

Exploring the Effects of Intimate Relationships on Depression and Anxiety in College Students

Zhe Ding *

College of Comprehensive Psychology, Ritsumeikan University, Osaka Japan

* Corresponding Author Email: cp0236xi@ed.ritsumei.ac.jp

Abstract. With growing concerns about university students' mental health, intimate relationships—an essential part of their social lives—play a critical role in shaping emotional well-being. This paper systematically reviews empirical studies to explore the effects of intimate relationship quality on depression and anxiety among college students. Specifically, it examines the mechanisms through which attachment style, emotion regulation strategies, and social support influence psychological outcomes. Findings indicate that high-quality intimate relationships are associated with lower levels of depressive and anxious symptoms, whereas frequent conflict, emotional neglect, and insecure attachment significantly heighten psychological distress. Emotion regulation strategies, such as suppression and cognitive reappraisal, serve as key mediators: suppression tends to exacerbate symptoms, while reappraisal is linked to better emotional adjustment. Moreover, the emotional support exchanged within intimate relationships not only impacts individuals' own affective states but also exerts cross-partner effects, contributing to mutual emotional well-being or distress. The study underscores the dual nature of intimate relationships, which may serve as protective factors or sources of stress depending on their quality and interaction patterns. Insecurely attached individuals, particularly those with anxious attachment, are more vulnerable to anxiety and depression when emotional support is perceived as insufficient or inconsistent. This review advocates for the integration of relationship-based factors into mental health interventions for university students. It further recommends future research to adopt longitudinal designs and multi-source assessments to better clarify the causal relationships and cross-cultural variations in how intimacy influences psychological symptoms.

Keywords: Intimate relationships; depression; anxiety; emotion regulation; attachment style; social support.

1. Introduction

All manuscripts must be in English, also the table and figure texts, otherwise we cannot publish your paper. Please keep a second copy of your manuscript in your office. When receiving the paper, we assume that the corresponding authors grant us the copyright to use the paper for the book or journal in question. Should authors use tables or figures from other Publications, they must ask the corresponding publishers to grant them the right to publish this material in their paper. Use *italic* for emphasizing a word or phrase. Do not use boldface typing or capital letters except for section headings (cf. remarks on section headings, below).

Do not number your paper: All manuscripts must be in English, also the table and figure texts, otherwise we cannot publish your paper. Please keep a second copy of your manuscript in your office. When receiving the paper, we assume that the corresponding authors grant us the copyright to use the paper for the book or journal in question. In modern society, the mental health of university students has attracted a great deal of attention. Intimate relationships, as an important part of an individual's social life, have a significant impact on an individual's emotions, behaviours and mental health [1, 2]. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have focused on the relationship between intimacy and depression and anxiety and have explored it through different methods and models. However, despite the fact that more studies have revealed the correlation between the two, there are still differences in research methodology, sample characteristics, and cultural contexts, which have led to some divergence in findings [3, 4].



The aim of this paper is to systematically explore the relationship between intimate relationships and depressed mood and anxiety among college students, and to reveal the underlying mechanisms and interactions between the two by combining and analyzing the existing literature. At the same time, this paper will also explore the types of attachment, emotion regulation and social support in intimate relationships to provide theoretical support and practical reference for future research.

2. Intimate Relationships and Mental Health

2.1. Intimacy

Intimate relationships usually refer to the deep emotional connection established between an individual and another person, which is expressed in mutual understanding, support and dependence [1, 2]. In the college student population, intimacy is mainly expressed in romantic relationships and friendships. Research has shown that the quality of intimate relationships is closely related to an individual's mental health [1, 4].

In a study of 149 heterosexual couples, Joosten et al. found that individuals with higher levels of depressive symptoms showed less intimacy and support and more conflict in their relationships [4]. This phenomenon is known as the relationship erosion effect, which means that depressive symptoms not only affect the individual's own affective experience, but also affect the partner's affective state and relationship satisfaction through cross-partner effects. It follows that conflict or lack of support in intimate relationships can exacerbate depressive symptoms.

