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Master Thesis

**Attachment Style and Perceived Effectiveness of Interpersonal Emotion Regulation**

**Strategies in Romantic Relationships**

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### Abstract

This study explored the relationships between attachment styles and the perceived effectiveness of interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) provided by romantic partners. Specifically, the study tested whether more avoidantly attached individuals perceive interpersonal suppression and distraction as more effective than less avoidantly attached (H1) and whether more anxiously attached individuals perceive interpersonal strategies cognitive reappraisal and co-rumination provided by their partner as more effective than less anxiously attached (H2). The first hypothesis was partially supported: more avoidantly attached individuals perceive suppression as more effective but distraction as less effective. Additionally, they perceived both engaging strategies as less effective for regulating their emotions. Contrary to the second hypothesis, more anxiously attached individuals perceive cognitive reappraisal as less effective, with no significant effect on co-rumination. Moreover, they also perceived interpersonal suppression as less effective, with no relationship to interpersonal distraction. Even though the results did not fully support the hypotheses, they revealed important findings. These results highlight the nuanced roles of attachment styles in emotion regulation, suggesting the need for a tailored approach when regulating a partner's emotions according to their attachment style. Future research should explore a broader range of IER strategies to better understand preferences associated with different attachment styles which could potentially enhance partners' well-being and contribute to relationship satisfaction.

*Keywords: attachment styles, interpersonal emotion regulation, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment*

## Introduction

Imagine navigating the turbulent waters of emotions without the right compass—where the ability to seek and accept help is intertwined with our childhood relationships with primary caregivers, forming the basis for later relationships. Given the rising occurrence of mental health issues and disorders linked to affective dysregulation from insecure attachments, the bond with our partner and their support could become key in guiding us to calmer seas (Moak & Agrawal, 2010; Waugh et al., 2020). However, the perceived effectiveness of their support may depend on a complex interplay between the provided emotion regulation strategies and our attachment styles (Brandão et al., 2020; Eilert & Buchheim, 2023).

This study seeks to understand which interpersonal emotion regulation strategies are perceived as effective by individuals with different attachment styles. Understanding perceived effectiveness is crucial as it may not always equate to actual effectiveness. Covering this research gap can help design better-targeted support, potentially enhancing personal well-being and relationship satisfaction (Barthel et al., 2018; Gross & John, 2003; Kardum et al., 2021; Webb et al., 2012; Zaki & Williams, 2013).

## Interpersonal Emotion Regulation

Interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) is defined as a collection of processes through which individuals modulate their own emotions through interactions with others, as well as influence the emotions of those they interact with, particularly close individuals such as romantic partners (Dworakowski et al., 2022; Horn et al., 2019).

The IER concept serves as an umbrella term for the reciprocal influence individuals have on each other's emotions within social interactions, using various strategies to manage emotions with specific goal (Dworakowski et al., 2022; Horn, 2022; Zaki & Williams, 2013).

Since these are interpersonal regulations, it is important to distinguish between two main roles: the target and the regulator. The target is the person whose emotions are being regulated, while the regulator is the person, in this case a romantic partner, who is trying to regulate the target's emotions (Barthel et al., 2018).

Emotion regulation may serve different functions, primarily categorized into hedonic and instrumental goals. The purpose of an instrumental goal is to help the partner manage emotions to achieve a practical outcome (Tamir, 2009). In contrast, when the regulator focuses on a

hedonic goal, the main motive is to make the target feel better. These strategies aim to enhance positive emotions and reduce negative ones in oneself and in social interaction (Zaki, 2020).

While the domain of intrapersonal emotion regulation has been extensively explored, the understanding of IER in the context of interpersonal relationships is a more novel area of study (Brandão et al., 2020; Jitaru & Turliuc, 2022). However, knowledge about intrapersonal (self-regulation) strategies may be helpful because research suggests that IER strategies engage in some cases similarly to intrapersonal strategies (Matthews et al., 2022).

Emotion regulation encompasses a range of strategies. **Disengaging strategies** focus on the diversion of the target from the emotional context, which can include avoiding the situation, distracting the person from emotions, or minimizing the emotional impact. In contrast, **engaging strategies** involve actively addressing and influencing the emotional situation, such as offering support, discussing emotions, or providing perspective (Levy-Gigi & Shamay-Tsoory, 2017; Parkinson & Totterdell, 1999).

