in close relationships to explain how they feel about their partners, which is a form of measurement called *self-report*. Self-report data are usually collected via a written survey. A benefit of self-report survey data is that the information can be collected easily and can include a broad diversity of research participants, especially when it is collected through online survey platforms such as SurveyMonkey or Qualtrics. Because researchers want their participants to be as honest as possible when taking part in their studies, they typically offer them anonymity or confidentiality. An anonymous study means that no one can link you to the responses that you provide, and a confidential survey allows only the researcher to know your identity, with a promise not to divulge identifying information.

But how is a relationship variable specifically measured? Researchers go through an extensive process of creating a series of items or questions that can be combined together to form a relationship variable measure, which is called a *scale*. Let's use relationship commitment as an example. Researchers might first ask a group of individuals to describe how they define commitment and what commitment means to them. These descriptions are then analyzed for patterns that multiple individuals mention and that are consistent with research on commitment. From these descriptions and previous research, relationship scholars then write a series of statements that they believe epitomize what commitment is.

Caryl Rusbult, John Martz, and Christopher Agnew's (1998) seven-item commitment scale, for example, includes items such as "I want our relationship to last for a very long time" and "I feel very attached to our relationship, very strongly linked to my partner." These scale items are slightly different from one another but reflect a unique aspect of commitment. The scale is then tested to

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ensure that the items fit together well with one another and truly do measure commitment, not another related relationship variable. Once the scale has successfully passed these tests, researchers can use it in their studies. If possible, it is usually best to select a scale that other researchers also use, as doing so means that the variable is consistently measured across studies. Much of the research described in this book makes use of these self-report survey data to gather valuable information about our experiences in our close relationships.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Have you ever been part of a research study that asks about how you communicate in interpersonal situations? If so, did you find the experience to be positive or negative? How?
2. Interpersonal communication researchers often have trouble getting individuals to complete their research studies. What suggestions do you have for persuading more individuals to take part in this type of research?
3. What are some potential problems with self-report studies dealing with communication in relationships?

8.3 Empathy and Social Support

The next two important relationship characteristics that contribute to relationship maintenance are empathy and social support. As you will see, these two concepts are considered together in the next sections because both emphasize the importance of taking your partner's perspective instead of just focusing on your own. Empathy and social support also highlight the importance of assisting and understanding each partner and his or her respective needs in the relationship.

Empathy

If you have access to your feelings and understand them, you can develop the ability to understand and be sensitive to the feelings of others as well. This sensitivity can bring you closer to people and enable you to feel empathy with them. **Empathy** is defined as putting yourself in another person's shoes or imagining another person's thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. When you feel empathy with another person, you identify with him or her and accurately understand his or her thoughts and feelings (Rogers, 1957).

Empathy is different from **sympathy**, where you convey that you experience sorrow for what the person is going through, without needing to identify with or relate to what the person is dealing with. In other words, sympathy means that you feel for the other person, but you do not necessarily have to know what they are experiencing. Further, according to one researcher (Orban, 2001), empathy involves "demonstrating sensitivity to the other person's feelings and attempting to envision her or his concern without influence from your own agenda of feelings, views, or values" (p. 4). In much the same way that the perception process gives you information about objects and other stimuli in the outside world, nineteenth-century philosopher Theodor Lipps (1903/1979) believed that empathy serves as our primary source of information about other people. In a sense, empathy enables you to understand others' mental states.

To be empathic, you must take the other person's perspective and consider his or her thoughts and feelings. When someone shares her feelings with you, try to recall experiences you have had that have generated similar feelings for you. Your identification of a similar feeling or experience in yourself can help you understand others. For example, suppose your friend Jake tells you that

he is terrified of flying in an airplane. If you love to fly, you may have a difficult time understanding why Jake feels fear on a plane. It is important here not to devalue or judge Jake's experience. Instead, try to recognize it and identify a similar experience of yours that will allow you to better understand how Jake feels. Specifically, think of an experience that terrified you—for example, when you saw a rattlesnake in front of you while walking on a trail. Think about the fear you had then, and you will be able to better understand the feeling Jake experiences when on an airplane. However, do not focus too much on your own experience, as this could take away from your ability to empathize with your friend.

Research shows that having empathy for others is related to your ability to exercise control over your behavior. Specifically, **self-control**—the ability to regulate what you say and how you act—is related to empathy. This capacity to control your emotions, urges, and desires has also been shown to result in healthier intimate relationships because you are willing and able to sacrifice your own needs, at times, for the benefit of your partner and the relationship (Rawn & Vohs, 2006). In this way empathy can have direct and indirect effects on how our relationships function.