Furthermore, Braithwaite et al. showed that college students in committed relationships had significantly lower rates of depressive symptoms than single individuals [1]. This suggests that healthy intimate relationships can provide emotional and social support, which can alleviate the production of negative emotions.

2.2. Depression

Depression is a common mood disorder that manifests itself in low mood, loss of interest, low energy, and negative cognitions [2,5]. The prevalence of depression is higher in the university student population and tends to be strongly associated with the quality of intimate relationships [3, 4].

2.3. Anxiety

Anxiety is an emotional experience triggered by an individual's excessive worry about a potential threat or stressor, which manifests itself as tension, fear, and worry [1, 6]. Research has shown that anxiety is significantly associated with the quality of intimate relationships, especially in conflict and insecure attachment situations in intimate relationships [3, 4].

In addition, the emotion regulation theory proposed by Gross provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between intimacy and anxiety [6]. Research has shown that individuals often choose different emotion regulation strategies when confronted with anxious emotions, including emotion suppression and emotion reappraisal. Emotional suppression is a negative form of emotion regulation, which usually manifests itself as suppressing or masking the outward expression of emotions. However, instead of effectively reducing anxiety, this strategy can exacerbate its negative effects. In contrast, emotion reappraisal, a positive emotion regulation strategy, is able to reduce the intensity of anxiety by altering perceptions of the situation, thereby improving an individual's emotion regulation and mental health [3, 6].

3. Intimacy and Depression

3.1. The Direct Relationship between Intimate Relationships and Depression

In recent years, more and more studies have begun to focus on the interaction process between the quality of intimate relationships and depressive symptoms, as well as the potential mediating and moderating variables affecting this relationship. In college student populations, the occurrence of depression is closely related to the quality of intimate relationships, and in particular, supportive and conflictual behaviours in romantic relationships significantly influence individuals' depressive symptoms [1, 4]. Depression, a common mental health problem, not only affects an individual's emotional experience, but also negatively impacts their social functioning, cognitive abilities, and physical health [3, 6]. High-quality supportive behaviours in intimate relationships can alleviate depressive symptoms, whereas frequent conflict and negative interactions can exacerbate an individual's emotional distress and psychological burden.

Research suggests that the quality of intimate relationships largely determines an individual's mental health status, and Braithwaite et al. showed that college students in committed relationships had significantly lower rates of depressive symptoms than single individuals [1]. This may be due to the fact that in committed relationships, individuals are able to receive emotional support and social support from their partners, thus alleviating the production of negative emotions [7]. In this study, the researcher categorised the college students into single, non-committed romantic relationships, and committed romantic relationships through self-report. A committed romantic relationship was defined as a relationship with stability, exclusivity, and future orientation, and was characterised by high levels of emotional attachment, mutual loyalty, expectations for future relationship development, and frequent exchanges of emotional support. Although not measured using a standardised questionnaire, the level of relationship commitment was clearly distinguished by means of self-identification. The results of the study show that college students in committed relationships not only have lower levels of depression, but also have better overall mental health and exhibit lower levels of risky behaviours, such as alcohol and sexual risk.

However, when the intimate relationship itself becomes a stressor, such as the presence of conflict, apathy, or lack of support, depressive symptoms tend to increase significantly [4]. Joosten et al., through their study of 149 heterosexual couples, found that individuals with higher levels of depressive symptoms exhibited less intimacy and support in their relationships, as well as more conflict [4]. This phenomenon is known as the 'relationship erosion effect', whereby depressive symptoms not only affect an individual's own affective experience, but also affect a partner's affective state and relationship satisfaction through cross-partner effects [4]. The existence of this cross-partner effect suggests that depressed mood in intimate relationships is not just an intrinsic problem of the individual, but rather a dynamic process involving the interaction of both partners [1]. In addition, Braithwaite et al. stated that the occurrence of both depressive symptoms and anxiety was closely related to patterns of interaction in intimate relationships [1]. It was found that the frequency and intensity of conflict significantly affects an individual's depressive mood, whereas mutual support and emotional care significantly reduces the incidence of depressive symptoms. The effects of such interaction patterns are particularly significant in long-term relationships [1, 4]. Similarly, anxiety tends to be significantly reduced when individuals feel emotionally supported in a relationship [7]; however, when there is conflict, misunderstanding, or a lack of communication in a relationship, anxiety increases rapidly [4].

