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Relationships as Regulators

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the Hofer (1984, 1996) and Field (1985, 1994) models on relationships as regulators, suggesting that relationships regulate optimal stimulation and thereby modulate arousal levels and attenuate stress. In these models, the behavioral, physiological and biochemical rhythms of individuals become synchronized within close relationships like mother-infant and peer relationships both in human and animal species, and they become more coordinated over time, with some potentially remaining stable, much like zeitgebers. Hofer supports his model by data on infant rat separation stress and Field describes "psychobiological attunement" between human infants and their mothers and between young peers. This review revisits the "relationships as regulators" model, summarizing studies on relationships between non-depressed versus depressed mothers and their infants, between infant, preschool and preadolescent friends versus acquaintances and between happily versus unhappily married couples. Although some behavioral and physiological data support Hofer's and Field's "relationships as regulators" model, many studies on relationships have focused instead on the effects of separation or loss. Both Hofer and Field suggest that the real question is "what was there about the relationship that was then missing after the loss?" Future research could address the question of potential mediators and underlying mechanisms for relationships becoming regulators. Potential mediators are explored here including mirror neurons, affective priming, imitation and empathy. The individuals' rhythms and the attraction to others' rhythms as regulators may be an epigenetic programming phenomenon, suggesting both genetic and early experience effects that endure across development.

KEYWORDS

Relationships; Psychobiological Attunement; Arousal; Separation

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