Expressing Empathy

One of the primary benefits of relational partners sharing their thoughts and feelings with each other is that doing so helps each partner understand the emotions of the other person. It is for this reason that researchers call empathy "a central and crucial" component of healthy romantic couple functioning (Busby & Gardner, 2008, p. 232). Dean Busby and Brandt Gardner (2008) found that expressing empathy positively influenced couples' relationship satisfaction one year later, evidence of the power that empathy can have in sustaining our close relationships.

Empathy is clearly an important quality to have in your interpersonal communication with others. Being empathic also helps you view the world in a more balanced and objective way. There are many different ways to express empathy in your close relationships. Generally, communication that is helpful and supportive of others can be considered empathic. Here are some specific guidelines that will help you be a more empathic communicator (Orban, 2001):

- Be an active listener—one who listens long enough to form a perspective before asking questions or responding with your reaction.
- Attend to the interaction and use supportive body language.
- Show the other communicator that you are sensitive to his or her feelings.
- Put yourself in the place of the other communicator to see how you would feel in a similar situation.
- Ask questions—ones that are relevant to the situation and that attempt to clarify your view of the situation.
- Once you have identified the other communicator's feelings, reply in a way that is consistent with his or her emotions.
- Indicate that you are willing to assist or help, if doing so is appropriate.
- If you disagree with the other communicator, be honest and express your different opinion, while also acknowledging the person's right to feel the way that he or she does.

Another specific way to communicate more empathically is to engage in **active-empathic listening (AEL)**, which occurs when a listener is genuinely focused and emotionally involved in a particular interaction and when this "involvement is conscious on the part of the listener but is also perceived by the speaker" (Bodie, 2011, p. 278). Both communicators recognize that the

listener is being actively empathic during their conversation. According to Graham Bodie (2011), AEL has three stages:

- *Sensing:* The listener indicates that she is actively involved and taking in the information provided by the speaker.
- *Processing:* The listener shows engagement by remembering what the other says and clarifying points made by the speaker.
- *Response:* The listener asks questions, paraphrases, and nonverbally indicates involvement in the interaction.

According to Michelle Pence and Andrea Vickery (2012), being able to listen in an active-empathic way is positively related to having **emotional intelligence**, which involves the ability to monitor, regulate, and discriminate among your own and your partner's feelings in order to guide your thoughts and actions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Take the *Self-Test* to determine how active-empathic a listener you are in your conversations with your relational partners.

SELF-TEST

Bodie's Active-Empathic Listening Scale

Indicate how frequently you perceive each of the following statements to be true of you using a seven-point scale, where

> **1** indicates *never or almost never true of me*
>
> . . .
>
> **4** indicates *occasionally true*
>
> . . .
>
> **7** indicates *always or almost always true*

1. I am sensitive to what others are not saying.
2. I assure others that I am receptive to their ideas.
3. I assure others that I will remember what they say.
4. I am aware of what others imply but do not say.
5. I assure others that I am listening by using verbal acknowledgments.
6. I summarize points of agreement and disagreement when appropriate.
7. I understand how others feel.
8. I keep track of points others make.
9. I ask questions that show my understanding of others' positions.
10. I listen for more than just the spoken words.
11. I show others that I am listening by my body language (e.g., head nods).

Scoring

Sensing: Add up the totals for items 1, 4, 7, and 10 and divide by 7.

Processing: Add up the totals for items 3, 6, and 8 and divide by 7.

Response: Add up the totals for items 2, 5, 9, and 11 and divide by 7.

The higher your scores are for each AEL stage, the more you are an active-empathic listener.

Source: Self-test from Bodie, G. D. (2011). The active-empathic listening scale (AELS): Conceptualization and evidence of validity within the interpersonal domain. *Communication Quarterly*, *59*, 277–295. Taylor & Francis. Copyright © 2011 Routledge.

(continued)

> **Consider Your Results**
>
> Perhaps you responded to the statements above in relation to a specific relationship you have with someone, or in regard to a specific topic that others frequently discuss with you. Or perhaps you asked someone else to take the test on your behalf, to see how active-empathic a listener they perceive you to be. Either way, review the following questions and reflect upon your results.
>
> **1.** Was there a specific stage that you scored higher or lower in?
> **2.** If your score was lower than you anticipated, what do you think you could do to be a more active-empathic listener?
> **3.** If someone else took the self-test on your behalf, how did their perception of your active-empathic listening match up with your own perceptions?

Types of Social Support

When you are upset or have had something bad happen to you, one of your first instincts is likely to reach out to others. By talking to those around you about your thoughts and feelings in response to a painful situation, you hope that they will listen, validate you, offer you a shoulder to cry on, and even be willing to help out or assist in some way. These behaviors are all examples of social support, which most communication scholars recognize as a fundamental reason why we communicate with one another—one that is as important as sharing information, forming relationships, and persuading others (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003). Specifically, **social support** occurs when people who are confronting daily problems or major life stresses turn to others in their social network who can "provide information, comfort, perspective, and aid" (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 11); this act of social support then bolsters one's ability to effectively cope and respond to the situation. We are said to **cope** when we are able to manage stressful situations by changing what can be changed through problem solving and also adapting and adjusting to what we cannot change (Du Pré, 2009).

