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## High Self-Esteem and Growth Belief Contribute to Resilience Following Positive and Negative Relationship Events

Maxine Boyd  
maxineboyd70@gmail.com

Maire Ford  
Loyola Marymount University, Maire.Ford@lmu.edu

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**High Self-Esteem and Growth Belief Contribute to Resilience Following Positive and  
Negative Relationship Events**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements of the University Honors Program  
of Loyola Marymount University

by

**Maxine Boyd**

**May 5, 2023**

**High Self-Esteem and Growth Belief Contribute to Resilience Following Positive and  
Negative Relationship Events**

Maxine Boyd

Department of Psychological Science, Loyola Marymount University

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Maire Ford

May 5, 2023

**Author Note**

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### **Abstract**

Individuals differ in how they interpret and respond to romantic relationship events. Some individuals engage in responses that promote personal and relationship well-being, while others engage in maladaptive responses. It is important to identify factors that shape responses to relationship events. The current study investigated self-esteem and implicit theories of relationships as predictors of resilient and adaptive responses to negative and positive romantic relationship events. Self-esteem plays a role in shaping these responses, with low self-esteem individuals perceiving more threat from negative relationship events leading to more harmful responses and those with high self-esteem responding more resiliently and adaptively to negative relationship events. Implicit theories of relationships (i.e., growth beliefs and destiny beliefs) guide individuals' inferences about relationships and their responses to relationship threats. Growth belief are characterized by an individual's belief that relationships are cultivated and developed and that relationship challenges can be overcome. This study examined individuals' cognitive responses (e.g., rumination about the event), emotional responses, and behavioral intent (e.g., the likelihood of the individual reacting with hostility toward their partner following the event) following hypothetical negative and positive relationship events. Findings suggest those with high self-esteem and growth belief respond more adaptively. They experience more positive cognitions, emotions, and behavioral intentions following both positive and negative relationship events.

*Keywords:* implicit theories of relationships, self-esteem, romantic relationships, growth belief

## **High Self-Esteem and Growth Belief Contribute to Resilience Following Positive and Negative Relationship Events**

A multitude of factors contribute to an individual's responses to romantic relationship events. It can be difficult to navigate actual or perceived challenges in romantic relationships, which makes research on factors that contribute to resilient and adaptive responses to relationship events extremely relevant for many individuals.

There is currently a significant gap in published research that has directly investigated how self-esteem and implicit theories of relationships contribute to responses to romantic relationship events. Many studies have focused on the effects of self-esteem and implicit theories of personality, intelligence, and ability, but have not explored self-esteem and implicit theories of relationships as predictors of responses to relationship events. Further, relative to the amount of literature on predictors of maladaptive responses to relationship events, less research has been conducted on the predictors of resilience and adaptivity in the face of relationship challenges.

The present study investigated the extent to which high self-esteem and the implicit theory of relationships (ITRs) known as growth belief contribute to resilient and adaptive responses to both positive and negative romantic relationships events. To investigate this, participants took part in an experimental research study. Participants completed online questionnaires assessing their trait levels of self-esteem and growth belief and were then presented with four vignettes (i.e., two positive imagined romantic relationship events and two negative). Following exposure to each vignette, participants completed measures that determined their cognitions, emotions, and behavioral intentions; some of which corresponded to adaptive and resilient responses while others indicated maladaptive or not resilient responses. Collecting data on a variety of measures provided more insight into an exact pattern of responses to

relationship events. It was expected that relative to those low in self-esteem and low in growth belief, those high in self-esteem and high in growth belief would exhibit more resilient and adaptive responses to both positive and negative events.