3.2. The Mediating Role of Emotion Regulation Strategies

The quality of intimate relationships not only directly affects an individual's level of depression, but also indirectly contributes to the onset and maintenance of depressed mood through the individual's emotion regulation strategies. Brandão et al. noted that emotion regulation strategies play an important mediating role between intimate relationships and depressed mood. Specifically, conflict or lack of support in intimate relationships often leads individuals to favour the use of emotion

suppression, a negative emotion regulation strategy, over positive emotion reappraisal strategies [3]. Using the Actor-Partner Interdependent Mediation Model (APIMeM) with a sample of 119 heterosexual couples in stable relationships (238 individuals in total), this study distinguishes between intra-individual emotional mechanisms and their cross-individual effects on their partners, thus shedding more light on the potential impact of the emotional interactions of both partners in an intimate relationship on mental health.

Gross's theory of emotion regulation provides the theoretical foundation for the above research [6]. He pointed out that the choice of emotion regulation strategies is of key significance to the effectiveness of emotion regulation. Emotion suppression is a regulatory strategy that emerges late in the process of emotion generation, which mainly responds to negative experiences by suppressing emotional expression. Although it can maintain superficial calm in the short term, it cannot effectively reduce the internal experience of emotions, but instead increases the physiological arousal and psychological burden of individuals, thus aggravating depressive symptoms. In contrast, the emotion reappraisal strategy, an earlier intervention in the emotion generation process, reduces the intensity and persistence of negative emotions by altering cognitive interpretations of events, and is considered to be a more adaptive strategy that significantly enhances an individual's psychological well-being [6].

It is worth noting that the choice of emotion regulation strategies is also influenced by an individual's attachment type. A study by Brandão et al. found that individuals with insecure attachment types (e.g., anxious and avoidant) were more likely to use emotion suppression strategies to deal with conflict or stress in close relationships [3]. However, rather than being conducive to genuine emotional release, this strategy may lead to the accumulation and internalization of negative emotions, further exacerbating depressive symptoms. On the contrary, securely attached individuals are more likely to adopt positive strategies such as emotion reassessment, which are more conducive to emotional recovery and mental health maintenance. Thus, the quality of intimate relationships constitutes an important indirect mechanism of influence on depressed mood by influencing the pathways of emotion regulation strategy use.

3.3. Attachment Type and the Regulatory Mechanisms of Social Support

Furthermore, Brandão et al. noted that those individuals with high avoidant or anxious attachment often choose to use emotional suppression strategies to cope with negative emotions [3]. However, rather than effectively alleviating depressed mood, the use of such strategies can cause individuals to become more absorbed in negative emotions, which can lead to further exacerbation of depressive symptoms [6]. In contrast, individuals who use the emotion reappraisal strategy are better able to regulate their emotions and show greater emotional stability in the face of conflict in close relationships [6]. The use of emotion regulation strategies is largely influenced by the type of attachment an individual has. Individuals with secure attachments typically have more positive emotional expression and tend to use constructive strategies such as emotional reappraisal to deal with negative emotions, whereas individuals with insecure attachments are more likely to adopt maladaptive strategies such as emotional suppression [3].

The social support buffering hypothesis proposed by Cohen and Wills suggests that when individuals are faced with stress or negative emotions, social support from others can be effective in alleviating such negative experiences [7]. However, when there is insufficient support or too much conflict in an intimate relationship, this buffering effect will not work and may even exacerbate depressive symptoms [4, 7]. In particular, individuals experience a significant increase in depressive symptoms when there is a lack of emotional support in the relationship [1].