Communication researchers have been instrumental in advancing scholarly understanding of social support. These scholars have identified the different types of social support that people can use. Athena du Pré (2009) examined this social support research and identified two broad categories of social support, each with its own individual social support types. We will explain each by using an example of a situation where social support is extremely important in a close relationship: a husband named Jeff providing support to his wife Emma, who has been diagnosed with breast cancer. The first category is **action-facilitating support**, which involves support that is tangible and problem solving in nature. Action-facilitating support includes two specific types of support. The first is **instrumental support**, in which support is provided by performing tasks and favors for the person in need. **Informational support**, on the other hand, entails collecting and organizing information.

In our example, Jeff provides instrumental support to Emma when he runs errands for her such as grocery shopping and picking up her prescriptions from the pharmacy. He offers informational support when he writes down information during Emma's medical appointments and researches her diagnosis and treatment options on the Internet. Terrance Albrecht and Daena Goldsmith (2003) point out that action-facilitating support is most helpful in particularly serious and stressful situations such as a major health crisis like Jeff and Emma's. In minor or less severe social support situations, such as simply having a bad day, using these types of social support could actually be viewed as criticizing or intrusive in nature.

According to du Pré (2009), the second broad social support category is **nurturing support**, which focuses on helping the person in need to cope and to feel better emotionally. There are three types of nurturing support. The first is esteem support, in which the individual in need is made to feel competent and valued. Esteem support includes offering encouraging words and supportively listening, which many who need support find to be more valuable than being given advice. When Jeff tells Emma that she is strong and will get through this, and also tells her that he is there to listen when she simply wants to talk, he is providing her with esteem support. Second, **emotional support** involves acknowledging and understanding what the person in need is feeling. Emma is seeking emotional support from Jeff when she tells him how she feels, and he listens and tells her that those feelings are OK. Third, **social network support** derives from ongoing relationships that are maintained before, during, and after a crisis. Jeff can provide social network support by staying with Emma as she battles her cancer. He can also ask others—their family and friends—to assist them, or he can accept their offers to help. These types of nurturing support, especially emotional support, are viewed as helpful and valuable across many different social support situations, from minor to extremely severe (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003).

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▲ A desire for social support is a fundamental reason why we communicate with one another. We turn to others for information, comfort, and guidance when we encounter difficult or painful situations.

How do we actually employ these various types of social support? Albrecht and Goldsmith (2003) offer five forms of supportive communication that can be helpful in a variety of social support situations:

- Assist the person in need to gain perspective about the situation, particularly if it is beyond the person's control.
- Enhance the person in need's skills or training relevant to the stressful situation.
- Promote actions or behaviors that provide tangible assistance without the person in need feeling an excess obligation to reciprocate in the future.
- Offer the person in need the option to engage in private disclosures or to vent their pent-up emotions and thoughts.
- Offer accepting and reassuring messages for the person in need's sense of dignity, face, and self-worth.

One other important caution regarding how and when we provide social support to others is to remember that more is not always better. Du Pré (2009) cautions against engaging in **oversupport**, in which excessive, unwanted, and unnecessary help is provided, including offering unsolicited advice, providing too much information, and empathizing too much with the person in need. Instances of oversupport can overwhelm the person in need and make the person feel overly dependent on others and exhausted.

Social Support and Health

Not only can social support help someone feel better emotionally and psychologically, it also benefits physical health and well-being. As we discussed in Chapter 1, many different forms of

communication can be linked to improved health, and social support is one of the most significant of these beneficial factors. Research has found that receiving support from others can be an important factor in the improved functioning of three of our physiological systems: (1) the cardiovascular system, which includes heart functioning and blood and lymphatic circulation; (2) the immune system, which buffers our bodies against the effects of diseases and illnesses; and (3) the endocrine system, which consists of the glands that secrete hormones such as adrenaline and norepinephrine into the bloodstream and that control our stress reactions and metabolism. Social support also improves our ability to recover from an illness, cope with and adapt to a chronic illness, remain healthy, and reduce our mortality (DiMatteo, 2004). For example, in one study, when husbands received more social support from their wives after having coronary artery bypass surgery, they needed less pain medicine, were discharged more quickly from the intensive care unit, and returned home from the hospital sooner than husbands receiving less spousal social support (Kulik & Mahler, 1989).

