Hope for Our Future:
Relational Hope Promotes Relationship Goal Pursuit and Well-Being

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Hope, or positive expectancies to meet desired goals, may shape romantic couples' goal attainment and well-being. The current work tested a new theoretical model of hope that extends beyond the intrapersonal domain to examine *interpersonal* hope for goals focused on a partner and relationship. In Study 1 ($N = 214$ couples), we tested the associations of relational hope on goal outcomes during a goal conversation in the lab and at a follow-up 3 months later. Individuals higher in relational hope viewed their goal more positively in the moment and made more progress on their goal 3 months later. In Study 2 ($N = 164$ couples), a 3-month longitudinal study, we tested whether hopeful individuals' goal pursuit facilitated long-term changes in relationship well-being. Relational hope predicted long-term increases in relationship well-being (i.e., constructive conflict behavior, commitment), and these changes were mediated by viewing one's relationship goals more positively. Results were consistent across the characteristics of relationship goals, including whether goals were shared and their degree of importance and difficulty. Across studies, results could not be fully explained by alternative explanations of optimism or relationship satisfaction, indicating that relational hope may be an added resource for couples beyond feeling generally happy or satisfied. Altogether, this work elucidates the benefits of feeling relationally hopeful for pursuing relationship goals and boosting well-being over time.

Keywords: hope, relational hope, goal pursuit, well-being, close relationships

The bond between romantic partners is among the most meaningful connections people form in life, and yet, these ties can be challenging to maintain over time. Even among satisfied couples, partners may experience lulls or boredom in their relationship or times of friction and strife. One resource that may help couples navigate these experiences is *relational hope*, or their striving toward desired outcomes and goals within their relationship (Shimshock & Le, 2022). Relational hope encompasses three key facets: *relational agency*, the motivation and competency for attaining relationship goals; *relational pathways*, the resources and strategies for pursuing relationship goals; and *relational aspirations*, the positive feelings in anticipation of meeting relationship goals. For example, an individual may have the goal to be more patient with their partner. If they are high in relational hope, they would feel confident in their ability to become more patient, think of numerous strategies for becoming more patient (e.g., reappraisal, couples therapy), and positively envision how much their relationship skills will improve after working on their patience. In the

current work, we test whether relational hope promotes relationship well-being by fueling movement toward desired relationship goals.

Hope has been defined as the generalized perception that an individual is able to reach their goals (e.g., Eliott, 2005).[1] Most prominently, hope has been defined as the motivation and strategies for attaining one's goals (Snyder et al., 1991). Although initially theorized to originate solely within the individual and to influence intrapersonal goals (Snyder et al., 1991), others have considered how hope may be shaped by external sources (Bernardo, 2010; Du & King, 2013) and influence social goals or outcomes (Schornick et al., 2023). For example, hope among parents promotes personal and familial benefits and buffers against parenting stressors (Cole & Molloy, 2023). Romantic relationships are also an important domain

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[1] Hope has been distinguished from other positive, goal-oriented, or future-oriented constructs, such as optimism, grit, and self-efficacy, and shows unique predictions beyond these other related constructs (e.g., Alarcon et al., 2013; Bryant & Cvengros, 2004; Moss-Pech et al., 2021).

in which hope functions (Lopez et al., 2000; Snyder et al., 2018), with some work finding benefits for couples' communication, parental teamwork, and family functioning (Merolla & Harman, 2018; Silverio et al., 2025). Given that romantic partners are often strongly involved in our goals (Fitzsimons et al., 2015), this is a crucial context to examine how hope may be beneficial.

The current work tests how hopeful partners may be better equipped to pursue desired goals in their relationship. Fundamentally, the core of hope theory concerns hope as a facilitator of goal pursuit and attainment (Feldman et al., 2009; Snyder et al., 1991). Links between hope and goal pursuit have been found across other goal domains (e.g., academics, health, finances; Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Moss-Pech et al., 2021), but this has not been tested in the context of goals for one's romantic relationship. Given that relational goals are tied to health and well-being (Canevello & Crocker, 2011; Impett et al., 2010), it is important to identify whether hope benefits these important goals. In turn, goal benefits should accumulate to boost overall well-being and positive outcomes (Feldman et al., 2009; J. Y. Lee & Gallagher, 2018).

