Self-esteem's impacts on intimacy-building: Pathways through self-disclosure and responsiveness

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Abstract

Building intimate relationships is rewarding but entails risking rejection. Trait self-esteem—a person's overall self-evaluation—has important implications for how people behave in socially risky situations. Integrating established models of responsiveness and intimacy with theory and research on self-esteem, we present a model that highlights the ways in which self-esteem impacts intimacy-building. A review of relevant research reveals that compared to people with high self-esteem, people with low self-esteem exhibit interpersonal perceptions and behaviors that can hinder intimacy development—for example, disclosing less openly, and eliciting and perceiving less responsiveness from others. We identify important directions for future research and consider methods for encouraging intimacy-promoting processes among people with low self-esteem.

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1.0

Building close relationships is among life's most rewarding experiences. Scholars have developed well-supported models [1-3] that explain how people can go from being strangers to becoming intimate friends or partners. These models highlight the importance of self-disclosing—revealing thoughts, feelings, and information—and of receiving responsive replies. Yet cultivating intimacy is risky; revealing oneself means risking rejection [3-5]. Thus, people must often decide between seeking the closeness they crave and avoiding possible rejection. The balance between these goals is influenced by self-esteem.

Self-esteem refers to a person's overall self-evaluation [6]. We focus on trait self-esteem, which is quite stable over time [6] (not state self-esteem, which fluctuates). Although self-esteem is typically measured in a continuous (versus categorical) fashion, for simplicity we will refer to people with relatively higher self-esteem as HSEs and people with relatively lower self-esteem as LSEs. HSEs are confident in their value, whereas LSEs have doubts about their value [7]. These self-evaluations have implications for interpersonal beliefs and behavior. LSEs project their feelings about themselves onto others, leading them to trust less in others' caring than do HSEs. Whereas HSEs assume acceptance, LSEs perceive rejection as likelier than do HSEs [7]. Thus, LSEs tend to be vigilant for signs of rejection and disliking from others and appear to adjust their behavior to avoid rejection [5,7]. Interpersonally, LSEs are cautious and self-protective; LSEs prioritize avoiding rejection even if this means foregoing rewarding connection opportunities [5,8,9]. By contrast, HSEs are less concerned about others' rejection or acceptance; they prioritize pursuing connection even if it is interpersonally risky. For example, in risky romantic initiation contexts, LSEs tend to use indirect strategies (e.g., waiting for the other

person to make a move), whereas HSEs tend to use direct strategies (e.g., communicating their interest verbally) [10]. LSEs' indirectness protects them from rejection, but may prevent a rewarding new relationship.

2.0 Self-Esteem's Impacts on Intimacy-Building Model

Because self-esteem affects interpersonal perceptions and behavior, it affects intimacy-building. Figure 1 presents our Self-Esteem's Impacts on Intimacy Building (SIIB) model, which illustrates the ways in which we propose that self-esteem shapes perceptions and behaviors critical to intimacy-building.

2.1 The building blocks of intimacy: Insights from prior frameworks (Paths A, B, and C)

Our model is adapted from the interpersonal model of intimacy [3], the InterCAPS model [2], and recent perspectives on listening and responsiveness [1]. These prior frameworks posit that intimacy develops when: a discloser reveals thoughts and feelings to a listener, which can elicit responsive (caring, understanding, and validating [3]) listening behaviors (Path A); the discloser interprets the listener's response as responsive (Path B); and the discloser's responsiveness perceptions affect future disclosing (Path C). Repeated, reciprocated self-disclosure and perceived partner responsiveness promote intimacy [2,3]. Our model extends existing frameworks by highlighting self-esteem's influence on intimacy-building.