### **Specific Disengaging and Engaging Strategies**

In the present study, we examine the perceived effectiveness of 2 types of disengaging and 2 types of engaging strategies. The first disengaging strategy is suppression. **Suppression** is characterized as a method of emotion regulation in which one member of a couple is directed to actively inhibition from expressing emotions (Winterheld, 2016). This emotion regulation not only conceals one's emotions but also can hide, minimize or shorten the emotional experience (Ben-Naim et al., 2013; Gross & John, 2003). Second disengaging strategy tested in the present study is distraction. **Distraction** either directs attention to different elements of the situation or completely diverts attention from it. This strategy might also involve thinking about different thoughts or memories (Gross & Thompson, 2007; Webb et al., 2012). In interpersonal situation the regulator is trying to find ways how to distract their partner from experiencing the emotion.

The third presented IER strategy is engaging strategy reappraisal. **Cognitive reappraisal** is a strategy that entails changing the content of an emotional experience to regulate one's emotional response (Webb et al., 2012). This strategy works by adjusting aspects of emotions at the early stages of their development, making it notably efficient (Gross & John, 2003; Gross & Thompson, 2007). In couples, partners often use reappraisal techniques that reshape the anticipated outcome of a situation to change the experience of emotion, convincing them that the outcome will be more positive than anticipated or that seemingly certain outcomes will not occur

(McRae et al., 2012; Vishkin et al., 2020). Lastly, **co-rumination** is an IER strategy that is characterized by excessive discussion of personal issues within another person, marked by frequent problem talk, repeatedly discussing the same issues, speculation about issues, and an emphasis on negative emotions (Rose, 2002).

The effectiveness of IER strategies varies based on their goals, contexts, and specific intended outcomes (Webb et al., 2012). Generally, strategies are evaluated based on the positive or negative consequences they produce (Southward et al., 2019). Cognitive reappraisal is often considered one of the more effective strategies, particularly beneficial for long-term emotional health (Webb et al., 2012). In contrast, suppression and distraction, while sometimes effective in the short term, tend to have negative long-term consequences (Fraley et al., 2015; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). Additionally, corumination is overall considered a maladaptive strategy due to its persistence on the negative aspect, it is linked to depression, anxiety and various mental health issues (Calmes & Roberts, 2008; Rose, 2002). However, the present study focuses on the IER strategies that target perceive as effective rather than their actual effectiveness. We believe that the perceived effectiveness of certain strategies, especially in hedonic contexts, may be rooted in different individual's attachment styles due to the foundational role that early attachment experiences play in shaping how individuals understand and manage their emotions, particularly late in partnerships (Shaver & Hazan, 1987).

### **Role of Attachment Styles**

Attachment style refers to the characteristic ways individuals form emotional bonds and interact in close relationships, particularly in stressful situations (Bowlby, 1969; Eilert & Buchheim, 2023). The theory was initially developed to understand the bond between infants and their primary caregivers, focusing on the child's emotional development. However, the foundational patterns established in early childhood often extend into and are also reshaped by romantic relationships (Shaver & Hazan, 1987).

According to attachment theory, originally developed by John Bowlby (1969) and later expanded by Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al., 1978), there are several primary attachment styles, known as secure and insecure. Insecure styles are further divided into avoidant, anxious, and disorganized. However, the concept of adult secure and insecure attachment has recently been operationalized into two primary dimensions rather than categories. Therefore, individuals can score high or low in attachment avoidance and anxiety scales. A low range on those scales is

considered a more secure attachment style, while a high range indicates a more insecure avoidance or anxiety attachment (Fraley et al., 2015; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). Originating as adaptive responses to early caregiver interactions, insecure attachment styles can become maladaptive in adulthood (Ruiz et al., 2019). Anxious attachment, marked by a quest for acceptance and reassurance, and avoidant attachment, characterized by self-reliance and distrust in others (Simpson, 1990). Contrary to secure attachment that is later associated with positive life outlooks and effective IER strategies like reappraisal and seeking support (Shaver et al., 2016).

### *Avoidant Style*

People scoring higher in avoidant attachment style may prefer to disengage from their emotions. This tendency can be driven by deep-seated skepticism regarding their partner's ability to be reliably supportive, leading to disappointment and anger when they seek support (Girme et al., 2015). They tend to defensively regulate attention away from attachment-related thoughts and emotions, particularly in stressful or anxiety-provoking situations (Rholes et al., 1999). Additionally, an experimental study suggests that people with avoidant attachment are adept at suppressing thoughts of separation, as indicated by fewer loss-related thoughts and lower physiological responses in scenarios invoking thoughts of a partner's separation (R. C. Fraley & Shaver, 1997). This pattern suggests that they may prefer their partners' help in strategies to avoid emotional closeness and maintain a sense of independence and self-reliance (Stanton et al., 2017).