How exactly does social support benefit our health? Albrecht and Goldsmith (2003) suggest a number of ways in which social support and physical health can be linked:

- Receiving social support encourages the person to more adaptively and usefully cope with stress.
- Social support from others can improve the health behaviors of the person in need; in essence, the individual is encouraged to live healthier by eating better, exercising more, or following their doctor's treatment regimen.
- Receiving social support helps the individual feel better psychologically, contributing to the person's self-esteem and positive view of life.
- Social support can give the individual hope for the future and a deeper sense of life purpose.

Returning to the example of Jeff and Emma and her breast cancer diagnosis, if Emma knows that she can rely on Jeff and their family and friends, she can focus on getting well and following through with her treatment, rather than on being stressed and feeling unable to cope with her cancer diagnosis. Knowing that others are there for her and that she can depend on them can also make Emma feel good about herself, which can then make her even more determined to beat her cancer. Social support can be thought of as a protective net that catches and holds the person in need, allowing the individual a safe place to heal or cope. Being there for someone you care about can therefore assist in maintaining your relationship with the person and can also contribute to the person's improved psychological and physical health.

8.4 Challenges of Relationship Maintenance

Thus far in this chapter we have focused on the many things that we can do to maintain our relationships. We have discussed the importance of relationship maintenance and considered how using positive relationship maintenance behaviors—intimacy, commitment, empathy, and support—can be a positive force in all types of relationships. Now we consider some situations where preserving the relationship can be very difficult. These situations—which include having an inequitable relationship and navigating a relationship via mediated channels or over a geographic distance—are important to understand and manage so that the relationship does not deteriorate or end entirely. We thus consider each with regard to relationship maintenance in the following sections.

Restoring Equity

One of the most basic things we want out of our interpersonal relationships is to feel rewarded. We seek to benefit from our relationships, and our partners also seek rewards in return. The forms of these rewards can be tangible, such as money, jewelry, and material wealth, or intangible, such as feelings of love, understanding, security, and joy.

Though the idea of rewarding relationships sounds simple and logical, relationship scholars initially had difficulty formally explaining the role of these tangible and intangible rewards in forming and maintaining relationships. **Social exchange theory** was therefore proposed by Harold Kelley and John Thibaut (1978) as a way to extend the economic notion of rewards versus costs to our relationships with others. According to the theory, we seek to maximize our rewards and minimize our costs in our relationships. Initially, social exchange theory was hailed as an intuitive, simple explanation for what we seek to get out of relationships. Over time, however, the theory proved difficult to test. For example, what one couple might consider a reward (money is helpful to us because we can use it to put a down payment on a house), another could see as a cost (we can't agree on money issues, and it is causing us a great deal of conflict). In addition, those who seemingly receive very few rewards and are shouldering great relational costs (for example, those who are being physically abused by their partners) do not always leave the relationship, as the theory predicts they would.

Elaine Hatfield and her colleagues (Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hay, 1985) proposed equity theory as a way to reconsider the concept of a relationship reward. Equity theory considers relationship rewards in relation to fairness, providing an alternative to social exchange theory. **Equity theory** formally asserts that we seek to balance our rewards with the rewards of our partner in order to maintain equity within our close relationships. Rather than both partners simply seeking to gain the maximum rewards from the relationship (as social exchange theory predicts), according to equity theory relational partners attempt to balance the amount of rewards they receive with the amount received by their partner. In other words, **equity** exists when both partners subjectively believe that they are putting in and obtaining equal or similar levels of relationship rewards. When inequity arises in a relationship, there is a discernible imbalance for one or both partners that can take one of two forms: being **underbenefited**, gaining fewer rewards than one's partner; and being **overbenefited**, obtaining more rewards than one's partner.

We might see many different inequities in our relationships. For example, maybe our parents allowed our brother to do something that we weren't allowed to do, or perhaps our friends spend time together but don't ask us to come along. Even the difference in annual salaries between a husband and his wife is an example of inequity in a relationship. When inequity is detected, it is often an upsetting experience for both partners. Underbenefited individuals feel unhappy, hurt, angry, and resentful toward their partners, are less satisfied in their

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▲ Equity exists in a relationship when both partners feel they are putting in and obtaining similar levels of relationship rewards. If an imbalance exists, one way to restore equity in a relationship is to change our behaviors.

relationships, and are less likely to like their partners. Overbenefited partners experience guilt, believe that they do not deserve these rewards, and, despite receiving the most out of the relationship, feel less satisfied and content than those in equitable relationships. It is thus no surprise that inequitable relationships are more likely to end. In contrast, individuals in equitable relationships feel emotionally rewarded and are relationally satisfied.