Altogether, we sought to test whether those higher in relational hope are better able to pursue their relationship goals, thereby facilitating greater relationship well-being. In doing so, we tested unique pathways through which hope may aid in goal pursuit, including making progress on one's goals, forming adaptive appraisals of goals, and integrating goals into a desired vision of the future. We tested whether these dimensions of goal pursuit were uniquely linked to relationship satisfaction, conflict management, and commitment, respectively (Figure 1). We also tested whether hope acts as a joint resource for couples (Laslo-Roth & George-Levi, 2022). Specifically, given the interdependence among romantic partners' goal pursuits and outcomes (Fishbach & Tu, 2016; Fitzsimons et al., 2015), we predicted that relational hope would be positively related to a partner's goal and relationship outcomes. Below, we detail how relational hope may be linked to romantic partners' goal processes and well-being through distinct pathways.

Relational Hope, Goal Pursuit, and Relationship Well-Being

First, relational hope may help individuals make greater *goal progress* toward desired relationship goals, which may promote

greater *relationship satisfaction*. Given that individuals higher in general hope tend to have more satisfying and supportive relationships (Laslo-Roth & George-Levi, 2022; Merolla et al., 2021), individuals higher in relational hope also likely experience stronger romantic bonds. This may occur as hopeful individuals are able to harness their resources to move toward important goals (Barrios et al., 2019; Feldman et al., 2009; Snyder, 2000), which may prompt them to feel that they can affect positive change in their relationship, promoting greater satisfaction (Holding et al., 2020; Young et al., 2013). Making progress on desired relational goals may also create more positive interactions and exciting activities between partners, promoting closeness and satisfaction (Harasymchuk et al., 2020; Impett et al., 2010). Thus, we hypothesize that relational hope boosts satisfaction through greater goal progress.

Second, relational hope may help individuals form adaptive *goal appraisals*, including higher challenge and lower threat appraisals, thereby supporting effective *conflict management*. Hope is associated with accommodation during couples' conflict, which involves disengaging from self-interested, destructive behavior and instead using constructive, relationship-building behavior (Merolla, 2014; Merolla & Harman, 2018). Specifically, hope has been linked to self-regulation during conflict (Merolla, 2017) and using alternative strategies (Vohs & Schmeichel, 2002) to yield positive resolutions. This link may be explained by appraising goals in more adaptive ways; even among challenging goals, hopeful individuals feel energized by the chance of success (Snyder et al., 1991, 1997) and feel they can cope effectively against any stressors that arise (Snyder, 2002). Appraising goals in a more positive, approach-oriented way, as opposed to burdensome or threatening (Blascovich & Mendes, 2010), provides hopeful individuals with the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resources needed to handle stressors that arise, such as relationship conflict (Jamieson, 2018; Palmwood & McBride, 2019). Thus, we hypothesize that relational hope will promote effective conflict management through adaptive goal appraisals.

Finally, relational hope may increase *goal integration* of relational goals toward a vision of a desired future, thereby strengthening relationship *commitment*. Positive feelings about the future of one's relationship are an important marker of commitment (Baker et