3.4. Mini-summary

To summarise, the relationship between intimate relationships and depression involves multiple factors, including attachment type, emotion regulation strategies, and social support. Existing

research suggests that stable and supportive intimate relationships can significantly reduce the prevalence of depressive symptoms, whereas insecure attachment and the use of emotion suppression strategies tend to exacerbate depression. However, most studies have relied on self-reported data, and future research should incorporate more longitudinal designs with multiple measures (e.g., physiological data and third-party assessments) to increase the credibility and generalizability of findings.

4. Intimacy and Anxiety

In recent years, the relationship between intimate relationships and anxiety has attracted much attention. For college student populations, the occurrence of anxiety is closely related to the quality of the intimate relationships they are in, their interaction patterns, and the type of attachment they have [3,4]. As college students are in a critical period of psychological and social development, they often face multiple challenges and pressures in exploring and establishing intimate relationships. Such pressures may arise not only from academic burdens and employment pressures, but also from the quality and stability of the intimate relationships.

Research has shown that the presence and quality of intimate relationships greatly affects individuals' experience of anxiety, with Braithwaite et al. indicating that the prevalence of anxiety among college students in committed relationships (meaning that both partners are highly invested in the relationship and have a stable commitment) was significantly lower (13.4%) than among single individuals (19.2%) lower than single individuals (19.2%), and the difference that was statistically significant ($p < .01$) [1]. This phenomenon suggests that the establishment of a close relationship itself may have a positive effect on an individual's emotion regulation. According to the Social Support Buffering Hypothesis proposed by Cohen and Wills, social support can alleviate an individual's negative emotional experience in stressful or anxious situations through direct support or buffering [7]. For individuals in intimate relationships, the emotional support, understanding, and positive feedback provided by their partners can effectively enhance their ability to regulate their emotions and thus reduce the incidence of anxiety.

In particular, in stable intimate relationships with high levels of trust and emotional commitment, the support provided by the partner tends to be more sustained and deeper. Specifically, when individuals face situations such as academic stress, interpersonal conflict, or future uncertainty, their experience of anxiety is significantly reduced if they receive understanding and encouragement from their partner [7, 8]. In addition, positive interactions and communication in intimate relationships not only provide immediate emotional support, but also enhance an individual's sense of self-efficacy and coping ability, which can alleviate anxiety over a longer timeframe [4, 6]. Braithwaite et al. further found that emotional support and interaction patterns in intimate relationship had a significant impact on the regulation of anxiety,, particularly amongst high anxiety attachment individuals, who tended to experience a significant increase in anxiety when their partner failed to provide stable emotional support [1]. Brandão et al.'s study also noted that individuals with high anxiety attachment types were more inclined to rely on their partner to provide emotional support, but that when the support is perceived as insufficient or ineffective, anxiety levels increase accordingly, their anxiety rises equally significantly [3].

However, not all intimate relationships are emotionally positive. When the quality of interactions in a relationship is problematic, such as frequent conflict, poor communication, or inadequate emotional support, intimacy may instead be a trigger or exacerbator of anxiety [4]. Frequent conflict can undermine an individual's sense of security in the relationship, leading to uncertainty and concern about the future of the relationship, and in a study of 149 heterosexual couples, Joosten et al. noted that individuals' anxiety levels were influenced not only by their own psychological state, but also by the level of emotional feedback and support provided by their partner [4].

This effect is particularly significant in individuals with insecure attachment types [3]. Attachment Theory suggests that insecurely attached individuals (e.g., anxious or avoidant) are more likely to

experience high levels of anxiety and agitation due to a lack of trust and security in their partner and often have excessive concerns about the stability of the relationship. According to Brandão et al.'s attachment style and emotion regulation strategies are crucial factors that shape the association between intimacy and anxiety [3]. Attachment patterns developed by individuals in early relationships can influence how they regulate their emotions and intimate behaviours in adulthood. In particular, anxious attachment individuals, due to their high reliance and unstable relationship expectations, tend to be highly sensitive to their partners' behaviours and are prone to interpreting neutral behaviours as threatening or rejecting, thus exacerbating the experience of anxiety.