Perhaps what's more troubling is that partners in inequitable relationships are less likely to work at maintaining their relationships than those who view their relationships as equitable. Underbenefited people may give up because working at a relationship that is inequitable and dissatisfying is not worth it or is self-defeating (Yum & Canary, 2009). This pattern might also be the result of the inequitable partners' decisions to use different relationship maintenance strategies: Overbenefited individuals in friendships use avoidance as a maintenance strategy, whereas underbenefited friends tend to use sharing activities (Messman, Canary, & Hause, 2000). But it is also possible that use of different maintenance strategies could be interpreted as unique attempts to restore equity: An overbenefited individual may step away from the friendship temporarily in order to restore balance, and an underbenefited individual may want to share an activity to give the friend an opportunity to offer more rewards.

One way to restore equity is to change behavior—either your own or your partner's. A study by Catherine Westerman, Hee Sun Park, and Hye Eun Lee (2007) found that individuals in inequitable coworker relationships dealt with their inequity in this manner. Westerman and her colleagues noted that their findings fit the pattern that underbenefited individuals would feel disadvantaged and thus seek change, and overbenefited people would feel the need to change how they acted because they felt as if they were taking advantage of their partners. Specifically, the study revealed that underbenefited coworkers were more likely to ask their overbenefited partners to act differently, while the overbenefited coworkers instead responded to the inequity by changing their own behaviors (Westerman et al., 2007).

Though it seems somewhat cold and businesslike, we do have a tendency to evaluate our close relationships in terms of having equitable rewards and costs with our partner. You encounter a significant challenge when you find yourself in a relationship where you are consistently over- or underbenefited. However, you might be able to restore the equity in the relationship by changing how you engage in relationship maintenance or by changing the behaviors—both yours and your partner's—that are primarily creating the imbalance.

Distance

We first discussed geographic distance in Chapter 1, where we described long-distance relationships (LDRs) as having a unique set of challenges and communication patterns. We return to distance here because it is specifically relevant to how we maintain our close relationships. Long-distance relationships are a common experience today, with commuter marriages; geographically separated romantic, family, and friend college relationships; and military deployments contributing to this growth (Merolla, 2010a). Those in LDRs must adjust how they maintain their relationships and communicate intimacy and satisfaction to one another to account for the miles between them. However, rather than giving up or throwing in the towel, LDR partners often show extra motivation to make up for the distance between them by scheduling specific times to talk to and visit one another, making a point to engage in intimate and positive conversations, and using multiple forms of social media and new technologies such as texting and video chatting (Jiang & Hancock, 2013).

Though the common belief is that individuals in LDRs have lower relationship quality than those in geographically close relationships, research has found that is actually not the case. A 2010

review of research by Laura Stafford, a communication scholar who specializes in distance and relationship maintenance, determined that the relationships of distant romantic partners are as trusting, satisfying, and stable as those who are in close proximity to each other. There were also no differences in relationship satisfaction and closeness between distant and close college-age friends (Johnson, 2001). In fact, in one study, LDR partners were in longer romantic relationships, had more intimate interactions, and reported greater commitment to each other than did geographically close partners (Jiang & Hancock, 2013).

When distance relationships were compared with geographically close relationships, there were no significant differences for the openness, positivity, and assurances relationship maintenance behaviors (Johnson, 2001). However, there were certain distinctions related to other maintenance behaviors between geographically distant and close relationships:

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▲ Relationship maintenance might be more complicated overall for partners in a long-distance relationship, but the quality of such relationships is more similar than different to geographically close relationships.

- College-aged friends reported using more relationship maintenance behaviors with their geographically close friends than their distant ones (Johnson, 2001).
- Geographically close friends used the social network and joint activities behaviors more, whereas distant friends relied more on sending cards and letters and calling to maintain their relationships (Johnson, 2001).
- Wives of deployed U.S. soldiers noted that their attempts to maintain their relationships are often complicated by communication environments that are not private, preventing intimate conversation, and that place restrictions and time limits on communications; they also would prefer more frequent interactions (Merolla, 2010b).
- LDR partners uniquely maintain their relationships by thinking about the times they previously were geographically close and looking forward to the times that will be spent together in the future (Merolla, 2010a).

Together, the research on long-distance relationships shows that relationship quality in such relationships is more similar than different to geographically close partnerships. This conclusion goes against the prevailing belief about the difficulty of managing LDRs, suggesting they may not be as much of a challenge as is assumed. However, LDR partners do use a number of different maintenance strategies than proximal partners, suggesting that both types of relationships work to maintain their relationships but in different ways. Relationship maintenance overall may also be more complicated for distant partners, which could present a challenge for some individuals in LDRs. But, if partners acknowledge the difficulty of distance and strive to compensate for it, LDRs have as much a chance for success as geographically close relationships.