Figure 1
Pathways Between Relational Hope, Goal Processes, and Relationship Well-Being
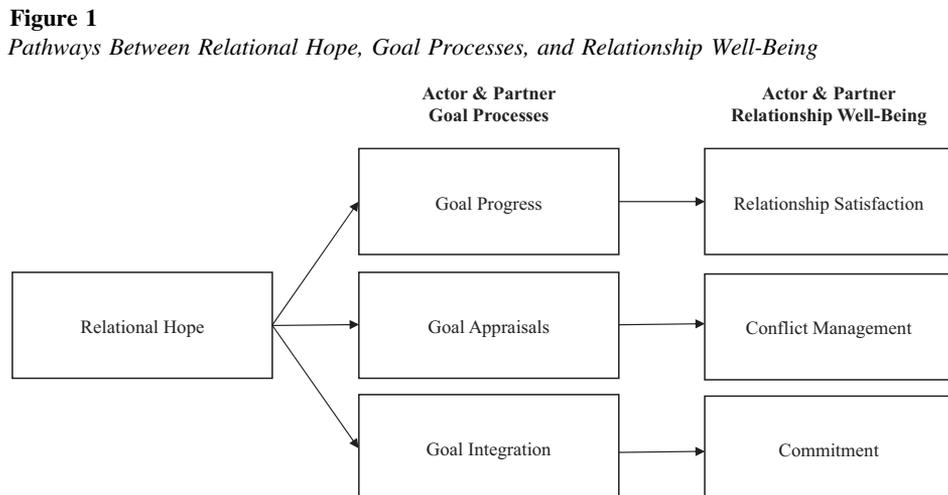
al., 2017; Lemay, 2016). Individuals high in relational hope may feel stronger relationship commitment due to viewing one's relationship goals as integral to future plans for oneself and for the relationship (Sheldon & Emmons, 1995). Hope may promote this goal integration given that feeling hope promotes broadened mindsets and behaviors by encouraging novel and creative thinking and planning for the future (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, 2013; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), such as increasing goal salience (Sheldon & Emmons, 1995). By integrating relationship goals into one's future plans, these goals seem more imperative to fulfilling one's future desires and wishes, strengthening commitment to the relationship to see these goals come to fruition. Thus, we hypothesize that relational hope will strengthen relationship commitment through bolstering goal integration.

The Current Work

Across two dyadic studies, we tested the associations between actor and partner relational hope with goal pursuit and relationship well-being. In Study 1, we conducted an initial test of the association between relational hope and goal outcomes when partners discussed an important relationship goal during a lab conversation. In Study 2, a 3-month longitudinal study where couples pursued multiple relationship goals naturalistically, we tested whether advances in goal pursuit mediated the association between relational hope and increased relationship well-being. Across studies, we reconducted all analyses controlling for alternative explanations to ensure the benefits of relational hope are not an artifact of optimistic thinking or generally feeling satisfied in one's relationship. Additionally, we explore underlying themes of relationship goals and test whether goal characteristics influence how relational hope benefits goal pursuit.

Study 1: The Dyadic Effects of Relational Hope During a Goal Conversation

In Study 1, we tested the associations between relational hope and goal outcomes as couples discussed important relationship goals. In the lab, couples engaged in a conversation where one person, the *speaker*, disclosed a goal they wanted to accomplish in their relationship to their partner, the *listener*. Then, partners switched roles for a second conversation. Couples reported on their relational hope and goal outcomes (i.e., goal appraisals and goal integration) immediately following the conversation, as well as their goal progress 3 months later in a follow-up survey. Below, we report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, and all measures examined as part of this study.

Participants and Procedure

A sample of 214 couples ($N = 428$ individuals) was recruited through a posting on our university's health registry and via Facebook ads targeting the broader community and surrounding suburbs. Couples who had been together for 6 months or longer were eligible to participate. A target sample size of 200 couples was selected to exceed prior samples with similar lab-based designs (Le et al., 2020). This provided sufficient power (exceeding .80) for detecting an actor effect size of $B = 0.25$ and a partner effect size of $B = 0.15$. Participants were 35.94 years old on average ($SD = 13.68$). The sample was 46.73% male, 49.77% female, and 3.50% gender variant/nonconforming, other, or did not report their gender. Participants were 80.61% White, 7.71% Asian, 3.50% biracial, 2.34% Black or African American, 2.10% other ethnicity, and 1.64% multiracial; one participant was American Indian or Alaskan, and eight participants did not report their ethnicity. For relationship status, 53.27% of participants were in monogamous marriages, 43.94% were in unmarried, monogamous relationships, and 2.79% were in open or polyamorous marriages or unmarried relationships or did not report their status. Couples had been together on average for 15.15 years ($SD = 11.96$).