2.2 Discloser's self-esteem predicts their own disclosure and listener's responsiveness (Paths D and E)

Conversations often begin with one person revealing information or feelings. Such disclosure is risky [3,5]; listeners may criticize, laugh, or disengage—responses that can convey rejection. LSEs' desire to avoid rejection often leads them to inhibit their disclosures [5] (Path D)—a manifestation of their self-protective approach. Relative to HSEs, LSEs report expressing feelings less openly [11] and are less likely to promptly disclose upsetting events to close

partners [12]. These effects seemingly emerge because, consistent with the idea that people project their self-views onto others, LSEs trust less in others' caring than do HSEs [9,11,12]. When LSEs do approach others about negative events they are facing, they often seek support more indirectly than do HSEs—sulking and whining rather than directly describing their problem and emotions [13]. LSEs' indirectness likely stems from their self-protectiveness; whereas direct support-seeking attempts leave one vulnerable to rejection, indirect support-seeking may feel safer because it limits self-revelation and does not demand a response.

Considering LSEs' guarded, indirect expressivity (Path D), it is perhaps unsurprising that LSEs elicit poorer responses from their partners than do HSEs (Path E). Open self-disclosure, emotional expression, and direct support-seeking increase listeners' compassionate motivation and understanding of disclosers' needs, thereby promoting responsiveness [14-17] (Path A). Inhibited disclosure, emotional suppression, and indirect support-seeking undermine these factors [15,18]. Indeed, indirect support-seeking is often missed, misunderstood, or met with unresponsiveness (e.g., criticism, blaming) [13].

Studies indicate that listeners *are* less responsive to LSEs than to HSEs. In one investigation, listeners were less responsive to their LSE (vs. HSE) romantic partners' negative self-disclosure about an in-lab task (according to listeners and independent coders) [19]. In another study, when disclosing failure experiences to a friend, LSEs received less validation of their negative emotions than did HSEs [20]. Further, when LSEs (vs. HSEs) disclose negative events, listeners enact more unsupportive behaviors such as minimizing and blaming [21].

Listeners may behave less responsively to LSEs (vs. HSEs) not only because of LSE disclosers' inhibition and indirectness, but also because of the valence of their disclosures. When LSEs do disclose, they often express more negativity and less positivity than do HSEs [5,22].

Although expressing negative emotion can signal need and enhance others' ability and motivation to provide support [15,23], chronic negativity can breed resentment and lead listeners to discount negative expressions, undermining responsiveness [5,24]. Positive expressions, which signal affiliation motives [25], typically promote liking and can encourage responsiveness [15,22,26]. The valence of LSEs' disclosures may therefore be another factor that reduces others' responsiveness. Taken together, these findings suggest that LSE (vs. HSE) disclosers may receive less responsiveness from listeners at least in part because of the ways in which LSEs self-disclose (an indirect effect; Path D-A).

Additionally, listeners may offer less responsiveness to LSEs versus HSEs because over the course of their relationship, listeners have developed (warranted or unwarranted) beliefs and expectations about LSEs that reduce the listeners' motivation to be responsive. For example, partners report believing that LSEs are less open and genuine, more needy and dependent than HSEs, and that supporting LSEs will be more tiring and frustrating [19,21,27]. Such beliefs may lead listeners to be less responsive to LSEs than to HSEs, even if responding to the same disclosure.

2.3 Discloser's self-esteem predicts their perception of listener responsiveness and its link to their subsequent disclosure (Paths F and G)

Once listeners enact (un)responsive behaviors, disclosers interpret these behaviors, forming a subjective perception of responsiveness [3]. The SIIB model predicts that disclosers' self-esteem not only affects listeners' actual responsiveness, but disclosers' perceptions of listeners' responsiveness (Path F).

Perceptions of partner responsiveness involve accuracy and bias [28]. Discloser perceptions of listener responsiveness track with coder-rated responsive behavior [29] (accuracy;

Path B). Thus, LSEs should perceive less responsiveness than HSEs because they actually receive less responsiveness (Path E). Additionally, responsiveness perceptions are biased by people's relationship-relevant knowledge, expectations, and motivations [3,30,31]. Recall that LSEs project their self-doubts onto others and are vigilant for signs of rejection. In general, LSEs interpret partner behaviors more negatively than do HSEs. For example, LSEs perceive less acceptance from others than do HSEs even when actual acceptance cues are held constant [32]. Thus, LSEs might perceive less responsiveness than HSEs even when partners exhibit the same listening behaviors [1,13].