Strategies such as interpersonal suppression, which involves inhibiting emotional expression, could be particularly appealing to avoidant individuals. Those with a higher avoidant attachment style may engage in interpersonal suppression to navigate their discomfort with closeness, attempting to mask any feelings that might signal a need for attachment, such as anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, shame, guilt, and distress. This behavior aligns with their broader tendency to maintain emotional distance from others to preserve independence and self-reliance, as they perceive expressions of emotion, such as anger, as indicative of vulnerability and care—elements they typically avoid to not contradict their self-sufficiency (Cassidy, 1994; Edelstein & Gillath, 2008; Fraley & Shaver, 1997; Gillath et al., 2005; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Shaver et al., 2016).

Individuals with a higher avoidant style may also perceive IER strategies like distraction, which redirects attention from negative to neutral or positive aspects before emotions fully

emerge (Waugh et al., 2020), as effective. These strategies help them avoid the discomfort associated with emotional closeness and maintain their preferred state of emotional independence and self-reliance. For example, an avoidant individual might ask their partner to change the subject or focus on a neutral activity when discussing a stressful event, thereby using distraction to manage their emotions. By using their partner to help them suppress or distract from their emotions, avoidant individuals can maintain their sense of self-sufficiency and emotional control (Barry & Lawrence, 2013; Gillath et al., 2005; Waugh et al., 2020).

### *Anxious style*

Individuals with an anxious attachment style seek greater dependency and desire for close and supportive relationships (Simpson, 1990). People who score high on the attachment anxiety scale tend to see negative emotions as a way to get closer to their partners and get support from them. Because of this, they not only seek attention but also exaggerate their negative emotions and helplessness to attract and retain their attachment figures' attention (Caldwell & Shaver, 2012; Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Overall et al., 2014; Shaver et al., 2016).

In an interpersonal setting, highly anxious individuals may find engaging IER strategies such as co-rumination particularly effective. Their partner can regulate their emotions by discussing problems and negative feelings extensively, providing the emotional closeness and validation that anxiously attached individuals crave. This strategy aligns with their need for frequent affirmation and emotional support from their partners (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Zaki & Williams, 2013). We hypothesize that the extensive emotional sharing that co-ruminations offer can help anxiously attached individuals feel more connected and supported, therefore they can perceive it as effective, even though retaining on the negative may reinforce anxiety (Rose et al., 2007).

Another strategy that may be perceived as more effective by anxiously attached individuals is cognitive reappraisal. Its interpersonal aspect involves a regulator helping the target to reshape the anticipated outcome of a situation to change their emotional response by adopting a more positive perspective (Gross & John, 2003). This technique can help diminish feelings of fear and anxiety by changing the individual's perception of potentially distressing situations in close interpersonal contexts (Shurick et al., 2012). For instance, if an anxiously attached person feels upset their partner may help reassure them by explaining the situation more



positively, which can contribute to maintaining emotional stability (McRae et al., 2012; Vishkin et al., 2020).

### **Present Study**

Providing unwanted help to our partner may not only be ineffective but also harmful (Ben-Naim et al., 2013). Conversely, partners may perceive certain strategies as effective even though they could cause long-term issues. This research aims to explore what strategies people with specific attachment styles perceive as effective. By addressing this research gap, the study may help couples implement more suitable emotional support tailored to their partner's attachment style, enhancing both personal well-being and relationship health (Gross & John, 2003; Zaki & Williams, 2013).

The present study seeks to answer the following research question: How are anxious and avoidant attachment styles associated with the perceived effectiveness of specific engaging and disengaging IER strategies provided by their romantic partner?

Specifically, the research examines two main hypotheses based on previous findings:

#### ***Hypothesis 1***

The more avoidantly attached individuals are, the more effective they will perceive disengaging emotion regulation strategies, i.e. suppression and distraction, provided by their romantic partner.

#### ***Hypothesis 2***

The more anxiously attached individuals are, the more effective they will perceive engaging emotion regulation strategies, such as reappraisal and co-rumination, provided by their romantic partner.

## Methods

### Participants

Data were collected through the Prolific online research platform. Prior to the research, the total sample size was calculated using G\*Power version 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2007) for multivariate regression and indicated a required size of 107 participants ( $F = 0.15$ ,  $1 - \beta = 0.95$ ,  $\alpha = .05$ , *number of predictors* = 2). The questionnaire was completed by 1017 participants. However, the data collection was part of the larger project and half of the participants were filtered out due to the instrumental condition. Only participants in the hedonic condition were kept for the relevance of this research question ( $N = 503$ ). Some of the participants ( $N = 9$ ) were excluded from the study due to failure in two out of three attentional checks and unsatisfactory answer to the last question about honesty. One participant was excluded because he stated that his age is 3 years old. The final total number of participants was 493. All participants were financially compensated £8 per hour.