In summary, the relationship between intimate relationships and anxiety is complex and dynamic. On the one hand, healthy and stable intimate relationships can effectively alleviate individuals' anxiety by providing emotional support and a sense of security; on the other hand, when the quality of intimate relationships is low or the interaction patterns are problematic, they may instead become an important source of anxiety. Future research can further explore the differences in the effects of different types of intimate relationships (e.g., long-term relationships, short-term relationships, long-distance relationships, etc.) on anxiety, and deeply analyse the regulatory mechanisms of individual attachment types in this context. Attention should also be paid to how socio-cultural factors play a moderating or mediating role between intimate relationships and anxiety, with a view to understanding this psychosocial process more comprehensively.

The importance of interpersonal emotion regulation in intimate relationships was further emphasized in a study by Zaki and Williams. The study showed that individuals often rely on their partner's emotional support and feedback when dealing with stressful or anxious emotions [8]. Especially when negative emotional experiences are strong, a partner's emotional support not only relieves an individual's anxiety, but also enhances relationship satisfaction and intimacy [8]. However, when partners fail to provide effective support, anxiety tends to be further exacerbated.

Overall, the relationship between intimacy and anxiety is complex and involves multiple factors, including attachment type, emotion regulation strategies, and social support. Existing research suggests that stable and supportive intimate relationships can significantly reduce an individual's level of anxiety, whereas insecure attachment and the use of emotion suppression strategies tend to exacerbate anxiety. However, most studies have relied on self-reported data, and future research should incorporate more longitudinal designs with multiple measures to increase the credibility and generalizability of findings.

5. Discussion and Suggestion

5.1. Summary of Findings

This study centred on the effects of intimate relationships on depression and anxiety among university students, integrating research on the quality of marital and romantic relationships, patterns of conflict interactions, social support, and emotion regulation [5, 9, 10]. It has been found that the quality of intimate relationships has a significant impact on individuals' psychological well-being, with individuals more likely to show symptoms of depression or anxiety in relationships that are lacking in emotional support, have high levels of conflict, or exhibit “demand-withdraw” communication patterns.

Further, depression is not only a consequence of a decline in the quality of intimate relationships, but may also be a starting point for relationship deterioration. This stress generation model emphasizes the two-way interaction between emotional distress and relationship conflict. In addition, the study highlights the moderating mechanisms of perceived and actual supportive behaviours on mental health, especially in the female population.

5.2. Recommendations and Implications Based on Research Findings

This study suggests that the quality of intimate relationships plays a key role in college students' depression and anxiety, and that highly supportive intimate relationships can help alleviate negative emotions, while negative interaction patterns such as frequent conflict and emotional avoidance may exacerbate psychological distress. Therefore, all parties in society should work together from different perspectives to focus on and optimize college students' experience of intimate relationships in order to promote their mental health.

For families, it should be recognized that intimate relationships are an important part of the psychological maturation process of young people. The role of parents as emotional supporters in the family has a profound impact on the formation of their children's relationship patterns, especially when they first establish a relationship. If parents can provide understanding and tolerance, it will help them build a stable and secure attachment foundation [5]. Schools and teachers should strengthen students' communication, conflict management, and emotion regulation skills in romantic relationships through mental health programmes and relationship education seminars, with particular attention to the potentially destructive effects of emotional suppression and demand-withdraw interactions in intimate relationships [9, 10]. In addition, school counselling centres should improve their ability to identify and intervene in relationship-related depression, not only by identifying individual depressive symptoms, but also by assessing whether the context of the interaction and the support system are dysfunctional. Students themselves should improve their knowledge of the dynamics of intimate relationships, understand the bidirectional mechanisms between emotional distress and interaction patterns, actively seek social support resources, and use positive strategies such as emotional reassessment [3, 6].