### **Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem has considerable implications for a person's well-being in many important domains of life. Self-esteem describes the subjective appraisal of self-worth, feelings of self-respect and self confidence, and the extent to which one holds positive or negative views of oneself (Wyland & Shaffer, 2019). Thus, relative to those with low self-esteem, those with high self-esteem have a high sense of self-worth, self-respect, self-confidence, and positive feelings about the self. High self-esteem has been shown to predict a more satisfying work life, better physical and mental health, and is positively correlated with relationship satisfaction (Wyland & Shaffer, 2019). In particular, those with low self-esteem are more likely to question their partner's intentions or feelings for them, blame themselves for a negative event occurring, and are more likely to respond maladaptively to negative romantic relationship events (Simpson & Overall, 2014). These maladaptive responses can include increased feelings of insecurity, stress, rumination, negative emotions, and substance use (Arikewuyo et al., 2021; DeHart et al., 2008). Alternatively, those with high self-esteem have been shown to be more resilient to challenges and threats by expressing more adaptive, self-regulatory responses. Thus, in comparison to low self-esteem, high-self esteem actually buffers the impact of a negative event and/or allows for quicker recovery from a negative event (Arikewuyo et al., 2021). Generally, how one feels about themselves is often correlated with how they think their romantic partner perceives them (Erol & Orth, 2016). There is a strong link between self-esteem and positive or negative relationship perceptions and outcomes (Arikewuyo et al., 2021).

Much of the available literature on this topic focuses on the relationship between self-esteem and responses to negative relationship events, leaving a gap in the literature on factors that contribute to adaptive and resilient responses to both positive and negative relationship events. The present study aims to offer a more nuanced analysis of the beneficial effects of high self-esteem by investigating responses to both positive and negative relationship events, as certain personality variables including self-esteem will only predict particular responses to positive or negative events. Previous research has shown that in an event in which an ego threat occurs (i.e., a threat to one's positive self-image or self-esteem), one's responses to that event are particularly influenced by their implicit theories (Burnette et al., 2013). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that when faced with a negative relationship event, an ego threat may be present that can lead a person to revert to attitudes and behaviors aligning with their implicit theories. Because of this potential effect, it is important to investigate the role of ITRs in contributing to responses to relationship events.

### **Implicit Theories of Relationships**

ITRs stem from Carol Dweck's research on implicit theories known as incremental and entity theories in domains such as intelligence, ability, and personality. Incremental theory describes the belief that traits are malleable and can develop over time, while those who subscribe to an entity theory believe traits are fixed and generally do not change throughout a person's life (Dweck, 2012). Implicit theories have been shown to be largely domain specific making it especially important to investigate implicit theories in the context of romantic relationships. ITRs have been shown to influence the initiation, maintenance, and longevity of romantic relationships (Knee, 1998). ITRs consist of two cognitive schemas known as growth belief and destiny belief (Knee, 1998). Growth belief is held by individuals who believe

successful relationships are cultivated and developed over time, mirroring an incremental theory in the context of romantic relationships. Alternatively, those with destiny belief subscribe to the ideology that romantic partners are either meant to be or not and tend to heavily rely on initial impressions of satisfaction when determining their compatibility with another person (e.g., love at first sight). With this evidence, it is reasonable to believe that ITRs might play a significant role in shaping individuals' responses to relationship events.

ITRs determine goals and motivations in romantic relationships and have been shown to predict coping strategies and the amount of effort an individual puts into maintaining their relationship, especially when faced with challenges (Knee, 2004). Growth belief is directly relevant to overcoming conflict in relationships due to its association with increased relationship maintenance and development strategies including constructive communication (Knee et al., 2001; Dovala et al., 2018). Those with growth belief endorse the ideas that relationships require maintenance, problems can be resolved, and disagreements can become opportunities for better understanding of one's partner. When faced with relationship problems, those who endorse growth belief have shown to optimistically reframe the problems, experience less feelings of hostility, and more positive emotions (Knee et al., 2001). Due to such associations, growth belief, in particular, can serve as a buffer against more typical negative effects of conflict on one's evaluation of the relationship, leading to increased commitment to their partner (Knee et al., 2004).

Growth belief and destiny belief are conceptually and statistically independent dimensions, meaning they do not represent opposing ends of a single continuum of relationships beliefs such that one's score on destiny belief is unrelated to one's score on growth belief (Knee et al., 2004). Due to their independence from one another, they can either be studied as separate



entities or together. The present study will focus on growth belief as an measured independent variable without statistical analyses on destiny belief.