The sample included a diverse group of participants with an average age of 43 years and an average relationship duration of 16 years. It included 186 males (37.7%), 301 females (61.1%), 4 non-binary individuals (0.8%), 1 agender individual (0.2%), and 1 "other" (0.2%). Data collection was conducted in the UK, and most of the participants identified themselves as White ( $N = 438$ ). The most frequent educational levels included bachelor's degrees ( $N = 185$ ) and high school completion ( $N = 105$ ). Many participants had children ( $N = 290$ ) and were married ( $N = 286$ ) and lived together with their partner ( $N = 438$ ).

### Procedure

Participants joined the research on the Prolific platform. After reading the information letter and providing informed consent, participants completed a 5-10-minute-long questionnaire developed and administered through Qualtrics.

Initially, participants were asked about their relationship status and duration to meet eligibility criteria (at least 18 years old and being currently in romantic relationship for at least six months). Individuals who did not meet these conditions could not continue.

In the next section, participants were randomly assigned to either the "Instrumental Goal" or "Hedonic Goal" condition to assess the perceived effectiveness of various IER strategies (including 21 items and 1 attention check) concerning one of these goals. Participants were asked

to “think of moments when you’re upset and want to feel better” or “moments when you’re upset and want to get work done.”

The next part included measures of attachment styles (8 items and 1 attention check). Lastly, the questionnaire included a relationship satisfaction (not relevant for this study), demographic details, an honesty question, and ended with a debriefing session explaining the study aims in greater detail and the possibility of providing feedback.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The consent process was conducted and obtained online before participation, explaining all procedures, study’s purpose, voluntary participation and confidentiality. The study was approved by the Utrecht University Ethics Committee (UU-SER reference number 24-0361).

### **Measures**

#### ***Perceived effectiveness of IER strategies***

The questionnaire measuring IER strategies was developed specifically for this project and was based on previous scales concerning specific IER (Battaglini et al., 2021; Jurkiewicz et al., 2023; Ruan et al., 2024; Swerdlow & Johnson, 2020). As previously noted, this study forms part of a larger research project. The present study concentrates only on questions related to hedonic strategies. Those started with a sentence: "When I want to feel better, I find it helpful when my partner...". This set of questions measured six IER strategies, however related to the research question, only 4 IER strategies (see Appendix A) were included for data analysis. Participants were asked to complete the sentence, "I find it helpful when my partner...", with three statements for each IER strategy (distraction, suppression, co-rumination, and reappraisal). The perceived effectiveness of each statement was assessed on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "completely disagree" to 7 = "completely agree").

The reliability of the IER scale was assessed using McDonald's Omega and Cronbach's alpha.

**Suppression.** The scale involved 3 questions with internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.57$ ;  $\omega = 0.64$ ) and an example question "tells me not to think about what is bothering me."

**Corumination.** The perceived effectiveness of corumination has an internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.60$ ;  $\omega = 0.61$ ). An example question is "tries to get me to talk over and over about what is bothering me."

**Reappraisal.** The questions for reappraisal have an internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ;  $\omega = 0.81$ ). One of the questions is "tries to make me think differently about the situation."

**Distraction.** Lastly, distraction was measured with an internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ;  $\omega = 0.76$ ). An example question consists of "tries to direct my attention to something else."

### ***Attachment Style***

Attachment styles were assessed using the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR-R Short Form), which includes 8 items measuring two dimensions: **anxiety** (e.g. "I get frustrated if romantic partner is not available when I need them. ") and **avoidance** (e.g. "I am nervous when partner get too close to me. ") (see Appendix B). Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree").

The ECR is known for its good reliability ( $\omega = 0.83$  for anxiety;  $\omega = 0.82$  for avoidance; Ehrental et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2007). However, the internal consistency for this sample was lower than expected for the Avoidant scale ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ,  $\omega = 0.79$ ) and especially for Anxiety scale ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ,  $\omega = 0.68$ ).

Items 2, 5, and 7 were reverse-scored, meaning their scales were inverted to align with the scoring direction of other items, ensuring consistent interpretation. This was done during the analysis phase.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 29, with data obtained via Qualtrics. The analysis examined the relationship between avoidant and anxious attachment styles (independent variables, IV) and the perceived effectiveness of four IER strategies (dependent variables, DV). Mean scores were calculated for each IV and DV based on responses to the respective questionnaires.