Mediated Communication

Think about the interactions that you had today with your friends, family, and romantic partner. How many were face-to-face? How many involved some form of mediated communication, such as a mobile phone or the Internet? It is likely that mediated communication comprises at least

half of your interactions on a given day. We now rely on many different communication channels in our day-to-day conversations with those who are close to us; in fact, cell phones and text messaging are frequent mediated channels of communication with romantic partners and are most often used when the partners wish to express affection to each other (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011). It is thus not surprising that mediated communication has become an instrumental tool for developing and maintaining relationships.

Interacting via mediated channels has many benefits: It is convenient, allowing us to communicate from almost anywhere and with almost anyone we wish; we can use it to keep in touch and maintain relationships with friends and acquaintances from different periods of our lives or with those who live far away; and we can meet people whom we would otherwise never have met. However, despite these benefits, there are a number of challenges associated with maintaining relationships via mediated communication channels.

First, communicating via text messaging or e-mail can leave too much room for interpretation, causing miscommunication. Texting or e-mailing can also cause frustration because thoughts, feelings, and ideas cannot be fully expressed through these channels, which are mostly limited to written text or basic symbols.

Second, maintaining relationships by way of social networks such as Facebook may contribute to stress, compromised health, and difficulty in adjusting to parenthood. Almost 86% of Facebook users in one study reported experiencing Facebook-induced stress (Campisi et al., 2012). In addition, the more new mothers checked their Facebook accounts and managed what they uploaded and posted on their Facebook pages, the more stress they experienced about parenting (Bartholomew, Schoppe-Sullivan, Glassman, Dush, & Sullivan, 2012). Another study found that female college students were more likely than males to lose sleep over Facebook, to feel that photos on Facebook contributed to their negative body image, and to admit to feeling stressed about, but still sometimes addicted to, being on Facebook (Thompson & Lougheed, 2012). Overall, the majority of respondents in Judith Campisi and colleagues' study (2012) reported that the increased use of technology means that it is more difficult for them to feel close to others (44% versus 40% who said technology made it easier, and 16% who felt it had no impact). It is possible that we are becoming overwhelmed by the larger number of relationships we feel we must maintain due to the exponential growth of mediated communication.

Third, when we communicate via mediated channels, we often are creating a permanent record of our messages. Research has found that self-disclosure is an important part of online relationship maintenance (Craig & Wright, 2012). Yet revealing private and personal information online can be risky because the disclosures could be shared with others or used against you. Self-disclosure online also is linked to increased predictability about the partner, which could become boring over time (Craig & Wright, 2012). Stepping away from mediated channels, however, can allow us to feel less overwhelmed with the constant ability to interact with and maintain relationships with others. Elizabeth Craig and Kevin Wright (2012) recommend that relational partners supplement their online interactions with face-to-face communications in order to clarify misunderstandings and that they use other relationship maintenance behaviors. These are sensible suggestions that we would suggest should be used with all forms of mediated communication. Communicating via a mixture of online and offline interactions is beneficial to maintaining our close relationships. (*IPC in the Digital Age* offers a perspective on relationship satisfaction on Facebook.)

IPC IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Photographic Displays of Relationship Satisfaction and Closeness on Facebook

We saw in Chapter 2 that people frequently work to construct a positive image of themselves online, including what profile picture they choose to accompany their Facebook profile. Recently published research also indicates that our profile photos are often used to display our relationships. A group of social psychologists, led by Laura Saslow, examined the possible links between relationship satisfaction, closeness, and whether or not one displays one's relationship in the Facebook profile picture (i.e., does the photo include the Facebook user and his or her romantic partner?).

Saslow and her colleagues (Saslow, Muise, Impett, & Dubin, 2012) conducted three studies of married and dating couples; they uncovered the following details based on participant information:

- The more satisfied and close participants were, the more likely they were to include their spouse or partner in their profile picture (which the researchers call "dyadic profile pictures").
- Almost 28% of dating couples were found to have dyadic Facebook profile pictures.
- The dating partners of satisfied individuals were more likely to have a dyadic profile picture.
- On specific days when dating partners reported being more satisfied in their relationships, they also posted more information about their relationships on Facebook, including writing more posts and comments about their partners and uploading more dyadic photos.

Saslow and her colleagues (2012) concluded from their research that "dyadic profile pictures on Facebook are an important marker of interconnectedness in a relationship" (p. 416). Results also indicate that this unique relationship marker is linked with couples' offline positive relational feelings toward each other. Apply these findings to your own experiences on Facebook, or the experiences of someone you know, and then consider the following questions.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Do you think that romantic relationship satisfaction and closeness correspond with what was displayed about the relationship on Facebook?
2. How aware are we of this when we select a profile picture, and how does our satisfaction influence the photo that our partner chooses to post? Can the selection of a Facebook profile picture help maintain a romantic relationship?
3. Do you think that this relationship would extend to other close relationships such as with friends, siblings, and parents?