It is reasonable to believe that self-esteem and implicit theories, specifically in the context of romantic relationships, can contribute to an individual's responses to a negative romantic relationship event. The present study is extending this research by examining the effects of both self-esteem and implicit theories of relationships on individuals' responses to both positive and negative romantic relationship events. The decision to focus on growth belief and high self-esteem was made to align with more of a positive psychology perspective on the traits associated with adaptive and resilient responses to relationship events. As such, the present study focused on traits that are likely to predict healthy responses to events.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how high self-esteem and growth belief contribute to resilient responses following negative romantic relationship events and adaptive responses following positive romantic relationship events. It is hypothesized that in response to negative romantic relationship events, participants with high self-esteem and those with growth belief will exhibit more resilient responses (i.e., less rumination, fewer negative emotions, etc.). In response to positive events, it is hypothesized that participants with high self-esteem and participants with growth belief would exhibit more adaptive responses (i.e., more positive emotions, more likely to act nicely toward their partner, etc.).

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Data was collected from 105 participants with an age range from 18 to 58 ( $M = 20$ ,  $SD = 5.42$ ). 63% of participants were female, 36% were male and 1% preferred not to state. Although inclusion criteria did not require participants to be in a current romantic relationship, data was

gathered on participant relationship status. 33% of participants were in a romantic relationship and 67% were not. Of those in a romantic relationship, 3% were married and 30% were dating.

Participants were primarily recruited through Loyola Marymount University's Human Subject Pool. Participants in the Human Subject Pool who were in a general psychology course at Loyola Marymount University were offered one research credit for completing the study. Other participants were obtained through snowball sampling and advertisements on LMU's campus.

### **Procedure**

Participants completed an online self-report study through Qualtrics. Upon logging in, participants completed questionnaires that collected demographic information and measured their trait levels of self-esteem and ITRs. Next, they were presented with a manipulation. The manipulation involved participants reading four vignettes: two being hypothetical positive relationship events and two being hypothetical negative relationship events (see Appendix). Following exposure to each vignette, participants completed questionnaires that measured their cognitions, emotions, and behavioral intentions. All dependent variables were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), meaning participants were asked to rate their agreement to each item on a scale of 1 to 7 after exposure to each of the vignettes.

Responses across the two negative vignettes were combined, and responses across the two positive vignettes were combined for statistical analyses conducted in SPSS. Regression analyses between independent and dependent variables were conducted in SPSS.

### **Measures**

#### ***Implicit Theories of Relationships***

ITRs were measured using the 22-item Implicit Theories of Relationships Scale (Knee, Patrick & Lonsbary, 2003). The growth belief subscale consists of 11 items ( $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = .604$ ,  $\alpha = .710$ ). Participants rated their agreement or disagreement with each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Items measuring growth belief contained statements including, “a successful relationship evolves through hard work and resolution of incompatibilities.” Higher scores are associated with greater growth beliefs.

### ***Self-Esteem***

Each participant’s trait level of self-esteem was measured using the continuous 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Participants rated their agreement or disagreement with each item (e.g., “I feel that I have a good number of qualities”). Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). ( $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ,  $\alpha = .889$ ). Higher scores are associated with greater self-esteem.

### ***Cognitions***

**Rumination.** Using a measure consisting of 4 items, participants’ levels of expected rumination were recorded following exposure to positive vignettes ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ,  $\alpha = .716$ ) and negative vignettes ( $M = 5.29$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ,  $\alpha = .862$ ). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale to items (e.g., “how likely would you be to wonder what you might have done to cause this event to occur”).

**Avoidant Rumination.** Using a measure consisting of 3 items, participants’ expected levels of avoidant rumination were obtained following exposure to positive events ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ,  $\alpha = .853$ ) and negative events ( $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ,  $\alpha = .889$ ). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale to items (e.g., “how likely do you think you would try to avoid thinking about the situation”).

**Self-Responsibility.** A single-item measure was also presented to determine the likelihood that the participants would hold themselves responsible for the event occurring following positive events ( $M = 4.86$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) and following negative events ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ).

**Partner-Responsibility.** A single-item measure asked participants to rate the likelihood that they would hold their partner responsible for the event occurring following exposure to the positive events ( $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) and the negative events ( $M = 5.71$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ).