### ***Multivariate regression analysis***

A multivariate regression analysis using the General Linear Model was employed for this analysis due to its ability to handle multiple dependent variables simultaneously. This approach provides a better overall  $R^2$  compared to conducting four separate linear regressions. Before conducting the analysis, assumptions were tested to ensure the validity of the results. Results were considered significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the two predictor variables and four outcome variables. *Table 1* presents the means, standard deviations, and other descriptives among the study variables.

**Table 1**

#### *Descriptive Statistics*

Variables	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Suppression	1.00	7.00	2.81	1.12
Distraction	1.00	7.00	4.76	1.14
Corumination	1.00	7.00	4.13	1.17
Reappraisal	1.00	7.00	5.24	1.03
Avoidance	1.00	7.00	2.26	1.04
Anxiety	1.00	6.00	3.36	1.26

#### *Preliminary Analysis*

Prior to the hypothesis testing, the assumptions for linearity, multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, multivariate normality, and autocorrelation were analyzed and all met, ensuring the robustness and reliability of the multivariate regression analysis were supported (see Appendix C). Additionally, outliers with Z-scores greater than  $\pm 3$  or high leverage values were flagged. While these outliers were retained due to their relevance, we also analyzed the data excluding them and the results remained consistent, therefore they were retained in the study as high scores on attachment styles were desirable for this research.

#### **Hypothesis Testing**

This study aimed to examine how an individual's attachment style influences their perceived effectiveness of engaging and disengaging IER strategies provided by their romantic partner. Specifically, the study tested whether more avoidantly attached individuals perceive interpersonal suppression and distraction as more effective (H1) and whether more anxiety-

attached individuals perceive cognitive reappraisal and co-rumination provided by their partner as more effective (H2). The parameter estimates for each dependent variable are presented in *Table 2*.

The results of the multivariate tests indicate that the overall model was significant ( $p < .001$ ), which means that the predictors (avoidance and anxiety attachment styles) are significantly associated with the combined dependent variables (perceived effectiveness of suppression, distraction, reappraisal, and co-rumination). The model fit statistics indicate the proportion of variance explained by the predictors. The R-squared values for suppression ( $R^2 = .024$ ), distraction ( $R^2 = .044$ ), reappraisal ( $R^2 = .097$ ), and co-rumination ( $R^2 = .056$ ) suggest that the predictors explained a small to moderate proportion of the variance in the perceived effectiveness of these IER strategies (Akossou & R., 2013).

### ***Hypothesis 1***

**Suppression.** In line with the first hypothesis, individuals with higher avoidant attachment perceive interpersonal suppression provided by their partner as a more effective strategy compared to individuals with lower avoidant attachment.

**Distraction.** Contrary to the first hypothesis, the avoidant attachment was a significant, but negative predictor of the perceived effectiveness of interpersonal distraction, indicating that individuals with higher avoidant attachment perceive distraction as less effective compared to less avoidant people.

### ***Hypothesis 2***

**Reappraisal.** Contrary to the second hypothesis, anxious attachment was a significant negative (rather than positive) predictor of reappraisal. This suggests that individuals with higher anxious attachment perceive reappraisal as a less effective strategy compared to individuals with lower anxious attachment.

**Corumination.** Contrary to the second hypothesis, the anxious attachment was not a significant predictor of the perceived effectiveness of co-rumination. Anxiety-attached individuals thus do not perceive co-rumination as a more effective strategy compared to individuals with lower anxious attachment.

**Table 2***Parameter Estimates*

Dependent Variable	Parameter	<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>Partial Eta Squared</i>	<i>95% CI (Lower)</i>	<i>95% CI (Upper)</i>
Suppression	Intercept	2.708	.157	17.247	<.001	.378	2.400	3.017
	Anxiety	0.175	.052	3.384	<.001	.023	0.073	0.276
	Avoidance	-0.086	.042	-2.022	.044	.008	-0.169	-0.002
Distraction	Intercept	5.321	.158	33.756	<.001	.699	5.011	5.630
	Anxiety	-0.222	.052	-4.283	<.001	.036	-0.323	-0.120
	Avoidance	-0.019	.043	-0.454	.650	.000	-0.103	0.064
Reappraisal	Intercept	6.160	.138	44.715	<.001	.803	5.889	6.430
	Anxiety	-0.214	.045	-4.737	<.001	.044	-0.303	-0.125
	Avoidance	-0.129	.037	-3.475	<.001	.024	-0.203	-0.056
Corumination	Intercept	4.633	.161	28.754	<.001	.628	4.316	4.949
	Anxiety	-0.280	.053	-5.296	<.001	.054	-0.384	-0.176
	Avoidance	0.040	.044	0.907	.365	.002	-0.046	0.125

*Note.* Computed using alpha = 0.05

**Exploratory Findings**

Across all models, we included both attachment styles, to control for the effects of the other attachment style. While we did not specify any, our main analysis did reveal additional significant relationships between attachment styles and other IER strategies.