Couples took part in a multipart study, including an initial background survey, an in-lab visit, a 2-week daily diary, and a follow-up survey. We utilize data from the in-lab visit, in which couples took part in a goal conversation, and the follow-up survey completed 3 months later. Prior to the lab visit, couples separately wrote about two goals they wanted to accomplish in their relationship in the future.[2] During the lab discussion, one partner was randomly selected to be the *speaker*, who disclosed their goal to their partner, the *listener*. After the discussion, both partners completed a questionnaire and then partners swapped roles for a second goal discussion. Each discussion lasted 6 min. Three months after the lab visit, participants completed a follow-up survey, which included a measure assessing their progress toward the goal discussed in the lab. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the university's research subjects review board. Hypotheses were not preregistered. Code for analyses, anonymized data (available upon request), and all additional online material can be found on our Open Science Framework page: https://osf.io/uwf5n/overview.

Lab Measures

All items were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and averaged into a composite, unless noted otherwise.

Relational Hope. In response to the stem "In this discussion," speaker and listener relational hope were assessed with six items total (e.g., "I was motivated to make my relationship thrive," "I envisioned good things for the future of my relationship"), $M_{speaker} = 6.28$, $SD_{speaker} = 0.81$, $\alpha_{speaker} = .89$; $M_{listener} = 6.20$, $SD_{listener} = 0.85$, $\alpha_{listener} = .92$.[3]

Speaker Goal Appraisals. Speaker goal appraisals were assessed with two items adapted from previous studies (Kavussanu et al., 2014; Ptacek et al., 1994). One item assessed challenge appraisal

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[2] Participants rated how willing and comfortable they would be discussing each goal in the lab with their partner. Prior to the lab session, research assistants selected the goal that participants would be at least somewhat willing to discuss in the lab and was rated as the least comfortable to disclose to their partner. This was chosen because a primary aim of the investigation was to have partners engage in challenging discussions.

[3] Data collection for Study 1 occurred prior to the scale development and validation work for the Relational Hope Scale in Study 2. Therefore, there were some differences between the relational hope items used in Study 1 and Study 2. Nonetheless, the relational hope items demonstrated similar scale properties, descriptives, and convergent validity with satisfaction with life, meaning in life, and relationship satisfaction across both studies.

("I view this goal as a positive challenge," $M = 6.45$, $SD = 0.76$), and one item assessed threat appraisal ("Pursuing this goal may pose some threats to me," $M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.84$). We treated these items separately, rather than combining into a composite, given their low correlation ($r = -0.17$, $p < .001$).

Speaker Goal Integration.   Speaker goal integration (Sheldon & Emmons, 1995) was assessed with two items on the integration of the goal with an ideal future self ("This goal brings me closer to who I want to be in the future") and ideal future relationship ("Pursuing this goal brings us closer to our ideal relationship in the future"; $M = 6.37$, $SD = 0.81$, $r = 0.67$, $p < .001$).

Follow-Up Measure

Speaker Goal Progress.   Speaker goal progress was assessed with three items adapted from Feldman et al. (2009): (a) "Please indicate the percent of progress you have currently made toward achieving this goal" from 1 (*0%*) to 11 (*100%*) in 10% increments, (b) "I was successful in achieving my goal," and (c) "I accomplished my goal." All items were standardized prior to averaging into a composite ($M = 0.00$, $SD = 0.92$, $\alpha = .91$).

Results

All analyses in this article were conducted using R v. 4.5.1 (R Core Team, 2025) in the lme4 (Bates et al., 2015) and lmerTest packages (Kuznetsova et al., 2017). We ran multilevel models with participants nested in couples, specifying random intercepts and fixed slopes. We examined speaker and listener hope as simultaneous predictors of speaker's goal outcomes concurrently after the lab and longitudinally at the follow-up survey. Speaker and listener hope were grand-mean centered on the sample mean. Participants were removed from the longitudinal analysis if they reported at follow-up that they did not remember the goal they discussed in the lab ($N = 66$), leaving a final sample of 333 participants for the longitudinal model.[4]