### ***Emotions***

**Positive Emotions.** Using a measure consisting of 6 items, expected positive emotions were reported following exposure to positive events ( $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = .876$ ,  $\alpha = .910$ ) and to negative events ( $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = .948$ ,  $\alpha = .905$ ). Participants indicated their agreement to items on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., “I would feel pleased with myself”).

**Negative Emotions.** Using a measure consisting of 12 items, expected negative emotions were reported following exposure to positive events ( $M = 1.95$ ,  $SD = .994$ ,  $\alpha = .95$ ) and negative events ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = .896$ ,  $\alpha = .925$ ). On a 7-point Likert scale participants indicated their agreement to items (e.g., “I would feel ashamed”).

### ***Behavioral Intentions***

**Nice to Partner.** A single-item measure asked participants to rate the likelihood of acting nicely toward their partner following the positive events ( $M = 6.26$ ,  $SD = .839$ ) and following the negative events ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ).

**Hostile Toward Partner.** A single-item measure asked participants to rate the likelihood of acting with hostility toward their partner following the positive events ( $M = 1.55$ ,  $SD = .876$ ) and the negative events ( $M = .389$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ).

**Continuing the Relationship.** A single-item measure asked participants to rate how likely it would be that they would want to continue the relationship following the positive events ( $M = 6.38, SD = .811$ ) and the negative events ( $M = 3.77, SD = 1.05$ ).

## Results

Prior to conducting analyses directly related to the given hypotheses, it was determined there was no significant correlation between self-esteem and growth belief as measures ( $r = -.100, p = .310$ ) (i.e., those high in self-esteem were not shown to also be high in growth belief and vice versa). With this information, it can be concluded that there was no conflation between the effects of each measure on one another. Thus, it was justifiable to analyze growth belief and high self-esteem independently. The following data was obtained through regression analyses.

In response to positive events, those high in growth belief and those high in self-esteem largely exhibited adaptive cognitive and emotional responses as well as behavioral intentions, providing support for Hypothesis 1. See Table 1 for a table of all results in response to positive events. Relative to those low in growth belief, those high in growth belief reported significantly less avoidant rumination, more positive emotions, were more likely to act nicely toward their partner following the event, and were less likely to act with hostility toward their partner. Those high in self-esteem reported significantly less rumination following exposure to the positive vignette, less avoidant rumination, and fewer negative emotions.

See Table 2 for a complete table of results in response to negative events. In response to negative relationship events, those high in self-esteem exhibited highly resilient responses providing support for Hypothesis 2. Individuals who possessed high self-esteem reported significantly less rumination, less feelings that they were responsible for the negative event occurring, and fewer negative emotions. Those high in growth belief exhibited resilient

responses following exposure to the negative events, but other non-significant responses seemed to indicate less resilience. Relative to those low in growth belief, those high in growth belief reported significantly less avoidant rumination.

### **Discussion**

This study aimed to explore how high self-esteem and growth belief contribute to resilient and adaptive responses following exposure to positive and negative relationship events. In response to negative events, relative to those with low self-esteem, those with high self-esteem reported highly resilient cognitions, emotions, and behavioral intentions. Additionally, in response to negative events although those with growth belief reported less avoidant rumination which is a resilient response, they also showed a nonsignificant tendency to report fewer positive emotions, possibly indicating some mixed results in resilience for those high in growth belief following negative events. This is one area that future research can potentially follow up on. In consideration of these results, it is clear that whether one is high in growth belief or has high self-esteem has major implications for how they perceive relationship events in ways that can affect both individual and relationship wellbeing.

There were some limitations faced in the present study that can guide the directions of future research. Inclusion criteria did not require participants to be in a romantic relationship. Future studies should investigate the present study's research question by examining participants in a current relationship, preferably including both individuals in the relationship. This could increase the effectiveness of the manipulation if participants are able to imagine their current partner in the vignettes. It could also allow researchers to analyze the similarities and differences between each partner's responses to certain relationship events. Additionally, the current study utilized a cross-sectional design. It would be valuable for future researchers to investigate the

longitudinal effects of high self-esteem and growth belief in regard to individual and romantic well-being. Lastly, the present study focused on the main effects of growth belief and high self-esteem. Future studies should investigate interactions between high self-esteem and growth belief in light of other relevant variables to uncover further nuances of contributors to responses to relationship events.