The avoidant attachment was found to be a significant negative predictor of both perceived effectiveness of reappraisal and co-rumination, indicating that individuals with higher avoidant attachment perceive these two engaging strategies as less effective compared to those with lower avoidant attachment.

The anxious attachment was a significant negative predictor of the perceived effectiveness of IER strategy suppression, suggesting that individuals with higher anxious attachment perceive suppression as less effective compared to those with lower anxious attachment. This is in contrast to findings for individuals with higher avoidant attachment, who perceive suppression as a more effective strategy compared to those with lower avoidant attachment.

### Discussion

Individuals frequently seek support from others to regulate their emotions during periods of emotional distress (Ruan et al., 2024; Zaki & Williams, 2013). One factor why people perceive different IER strategies provided by partner as effective may be their attachment style. This research examined four IER strategies—two engaging (reappraisal and co-rumination) and two disengaging (suppression and distraction)—and the role of attachment in the perceived effectiveness of these strategies.

Consistent with the first part of hypothesis 1, the results showed that individuals with higher avoidant attachment styles perceived interpersonal suppression as a more effective strategy compared to those who are less avoidant. This finding aligns with the expectation of avoidantly attached individuals and their tendency to minimize emotional engagement, as they prefer to distance themselves from emotional experiences, which aligns well with their general coping style (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Providing desired support to your partner's emotions underscores the importance of tailoring the IER suppression to their attachments. Moreover, the results for anxiously attached people revealed the opposite finding: they perceive interpersonal suppression as less effective compared to those with lower anxious attachment, highlighting even more the necessity for different approaches for regulating partners' emotions according to their attachment style.

However, the question remains whether those IER strategies are truly beneficial for the individual. For instance, providing interpersonal suppression to more avoidantly attached partner may be perceived as an effective response to help them regulate their emotions. However, the tendency to suppress emotions may lead to a lack of emotional intimacy and closeness within the relationship, which can cause avoidant individuals to struggle with forming meaningful connections (Stanton et al., 2017). This avoidant behavior might be perceived by their partner as distant or emotionally unavailable, potentially causing strain within the relationship (Birnie et al., 2009). Therefore, it is important to distinguish between perceived and actual effectiveness.

Contrary to the second part of Hypothesis 1, the results suggest that more avoidantly attached individuals perceive distraction as a less effective strategy. This finding may be due to the nature of the distraction in the interpersonal context. The items which with distraction were measured emphasized interpersonal contact (e.g., by doing something fun to ....), which avoidant individuals tend to avoid in distressing situations (Dewitte et al., 2008). Previous research that



found a positive relationship between avoidant attachment and interpersonal distraction used more maladaptive forms such as drinking alcohol, having multiple sexual partners, or denial and confusion (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Lopez et al., 2001; Pascuzzo et al., 2013), whereas this study used a more neutral description. This indicates that the effectiveness of distraction strategies may vary significantly depending on the context and the nature of the activity involved. It appears that avoidant individuals may respond differently to interpersonal distractions compared to solitary or more maladaptive distractions. This may also suggest that in interpersonal contexts, avoidant individuals might not benefit as much from distraction strategies that involve social interaction. Moreover, more anxiously attached people also found distraction as a less effective strategy, which provides a better picture that this strategy may not be the best perceived option how for regulating your partner's emotions in distressful situations for either of the more insecurely attached individuals. The result for anxious attachment style is not surprising because they tend to seek closeness and reassurance from partner during distress (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). Distraction, which often involves diverting attention away from the source of distress, may not fulfill their need for emotional closeness and support, making it less effective for them as well.

The second hypothesis was not supported. More anxiously attached individuals unexpectedly perceived cognitive reappraisal as less effective compared to less anxiously attached individuals. One possible explanation is the nature of cognitive reappraisal, which aims to reshape the perspective of a negative emotional experience to a more positive one (Rose, 2002). Although generally considered very effective, this strategy might be less effective for anxiously attached individuals due to their attachment style. They may interpret their partner's attempt at reappraisal as invalidating their emotions by implying that their negative point of view is wrong. This perception can conflict with their need for emotional acceptance and reassurance (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Zaki & Williams, 2013). Additionally, anxiously attached individuals tend to be highly sensitive to potential negative outcomes but also can exaggerate their negative emotions to retain their partner's attention (Caldwell & Shaver, 2012; Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Overall et al., 2014; Shaver et al., 2016). In stressful situations, when their dependency on their partner increases, it may become even more difficult for them to abandon this ingrained strategy and adopt a more positive outlook (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). The fact that they perceive interpersonal reappraisal as less effective may align also with previous research indicating that

anxiously attached individuals tend to engage in dysfunctional emotion regulation strategies (Read et al., 2018). Furthermore, the more avoidantly attached individuals also perceived interpersonal reappraisal as less effective compared to those who are less avoidant. This supports our initial viewpoint that avoidantly attached people do not find strategies that directly engage their emotions effective and instead seek emotional distance (Girme et al., 2015). Therefore, cognitive reappraisal does not seem to be perceived as an effective strategy for either type of insecure attachment style.