After the lab discussion, hopeful speakers reported more adaptive goal appraisals, including higher challenge ($b = 0.40$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$) and lower threat appraisals ($b = -0.43$, $SE = 0.12$, $p < .001$) and higher goal integration ($b = 0.30$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$). Three months later, hopeful speakers reported greater progress on the goal they discussed, controlling for any initial progress made on this goal as reported in the lab ($b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .03$). There were no significant partner effects of listener relational hope on speaker goal outcomes. In summary, relational hope predicted intrapersonal goal benefits, including viewing one's goal more positively concurrently in the lab and making more progress on this goal 3 months later.[5]

Next, we tested if relational hope captures something unique beyond relationship satisfaction by reconducting all models controlling for speaker's relationship satisfaction at the start of the lab session. Importantly, all effects of relational hope on goal outcomes concurrently and longitudinally remained unchanged when accounting for relationship satisfaction, $|.15| \leq bs \geq |.42|$, all ps $< .03$. These results indicate that relational hope provides unique benefits for goal pursuit that cannot be accounted for by how satisfied one is in the relationship.

Study 2: The Dyadic Effects of Relational Hope During Goal Pursuit Over Time

In Study 2, we sought to test the benefits of relational hope outside of the lab, as people pursue multiple relationship goals naturalistically over time. In a 3-month longitudinal design, we tested if relational hope at Time 1 (T1) predicted various aspects of goal pursuit (i.e., goal progress, goal appraisals, and goal integration) at Time 2 (T2) and if these factors promoted distinct indices of relationship well-being (i.e., satisfaction, conflict management, and commitment) at Time 3 (T3). We also conducted content coding to explore the types of relationship goals people hold and tested how key goal characteristics may influence the effects of relational hope.

Prior to Study 2, we developed and validated the Relational Hope Scale. We report this research in the additional online material (https://osf.io/uwf5n/overview), including item development and refinement, measure invariance, and convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity. The developed measure included 15 items (Table 1) which demonstrated invariance across key demographic groups (e.g., sexual orientation, relationship status), was related to conceptually similar personality (e.g., self-efficacy, optimism) and relationship (e.g., trust, growth beliefs) measures, and unrelated to conceptually distinct measures (e.g., self-consciousness).

Participants and Procedure

We first conducted an a priori power analysis for an actor-partner interdependence model with indistinguishable dyads (Ackerman & Kenny, 2016). To achieve a power of 0.80, 159 couples were needed for detecting a partner effect size of $B = 0.15$, and 59 couples were needed for detecting an actor effect of $B = 0.25$. The target sample size was 175 couples to account for attrition during the study. We initially recruited 173 couples from Research Match, a volunteer platform for research participation. At T1, responses were removed if only one partner completed the survey ($N = 6$), free responses were identical across partners ($N = 10$), or answers in the key goal identification task were incomplete ($N = 2$), resulting in $N_{final} = 164$ couples ($N = 328$). Participants were 35.74 years old on average ($SD = 12.81$). The sample was 46.34% female, 45.73% male, 4.57% nonbinary, 2.13% transgender male or female, and four participants identified as another gender identity. The sample was 78.05% White; 8.84% bi- or multiracial; 4.88% Black or African American; 4.57% Hispanic, Spanish, or Latin American; and 3.66% Asian. The majority were in a monogamous marriage (53.35%) or relationship (40.85%), with some in a polyamorous or open marriage or relationship (5.79%). Couples were together on average for 9.86 years ($SD = 10.80$).

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[4] To ensure our longitudinal effects were not biased based on the portion of the sample we included versus excluded, we tested whether those who remembered their goal in the follow-up survey versus those who did not differed on key variables. We found that these groups did not significantly differ in baseline (lab) levels of hope ($b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .82$) or baseline (lab) levels of goal importance ($b = -0.14$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .20$).

[5] Although we did not have all relationship outcomes variables needed to test the full proposed models from Figure 1, we were able to test the model from relational hope to goal progress and relationship satisfaction. We found that speaker relational hope predicted higher speaker relationship satisfaction 3 months later, but the mediation via goal progress was not significant (see the additional online material at https://osf.io/uwf5n/overview).