### **Conclusion**

Literature on the benefits of high self-esteem in the context of romantic relationships is extensive and diverse. Additionally, research on ITRs has demonstrated growth belief to predict positive relationship perceptions and the likelihood of a person to engage in effective conflict resolution with a romantic partner. With an emphasis on positive psychology, the current study expanded the scope of this literature by examining the extent to which high self-esteem and growth belief predict healthy and resilient responses to positive and negative romantic relationship events. High self-esteem and growth belief were shown to predict more adaptive and resilient cognitions, emotions, and behavioral intentions following exposure to both positive and negative relationship events.

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**Table 1: Correlations and Significance Between Growth Belief and Self-Esteem Following Positive Relationship Events**

	Growth belief		Self-esteem	
	$\beta$	$p$	$\beta$	$p$
<b>Cognitions</b>				
Rumination	.091	.364	-.317**	.001
Avoidant rumination	-.255*	.010	-.242*	.014
Self-responsibility	-.123	.218	.173	.083
Partner-responsibility	-.182	.067	.032	.748
<b>Emotions</b>				
Positive emotions	.207*	.038	.065	.521
Negative emotions	-.046	.648	-.312**	.001
<b>Behavioral Intentions</b>				
Nice to partner	.225*	.023	.042	.675
Hostile toward partner	-.209*	.035	-.075	.453
Want to continue relationship	.175	.079	.175	.078

*Note:* The standardized coefficient, Beta ( $\beta$ ), was used in regression analyses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 2: Correlations and Significance of Dependent Measures with Growth Belief and Self-Esteem Following Negative Relationship Events**

	Growth belief		Self-esteem	
	$\beta$	$p$	$\beta$	$p$
<b>Cognitions</b>				
Rumination	.143	.150	-.375***	<.001
Avoidant rumination	-.221*	.026	-.129	.195
Self-responsibility	.159	.110	-.349***	<.001
Partner-responsibility	.053	.597	-.037	.709
<b>Emotions</b>				
Positive emotions	-.179	.074	.083	.407
Negative emotions	.101	.310	-.328***	<.001
<b>Behavioral Intentions</b>				
Nice to partner	-.037	.714	.092	.356
Hostile toward partner	-.096	.337	-.187	.060
Want to continue relationship	-.101	.920	.050	.621

*Note:* The standardized coefficient, Beta ( $\beta$ ), was used in regression analyses.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Appendix

### Vignettes Presented in the Experimental Manipulation

Table A1 contains the two positive relationship event vignettes presented to each participant. Participants were asked to imagine that the following event occurred between them and their partner.

**Table A1: Positive vignettes**

Positive vignette 1	Positive vignette 2
<p>Imagine that your partner asks you to go to an important work-related event with them. They say that they are really proud to have you as their partner and that they are excited for everyone at work to meet you and see what a great person you are.</p>	<p>Imagine that you haven't seen your partner in a while because you have both been busy with school work and club activities. One day your partner calls you to tell you that they have been really missing you and that not being able to spend as much time with you has made them realize how deep their feelings for you really are. They also mention that they would like to figure out a way for you both to spend more time together despite your busy schedules.</p>

Table A2 contains the two negative relationship event vignettes presented to each participant. Participants were asked to imagine that the following event occurred between them and their partner.

**Table A2: Negative vignettes**

Negative vignette 1	Negative vignette 2
<p>Imagine that you are very ill and cannot leave the house. You call your partner and ask them to come over to watch a movie with you. Instead of coming over to keep you company, they decide to keep their plans to go out with friends and don't call you later to see how you are doing.</p>	<p>Imagine that you have not seen your partner in a while. It seems like every time you suggest going out together he/she has an excuse for why he/she can't make it. You are getting tired of being the one who always tries to make plans, and you are tired of asking your partner to hang out only for him/her to come up with some excuse to avoid hanging out with you.</p>

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