The results of the next part of the second hypothesis indicate a nonsignificant relationship between anxious attachment and the perceived effectiveness of co-rumination. This could be due to the dual nature of co-rumination, involving both sharing and dwelling on problems (Rose et al., 2007). While anxious individuals may engage in co-rumination to seek reassurance and emotional support, they may not necessarily perceive it as an effective due to the constant adherence to the negative emotional experience (Rose, 2002). Despite this, anxiously attached individuals may engage in it frequently due to their need for reassurance and support (Simpson, 1990). Future research could explore if anxious individuals co-ruminate more often despite recognizing its limited effectiveness. Additionally, more avoidantly attached individuals perceive co-rumination as less effective, aligning with their self-reliance and the general view of co-rumination as ineffective (Calmes & Roberts, 2008; Rose, 2002).

To summarize, people with more anxious attachment did not find any of the four interpersonal regulation strategies as a more effective strategies how they partner can regulate their emotions, compared to people who are less anxiously attached. Additionally, the results showed that they perceived interpersonal suppression and cognitive reappraisal even less effective. On the other hand, for more avoidantly attached individuals, we found different results. They perceive it as more effective if their partner helps them suppress their emotions and they find interpersonal distraction and both engaging strategies a less effective way for their partner to help them feel better.

Although these findings do not support our hypothesis, they reveal important results showing that a person's attachment style matters, as differences in the perceived effectiveness of IER strategies according to attachment style exist. Therefore, considering a person's attachment style is important when implementing an IER strategy to help our partner. This research showed considering effectiveness of IER strategies is more complicated than looking at the strategies

according to division to disengaging and engaging. Future research could extend these findings by testing a broader range of IER strategies and the role of attachment styles. Additionally, it would be beneficial to conduct research comparing perceived effectiveness, actual effectiveness, and the frequency of use of these IER strategies for specific attachment styles. This could provide more targeted help for differently attached individuals, ensuring the strategies are both helpful and perceived as effective. As we observed, despite extensive research on the effectiveness of certain regulation strategies, what value do they bring if individuals do not perceive them as effective ways how their partner can help them feel better when they are upset?

### **Strengths & Limitations**

A key strength of this research is the finding that higher avoidance attachment is associated with lower perceived effectiveness in three out of four IER strategies, and higher anxious attachment in two out of four. These results address a research gap by providing a more comprehensive understanding of emotion regulation in interpersonal contexts and the role of attachment style.

Another strength is the large and diverse sample size. Unlike many studies focusing on college couples (Calmes & Roberts, 2008; Chen et al., 2020), our research included almost 500 participants with an average relationship duration of 16 years. This broad sample enhances the generalizability of our findings to long-term relationships, offering valuable insights into IER dynamics across a wider demographic.

The measurement scales used in this study to assess interpersonal reappraisal, distraction, and avoidance strategies demonstrated high internal consistency. The reliability of these scales means that the associations observed between attachment styles and IER strategies are likely to be robust and replicable.

However, this study also has some limitations. One is the unexpectedly low reliability of the anxiety scale ( $\omega = 0.68$ ), compared to the expected reliability ( $\omega = 0.83$ ; Ehrental et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2007). Additionally, the scales for suppression and co-rumination demonstrated low internal consistency, possibly due to item wording or the short scale length. Consequently, results related to suppression should be interpreted with caution. Future research should revise these scales or use alternative measures to ensure higher reliability.

The predominance of people scoring within the secure attachment range in our sample might overshadow the perceived effectiveness of IER strategies for avoidant or anxious

individuals. To address this in future research, collecting more balanced sample with greater representation of insecure attachment style is crucial. This could involve targeted recruitment strategies or using screening tools to identify participants with specific attachment styles.

Lastly, individuals may not fit neatly into one attachment style; some may show both anxious and avoidant traits, indicating a disorganized attachment style (Rholes et al., 2016). This complexity means our results might not fully capture how mixed attachment styles affect IER strategies. Future research should consider those who score high on both scales as a separate variable. This approach could clarify the specific needs of individuals with mixed attachment styles.