Considerable evidence supports Path F: Compared to HSEs, LSEs perceive less social support overall [33] and perceive specific partners to be less responsive to them [19,21]—in general and in particular conversations. LSEs also perceive partners as responding less enthusiastically to their good news than do HSEs, at least following relationship conflicts or threats [34]. Such effects may reflect accurate perceptions (Path B), but some evidence also implicates bias: After disclosing about an in-lab failure experience, LSEs perceived less support in their romantic partner's response than did HSEs, but coders saw no such differences [35]. LSEs' tendency to project their self-views, and their vigilance for rejection cues, may lead them to doubt partners' responsiveness even when such doubts are unwarranted.

Why does perceived responsiveness matter? When people perceive partners as more (vs. less) responsive, they experience tremendous personal and relational benefits [1-3,36-40]. They also behave more responsively themselves [2,3,41,42], and they self-disclose and express emotions more openly [1-3,40,43,44] (Path C). This latter finding is especially true for LSEs (Path G)—that is, discloser self-esteem moderates the effects of listener responsiveness on subsequent disclosure: LSEs express themselves more openly with responsive partners (vs.

partners whose responsiveness is low or unknown), whereas HSEs express themselves more freely, apparently with less regard for partner responsiveness [4]. LSEs' vigilance for rejection and self-protectiveness leads them to inhibit disclosure unless high responsiveness allays their fears [4,5]. By contrast, HSEs' lesser worries about rejection leads them to prioritize connection: Compared to LSEs, HSEs' decisions about how openly to disclose seem less contingent on partner responsiveness.

2.4 Listener's self-esteem predicts receiving disclosures (Path H)

We have focused thus far on discloser self-esteem. The SIIB model also predicts a role for listener self-esteem. Specifically, listener self-esteem—or at least disclosers' perceptions of listener self-esteem—should affect the disclosures that listeners receive (Path H). Listener self-esteem may also predict listeners' responsiveness to others' disclosures (Path I), and disclosers' perceptions of the listener's responsiveness (Path J)—paths to which we turn shortly.

Work relevant to Path H has examined how disclosers' *perception* of listener self-esteem (which tends to be moderately accurate [45])—rather than actual listener self-esteem—affects disclosers' sharing. Some evidence indicates that people hold rather negative expectations of others they perceive to be LSEs. (It is worth noting, though, that this evidence does not involve people's expectations about their own relationship partners; rather, it involves people's expectations about novel targets who are characterized as LSEs or HSEs). For example, people anticipate that they will like LSE targets less than HSE targets and they assume that LSE targets will be less agreeable and less open to experience than HSE targets [46,47]. Such views could lead people to anticipate less warm and more judgmental responses from LSE compared to HSE listeners. If people similarly anticipate less responsiveness from their LSE (vs. HSE) relationship partners, people might disclose less to partners they perceive to be LSEs versus HSEs.

Evidence from correlational and experimental studies indicates that disclosers do indeed share less openly with listeners whom they perceive to be LSEs (vs. HSEs). When facing stressors, disclosers seek less support from (perceived) LSE (vs. HSE) partners because they doubt LSEs' support provision abilities [48]. Disclosers conceal their negative sentiments about listeners they perceive as insecure, seemingly to spare their feelings [49]. People are also reluctant to disclose *positive* experiences to partners they believe to have LSE because they fear that LSEs will feel inferior or "rain on their parade" [45,50].