It is worth emphasizing that healthy intimate relationships are not only a form of emotional belonging, but also an important mechanism of psychological protection, with effects that go far beyond increased relationship satisfaction to include buffering against emotional problems such as anxiety and depression [1, 4]. Therefore, incorporating intimate relationships into mental health promotion strategies for college students has practical application urgency and feasibility.

5.3. Directions for Future Research

Although this study integrates existing literature, there are still some issues worth exploring. Firstly, future research could further compare the mechanisms of intimate relationships on mental health in different cultural contexts, and explore the moderating role of cultural differences in emotional expression and supportive behaviours. Second, it is recommended to adopt a longitudinal tracking design with multiple time points, combining behavioral observations and physiological indicators, to deepen the understanding of the causal mechanisms between the interactive process of intimate relationships and the dynamic changes of psychological symptoms. Furthermore, attention should be directed to gender differences in stress-generation mechanisms, thereby contributing to the theoretical development of gender-specific pathways in emotion regulation.

6. Conclusion

This study systematically sorted out the relationship between intimate relationships and depressed mood and anxiety among college students. The study suggests that the quality of intimate relationships has a key influence in college students' mental health. High-quality intimate relationships can effectively alleviate individuals' depression and anxiety, while frequent conflicts, insecure attachments, and lack of emotional support significantly increase the risk of negative emotions. Emotion regulation strategies as mediating variables, and attachment type and social support as moderating mechanisms, together revealed the underlying mechanisms of this complex interaction.

In addition, intimate relationships are not only an important foundation for individual social adaptation, but also a key source of emotion regulation and psychological resilience. Especially in

college, the understanding, support and sense of belonging provided by intimate relationships help individuals cope with the multiple challenges of academics, life and self-identity. Therefore, intimate relationships should be considered an important part of mental health interventions for college students.

In conclusion, the establishment and maintenance of healthy, stable and supportive intimate relationships are important for the promotion of college students' psychological adjustment and emotional health. Future research can further combine multi-source data and longitudinal design to deeply reveal the causal mechanism between intimate relationships and psychological health, and provide empirical basis and intervention direction for the construction of psychological support system in colleges and universities.

References

- [1] Braithwaite, S. R., Delevi, R., & Fincham, F. D. (2010). Romantic relationships and the physical and mental health of college students. *Personal Relationships*, 17 (1), 1 – 12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2010.01248.x>.
- [2] Vujeva, H. M., & Furman, W. (2011). Depressive symptoms and romantic relationship qualities from adolescence through emerging adulthood: A longitudinal examination of influences. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 40 (1), 123 – 135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2011.533412>.
- [3] Brandão, T., Matias, M., Ferreira, T., Vieira, J., Schulz, M. S., & Matos, P. M. (2020). Attachment, emotion regulation, and well-being in couples: Intrapersonal and interpersonal associations. *Journal of Personality*, 88(4), 748–761. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12523>.
- [4] Joosten, D. H. J., Nelemans, S. A., Meeus, W., & Branje, S. (2022). Longitudinal Associations Between Depressive Symptoms and Quality of Romantic Relationships in Late Adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 51 (4), 509 - 523. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-021-01511-2>.
- [5] Hammen, C. (2005). Stress and depression. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 1, 293 – 319. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.1.102803.143938>.
- [6] Gross, J. J. (2002). Emotion regulation: Affective, cognitive, and social consequences. *Psychophysiology*, 39 (3), 281 – 291. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0048577201393198>.
- [7] Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98 (2), 310 – 357. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.98.2.310>.
- [8] Williams, W. C., & Zaki, J. (2013). Interpersonal emotion regulation. *Emotion*, 13 (5), 803 – 810. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033839>.
- [9] Davila, J., Bradbury, T. N., Cohan, C. L., & Tochluk, S. (1997). Marital functioning and depressive symptoms: Evidence for a stress generation model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73 (4), 849 – 861. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.4.849>.
- [10] Papp, L. M., Kouros, C. D., & Cummings, E. M. (2009). Demand–withdraw patterns in marital conflict in the home. *Personal Relationships*, 16 (2), 285 – 300. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2009.01221.x>.