### **Conclusion**

The present study highlights the intricate interplay between attachment styles and the perceived effectiveness of emotion regulation strategies provided by romantic partners. Individuals with higher avoidant attachment styles perceive interpersonal suppression as a more effective strategy to regulate their emotions compared to those with lower avoidant attachment styles. However, they also perceive IER strategies such as distraction, cognitive reappraisal, and co-rumination as less effective in helping them feel better.

On the other hand, individuals with higher levels of anxious attachment tend to perceive suppression and reappraisal as less effective, with no significant relationship found for distraction and co-rumination. These findings suggest that attachment style indeed plays a crucial role in individuals' preferences for certain IER strategies. These differences underscore the importance of personalized approaches in regulating a partner's emotions, tailored to individuals' attachment styles. Such personalized approaches can support their well-being and contribute to overall satisfaction in the relationship (Brandão et al., 2020; Ruan et al., 2024).

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**Appendix A**

*Questionnaire: Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR-R Short Form)*

1. *I find that my partner doesn't want to get as close as I would like.*
2. *I do not often worry about being abandoned. (-)*
3. *I get frustrated if romantic partner is not available when I need them.*
4. *I worry that romantic partner won't care about me as much as I care about them.*
5. *I turn to my partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance. (-)*
6. *I try to avoid getting too close to my partner.*
7. *I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner. (-)*
8. *I am nervous when partners get too close to me.*

## Appendix B

### *Questionnaire: Interpersonal Emotion Regulation strategies for hedonic condition*

When I want to feel better, I find it helpful when my partner...:

1. *Reappraisal:*

- tries to make me look at things from a different perspective.
- tries to make me think differently about the situation.
- tries to make me look at the situation in a more positive way.

2. *Co-rumination:*

- tries to get me to talk over and over about what is bothering me.
- repeatedly engages me in a conversation about my negative emotions.
- I spend a lot of time discussing the difficulties I'm experiencing.

3. *Suppression:*

- tells me not to feel bad (e.g. "Don't cry, don't be sad, don't worry").
- discourages me from expressing my emotions.
- tells me not to think about what is bothering me.

4. *Distraction:*

- tries to distract me.
- tries to direct my attention to something else.
- brings up something fun to take my attention off my negative feelings.



### Appendix C

#### *Preliminary Analysis: The Assumptions Testing for Multivariate Regression*

First, the **linearity** assumption was assessed by creating scatterplots of each predictor variable (Anxiety, Avoidance) against the dependent variables (Suppression, Distraction, Corumination, Reappraisal), with fit lines added. Visual inspection of the scatterplots indicated that the relationships between the variables were linear. The  $R^2$  values were: Avoidance with Suppression ( $R^2=0.016$ ), Anxiety with Suppression ( $R^2=0.002$ ), Avoidance with Distraction ( $R^2=0.044$ ), Anxiety with Distraction ( $R^2=0.009$ ), Anxiety with Corumination ( $R^2=0.002$ ), Avoidance with Corumination ( $R^2=0.055$ ), Anxiety with Reappraisal ( $R^2=0.056$ ), and Avoidance with Reappraisal ( $R^2=0.075$ ). Although these  $R^2$  values indicate that the relationships were weak, the visual inspection confirmed that the relationships were sufficiently linear for the purposes of the analysis.

The assumption of **multicollinearity** was tested by examining the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for each predictor variable across four regression models. All VIF values were well below the common threshold of 10, which indicates no multicollinearity issues

. Specifically, Anxiety and Avoidance had the same value ( $VIF = 1.144$ ) in all models.

Additionally, the assumption of **homoscedasticity** was evaluated by inspecting the scatterplots of standardized residuals against standardized predicted values for each regression model. The scatterplot revealed that the residuals for Suppression, Distraction, Corumination, and Reappraisal were randomly scattered around the horizontal axis with no clear pattern or funnel shape, suggesting that the homoscedasticity assumption was met.

The assumption of **multivariate normality** was assessed using Q-Q plots for the residuals of each regression model. The Q-Q plots for all four IER strategies showed that the points closely followed the diagonal line, indicating that the residuals were approximately normally distributed. Additionally, the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the residuals were normally distributed ( $p\text{-value} > 0.05$ ). The histograms of the residuals showed a bell-shaped distribution, further supporting the assumption of normality.

The absence of autocorrelation was checked using the Durbin-Watson statistic. The values for Suppression (1.92), Reappraisal (2.02), Corumination (1.96), and Distraction (1.82) are all close to 2, indicating no significant autocorrelation in the residuals. D-W values between 1.5 and 2.5 generally suggest that the residuals are independent (Nerlove & Wallis, 1966).