2.5 Does listener's self-esteem predict listener's responsiveness and discloser's perception of listener's responsiveness? (Paths I and J)

The SIIB model includes the possibility that listeners' self-esteem affects their own responsiveness (Path I), as well as disclosers' perception of their responsiveness (Path J). However, it may do so in contradictory ways, which prevents a clear prediction. On one hand, LSEs may be less responsive listeners than HSEs. Disclosers' reluctance to share openly with (perceived) LSEs may hinder LSE listeners' ability to be responsive [15] (Path H-A). LSEs experience more negative affect [51] and stress [52] than do HSEs, which may induce self-focus [53] and impede LSEs' ability to recognize and respond sensitively to partners' needs [54]. On the other hand, LSEs' desire to avoid rejection may motivate attentiveness and helpfulness, and their negative affect may promote empathy, which could bolster responsiveness [1,17]. Any self-esteem differences in responsive listening behaviors may produce accurate differences (Path B) in disclosers' perceptions of LSEs' and HSEs' responsiveness (Path J). Bias may also operate: People's negative inferences about LSEs [46,47] may lead disclosers to interpret the same listening behaviors as less responsive when enacted by LSEs versus HSEs.

Unfortunately, the existing literature does not provide definitive evidence regarding Paths I and J. LSEs rate themselves as less supportive than HSEs [55,56], but such reports may simply reflect LSEs' negative self-views. A meta-analysis involving observer-rated or informant-rated responsiveness in different contexts found a small positive association between self-esteem and responsiveness [57]. However, more recent studies also using observer-rated or partner-rated outcome measures have found no self-esteem differences in responsiveness or emotional support provision to romantic partners [45,55,58]. Additionally, some evidence suggests that LSEs may offer less of particular types of support (e.g., esteem support) than HSEs—though not other types (e.g., tangible support) [58]. Further research is needed to establish whether and when self-esteem differences in listener responsiveness emerge. Additional work should also examine whether any such differences in responsiveness explain disclosers' tendencies to disclose less openly to listeners they perceive as LSEs (vs. HSEs; Path H) and/or whether potentially unfounded negative views of LSEs' personalities [46,47] and reactions to disclosures [45,48,50] might fuel this inhibited disclosure.

3.0 Conclusions

The SIIB model highlights multiple pathways through which self-esteem affects intimacy-building. LSEs' tendency to project their negative self-views, vigilance for rejection, and self-protective orientation lead them to disclose (Path D) in ways that limit others' responsiveness (Path E), and to perceive responsiveness (Path F) in ways that discourage future disclosures (Path G)—processes that can stifle intimacy development [1-3]. Others' negative beliefs about LSEs [46,47] may also limit the disclosures that LSEs receive (Path H). By contrast, HSEs typically disclose, elicit, and perceive responsiveness in intimacy-promoting

ways. Additional research is needed to draw conclusions regarding LSEs' responsiveness (Paths I and J).

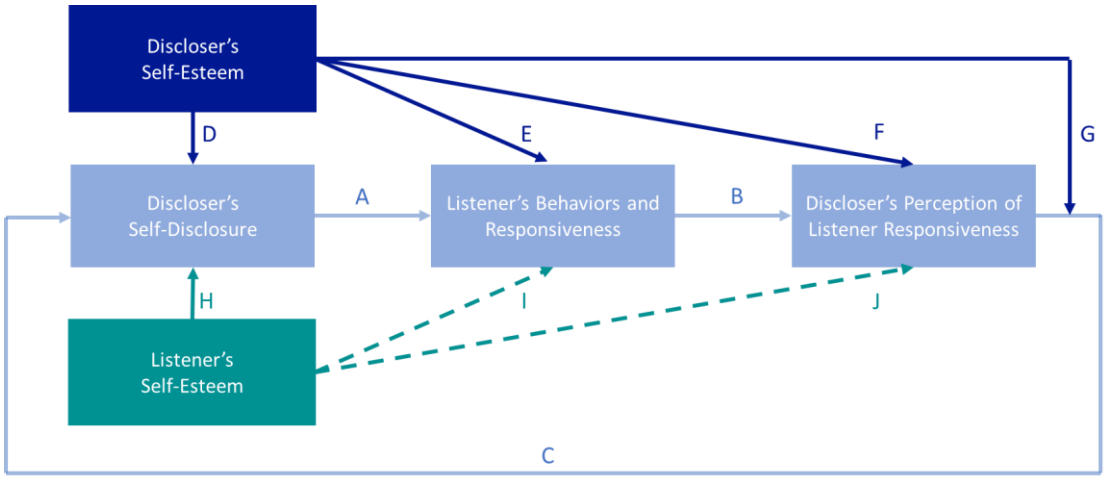
An important next step will be to examine how discloser and listener self-esteem jointly shape disclosure and responsiveness. For example, perhaps LSEs disclose more openly to LSE (vs. HSE) listeners because they perceive other LSEs to be more similar to themselves and more likely to understand their own experiences. New work should also examine whether self-esteem's influence on disclosure, listening, and responsiveness differs by relationship type (e.g., with established partners versus strangers). Researchers should further consider whether self-esteem shapes the interpretation of specific types of disclosures (e.g., negative or positive disclosures), and/or the listening behaviors people use to show and perceive (un)responsiveness. Indeed, evidence suggests that LSEs and HSEs differ in the types of support they perceive to be responsive [20]. Future work should also investigate whether self-esteem moderates the effects of disclosure and/or responsiveness on personal and relational well-being. LSEs' vigilance for rejection could make perceiving partner responsiveness especially beneficial to LSEs [59,60] (but see [61]). Although we considered self-esteem as a predictor or moderator of intimacy-building processes, research should investigate whether and how these processes may affect self-esteem [1,2,3].