Table 1
Relational Hope Scale Items

Item
1. I am committed to continually growing and improving my relationship.
2. I am willing to put in the work for my partner and relationship.
3. I am motivated to do what it takes to make my relationship thrive.
4. I will do whatever I can to help my relationship grow.
5. I am committed to building a strong and healthy romantic relationship.
6. I have the skillset to help me handle challenges in my relationship.
7. I can shift my perspective when faced with challenges in my relationship.
8. I often use new approaches to improve my relationship.
9. I am creative in finding new solutions to relationship challenges.
10. There are lots of ways around any problem in my relationship.
11. The trajectory of my relationship feels promising.
12. I feel secure knowing that my partner and I will make it through hard times.
13. I envision a positive road ahead for me and my partner.
14. A positive future with my partner feels attainable.
15. I feel secure in the future of my relationship.

Note. Item Numbers 1–5 capture relational agency, Numbers 6–10 capture relational pathways, and Numbers 11–15 capture relational aspirations. Item No. 3 was also included in the Study 1 relational hope items.

First, we conducted Zoom calls with interested couples from Research Match. This allowed the research team to confirm participants were in a relationship and encouraged participants' long-term interest and retention in the study. Participants then completed three surveys online over 3 months. In the first survey, they completed a goal identification task and described three short-term goals for their relationship. We defined these goals as an area in their relationship on which they would like to focus their energy or attention and must be something that would affect their relationship or partner. This task was piloted beforehand to ensure it was feasible for participants to identify three relationship goals that they could work toward during the 3-month time frame of our study (see the additional online material at https://osf.io/uwf5n/overview). Then, participants completed a second survey 90 days later (T2) and a third survey 1 week after the second survey (T3).[6] The spacing between surveys was chosen for theoretical reasons based on prior research examining hope and goal pursuit (Feldman et al., 2009). Specifically, a 3-month time frame between T1 and T2 was chosen to allow individuals enough time to work toward their goals. The 1-week time frame between T2 and T3 was selected because we predicted that the goal processes would boost well-being in the shorter term or more proximally to the changes in goal processes. For participant retention, 88% of the sample completed the survey (or a shortened survey with all key measures from this study) at T2, and 89% completed the survey at T3. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the university's research subjects review board. Our hypotheses and analysis plan were preregistered on the Open Science Framework, posted along with code and anonymized data (available upon request) at https://osf.io/uwf5n/overview (Shimshock & Le, 2026).

Measures

For each measure, items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and averaged into a composite unless indicated otherwise. For goal measures, participants' descriptions of each goal from T1 was piped into later survey waves so they could remember and report on each goal.

Relational Hope. Participants completed the 15-item Relational Hope Scale to assess relational hope ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 0.65$, $\alpha = .90$) at T1. See Table 1 for the full item list.

Goal Progress. Participants reported on their progress for each of the three goals with three items (Feldman et al., 2009): "Overall, how successful do you think you have been in pursuing this goal thus far?" from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*completely*), "I have put in a lot of effort in pursuing this goal," and "Please indicate the percent of progress you have currently made toward achieving this goal" from 0% (*none at all*) to 100% (*I have completely achieved this goal*) in 10% increments. Items were standardized prior to creating a composite score ($M = 0.00$, $SD = 0.65$, $\alpha = .61$) at T2.

Goal Appraisals. Participants reported on their goal appraisals for each of the three goals with three items for challenge appraisals (e.g., "I view this goal as a positive challenge") and three items for threat appraisals (e.g., "Pursuing this goal may pose some threats to me"; Kavussanu et al., 2014; Ptacek et al., 1994). Challenge ($M = 5.93$, $SD = 0.65$, $\alpha = .80$ at T2) and threat appraisals ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.67$, $\alpha = .84$ at T2) were tested separately given their correlation did not exceed our preregistered cutoff of $r = -0.60$ ($r = -0.23$ at T2).