8.5 Strategies for Communicating Competently When Maintaining Interpersonal Relationships

This chapter has shown the importance of behaviors in maintaining close, loving relationships: We must continuously show our partners that we care about them through our behaviors and our communication. We also can tell our partners that we care for them by being empathic and offering them social support when they need it. If we do not maintain our relationships in the ways described in this chapter, the relationship quality will undoubtedly suffer. We thus close this chapter by offering some specific strategies for improving your relationship maintenance competence.

Strive to Engage in Positive Relationship Maintenance Behaviors

Research has shown that actions that we may usually consider routine, even mundane, are important for preserving the relationships that are important to us. In addition, communication competence is strongly related to using positive maintenance behaviors in your relationships (Hwang, 2011). Reflect on how you (and your partner) use maintenance behaviors in your close relationships, particularly the sharing tasks and offering assurances strategies. Try to use positive maintenance behaviors, which enhance relationship satisfaction, liking, and control mutuality, rather than negative maintenance behaviors, which can damage the very relationship that you are trying to preserve. Remember that assisting with even the smallest tasks and telling your partner that you care about him or her can go a long way!

Evaluate Your Relationships

We saw in this chapter that a number of relational characteristics can contribute to understanding whether or not a relationship will succeed or fail. Now that you have a better grasp of the importance of intimacy, commitment, satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment in close relationships, use this knowledge to help determine why you communicate the way that you do with your relational partners. Consider specifically how much (or how little) you experience these five relationship characteristics and how your levels may or may not correspond with your partners' levels. If you are experiencing reduced levels of one or more of these characteristics, think about how it might be improved. How might you also communicate differently to improve your relationship's long-term outlook? How can your partner do the same?

Engage in Social Support, but Don't Oversupport

Social support clearly has many positive implications, for relationships, for individuals, and for one's health. It is also a fundamental reason why we communicate with others. But it is important to verify that someone needs or is seeking social support, even in less stressful or ordinary situations. Recall that providing too much support or the wrong type of support can make the situation worse and can cause the person in need to feel even more stressed and overwhelmed. It is always best to step back and evaluate the social support situation to see how you can best contribute. You might do this by asking the person in need or others close to the person what you can do to assist. Be empathic in order to understand the needs of the person you are trying to help.

Summary and Resources

How we treat each other and the way that we communicate once we are in a close relationship is the most important way that we can keep the relationship going. Relationship maintenance involves how you act in ways that sustain and repair your relationship so that it is satisfying to you, and it can be accomplished using both positive and negative maintenance behaviors. Use of positive maintenance behaviors enhances relationships, whereas negative maintenance can be relationally damaging.

Two additional relationship components that can be shaped by communication are commitment and intimacy. According to the investment model, being satisfied with and invested in the relationship, and having few quality relationship alternatives, increases one's relationship commitment, which then increases the willingness to stay in the relationship and communicate in positive ways. When an individual experiences dissatisfaction, he or she can respond to it via

exit, voice, loyalty, or neglect. Voice and loyalty are more often used in committed and satisfied relationships. Communication is also inherent in intimacy, which involves sharing thoughts and feelings with another person, and can be expressed in both verbal and nonverbal messages.

Empathy and social support are two important ways to maintain a relationship because both prompt you to consider your partner and his or her perspective. Empathy involves identifying with someone by putting yourself in the other's shoes. It can be expressed by actively listening, being involved in the interaction, showing sensitivity, asking targeted and relevant questions, replying while considering his or her emotions, and indicating a willingness to help. We can also use social support to help individuals in need cope with and confront stressful situations. Social support has multiple health benefits and can even decrease mortality, as well as contributing to psychological well-being. This support can be both tangible, by providing instrumental or information support, and intangible, by providing emotional and esteem support. Individuals offering social support should be careful to offer the type of support that is most appropriate to a particular situation and to not oversupport the person in need.

We should also keep in mind the three challenges to relationship maintenance. The first is restoring equity. According to equity theory, we strive to gain the same level of rewards from the relationship as our partner does. When there is inequity, one or both partners receive more or less benefits, and relationship maintenance and quality can suffer. Second, geographic distance can be a maintenance challenge. However, if the long-distant partners acknowledge that distance must be accommodated and make a greater effort or engage in unique forms of relationship maintenance, that challenge can be overcome. The third challenge is maintaining relationships by way of mediated communication channels. Though convenient, relying on mediated channels to maintain relationships can cause stress and be overwhelming.