Finally, researchers should consider how LSEs can reap the rewards of intimacy despite the risks involved in building it. Partners who exhibit high-quality listening behaviors [1] should be helpful in this regard; their responsiveness should encourage LSEs to disclose openly [4], inviting further partner responsiveness [3,15] and reciprocated responsiveness [3,41,42]. Teaching relationship partners to enact high-quality listening behaviors may be a fruitful approach. To the extent that such training can be effectively applied in everyday interactions, couples may benefit from increased responsiveness within their relationships. Contextual

features might also assuage LSEs' rejection concerns. Given that LSEs feel safe disclosing online [22], and that some forms of computer-mediated disclosure can effectively build closeness [62], mediated communication may be one fruitful approach. Asking partners about their support preferences and communicating one's own preferences [15] (e.g., for negative validation versus positive reframing) might also heighten disclosers' perceptions of listener responsiveness.

The SIIB model illustrates how self-esteem shapes processes critical to intimacy-building. We hope that it will inspire new research that helps us understand how LSEs and HSEs can build rewarding intimate connections.

Figure 1


Discloser's Self-Esteem
D
E
F
G
Discloser's Self-Disclosure
A
Listener's Behaviors and Responsiveness
B
Discloser's Perception of Listener Responsiveness
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Listener's Self-Esteem
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Figure Caption

Figure 1: Self-esteem's Impacts on Intimacy-Building (SIIB) model

The SIIB model is adapted from the interpersonal model of intimacy [3], the InterCAPS model [2], and other perspectives on high quality listening and responsiveness [1], which posit that intimacy develops when: a discloser reveals thoughts and feelings to a listener, which can elicit responsive listening behaviors (Path A); the discloser interprets the listener's response as responsive (Path B); and the discloser's responsiveness perceptions affect future disclosing (Path C). The SIIB model further proposes that a discloser's self-esteem predicts features of their self-disclosures (Path D), the listener's responses (Path E), the discloser's perceptions of listener responsiveness (Path F), and the degree to which perceptions of listener responsiveness affect subsequent disclosure decisions (i.e., self-esteem moderates perceived responsiveness's effects on disclosure; Path G). Additionally, a listener's self-esteem predicts features of the disclosures they receive (Path H). The SIIB model also allows for the possibility that a listener's self-esteem affects the responses they offer (Path I) and the responsiveness that disclosers perceive from them (Path J). Paths I and J are marked with dashed lines because direct evidence for them is limited and/or inconsistent.

Authors' Contributions

A. L. Forest wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the writing and editing of the manuscript and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

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