Key Terms

action-facilitating support A broad social support category involving support that is tangible and problem solving in nature.

active-empathic listening (AEL) Listening that occurs when a listener is genuinely focused and emotionally involved in a particular interaction.

advice A positive relationship maintenance behavior that involves the expression of partner-related emotions and cognitions to the partner and giving opinions.

allowing control A negative relationship maintenance behavior that involves giving the partner control in the relationship.

assurances A positive relationship maintenance behavior that involves expressing commitment, love, and emotional support.

avoidance A negative relationship maintenance behavior that involves not talking about a topic and evading the partner.

commitment Long-term attachment to a relationship that persists through both good and bad times.

conflict management A positive relationship maintenance behavior that involves employing constructive and positive behaviors such as cooperating and apologizing when in conflict with the partner.

control mutuality The extent to which the partners share responsibility in the relationship.

cope The ability to manage stressful situations by changing what can be changed or adapting to what one cannot change.

destructive conflict A negative relationship maintenance behavior that involves being controlling and starting conflict.

emotional intelligence The ability to monitor, regulate, and discriminate among one's own and one's partner's feelings in order to guide one's thoughts and actions.

emotional support Acknowledging and understanding what the person in need is feeling.

empathy The ability to put the self in another person's shoes or to imagine another person's thoughts, feelings, and perspective.

equity Both partners subjectively believe that they are putting in and obtaining equal or similar levels of relationship rewards.

equity theory A theory that proposes that we seek to balance rewards with the rewards of our partner in order to maintain relational equity.

exit An active, negative response to relationship dissatisfaction that includes damaging actions such as breaking up.

infidelity A negative relationship maintenance behavior that involves flirting with others and having affairs.

informational support A type of support in which one collects and organizes information for the person in need.

instrumental support A type of support in which one performs tasks and favors for the person in need.

intimacy A state of closeness achieved by verbally and nonverbally sharing one's innermost thoughts, feelings, and ideas with another person.

investment Tangible and intangible relationship resources such as children, property, or shared feelings and experiences.

involvement behaviors Actions that exhibit one's attentiveness, interest, and active participation in interactions; important aspects of intimacy.

jealousy induction A negative relationship maintenance behavior that involves flirting with and commenting on others' attractiveness to elicit the partner's jealousy.

loyalty An inactive, positive response to relationship dissatisfaction that includes passive behaviors such as being patient and waiting out problems.

neglect An inactive, negative response to relationship dissatisfaction that includes letting the relationship deteriorate by ignoring the partner.

nurturing support A broad category of support that involves helping the person in need to cope and to feel better emotionally.

openness A positive relationship maintenance behavior that involves self-disclosures and direct relational discussions.

overbenefited A relationship scenario in which one partner is obtaining more relational rewards than the partner.

oversupport Help that is excessive, unwanted, and unnecessary.

positivity A positive relationship maintenance behavior that involves being optimistic, cheerful, and pleasant.

quality of relationship alternatives Attractive options other than the relationship, such as other partners, spending time with friends, and even being alone.

relationship maintenance Actions that sustain or preserve our relationships in a state that we desire.

relationship maintenance behaviors The actions and tasks that assist with maintaining, managing, and/or repairing a relationship.

relationship satisfaction Positive emotion and attraction toward the relationship.

self-control The ability to regulate what one says and how one acts; related to empathy.

sharing tasks A positive relationship maintenance behavior that involves performing one's fair share of joint jobs in the relationship.

social exchange theory A theory that proposes that we seek to maximize our rewards and minimize our costs in relationships.

social networks A positive relationship maintenance behavior that involves the reliance on the support of common family and friend networks.

social network support Support from relationships that are maintained before, during, and after a crisis.

social support The experience of turning to others in one's social network when confronting daily problems or major life stresses.

spying A negative relationship maintenance behavior that involves checking up on the partner.

sympathy The experience of feeling the same emotions or thoughts as someone else.

underbenefited A relationship scenario in which one partner is gaining fewer relational rewards than the other partner.

voice An active, positive response to relationship dissatisfaction that includes attempts to improve the relationship such as discussions.

Critical Thinking and Discussion Questions

1. Take a moment to evaluate one of your own relationships or the relationship of someone close to you. What types of relationship maintenance behaviors are used in this close relationship? Are different ones used in different relationships? Why?

2. Why might someone use negative relationship maintenance behaviors? Do you think such actions could be beneficial for a relationship?

3. Which relationship characteristic—intimacy, commitment, relationship satisfaction, investment, or quality of relationship alternatives—do you think is most important for maintaining a close relationship? Why?

4. Think of a time when someone provided you with social support. Which type(s) of social support did they use? Was it appropriate for the situation?

5. What are some specific messages or behaviors you might use to restore equity in a close relationship? How would you use different messages or behaviors if you were underbenefited versus overbenefited?

6. As discussed in this chapter, a relationship can encounter different challenges. How do you work to maintain your relationships when confronted with one or more of the three discussed?