Goal Integration. Participants reported on their goal integration for each of the three goals with three items for integration with ideal future self (e.g., "This goal brings me closer to who I want to be in the future") and three items for future relationship (e.g., "This goal will help me achieve my ideal relationship"; Sheldon & Emmons, 1995). Items were combined into a total goal integration composite ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 0.81$, $\alpha = .61$ at T2) given that the correlation between self and relationship items met our preregistered cutoff of $r = 0.60$ ($r = 0.76$ at T2).

Relationship Satisfaction. Participants reported on their relationship satisfaction with the 16-item Couples Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007). A sample item includes "Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of

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[6] Another survey was completed in between the first and second surveys. However, this survey was not included in our preregistered analysis plan as we wanted to examine longer term changes in goal pursuit.

your relationship" from "extremely unhappy" to "perfect." Scale anchors were used from the original scale article. Items were summed into a total score ($M = 70.73$, $SD = 29.91$, $\alpha = .97$) at T3.

Conflict Management. Participants completed the 16-item Relationship Accommodation Scale (Rusbult et al., 1986) to assess conflict management. Eight items measure destructive strategies (e.g., "When we have problems, I discuss ending our relationship"), and eight items measure constructive strategies (e.g., "When my partner and I have problems, I discuss things with them"). Constructive ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 0.71$, $\alpha = .63$ at T3) and destructive strategies ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 0.94$, $\alpha = .83$ at T3) were tested as separate outcomes given their correlation did not exceed our preregistered cutoff of $r = -0.60$ ($r = -0.46$ at T3).

Commitment. Participants responded to eight items assessing commitment from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). A sample item includes "I want our relationship to last for a very long time" ($M = 6.53$, $SD = 0.81$, $\alpha = .90$ at T3).

Results

We tested the longitudinal associations of relational hope with goal processes and relationship well-being.[7] Specifically, we examined associations between relational hope at T1 with goal mechanisms at T2 and relationship well-being at T3, allowing us to examine the temporal order of effects. Models controlled for the mechanisms and outcomes at T1 so estimates reflected changes in goal and relationship outcomes. We used actor–partner interdependence modeling, simultaneously testing actor and partner relational hope as predictors of actor and partner goal and relationship outcomes. Dyads were treated as indistinguishable, and models specified random intercepts and fixed slopes. Predictors were grand-mean centered on the sample mean. Goal mechanisms were collapsed across the three goals reported and grand-mean centered. In addition, multilevel mediation analyses were conducted using the Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Mediation to generate 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for the indirect effects using 20,000 bootstrapped samples (Selig & Preacher, 2008). Mediation was concluded when the 95% CIs did not include zero.

First, we tested the longitudinal mediation model of relational hope predicting goal progress and relationship satisfaction (Figure 2). Higher actor relational hope predicted increased actor goal progress at T2 but no change in actor relationship satisfaction at T3. Greater actor goal progress at T2 predicted increased actor relationship satisfaction at T3. There was not a significant indirect effect of actor relational hope on actor relationship satisfaction via goal progress (95% CI [−20.90, 18.45]), and there were no significant effects on partner outcomes.

Second, we tested the longitudinal mediation model of relational hope predicting goal appraisals and conflict management. We tested two models with constructive (Figure 3) and destructive (Figure 4) conflict strategies as separate outcomes given that their correlation did not meet our preregistered cutoff ($r = -0.60$) for creating a composite. For the same reason, we tested challenge and threat appraisals as separate simultaneous mediators. Higher actor relational hope predicted increased actor *and* partner goal challenge appraisals at T2. There was no effect on goal threat appraisals. Higher actor relational hope also predicted increased actor constructive conflict and decreased destructive conflict at T3 for actors but not their partners. Actor goal challenge appraisal at

T2 was related to increased actor constructive conflict at T3, whereas actor goal threat appraisal at T2 was related to increased destructive conflict at T3. The indirect effects of actor relational hope on actor destructive conflict via goal challenge or threat appraisals were nonsignificant (95% CIs [−0.01, 0.01] and [−0.03, .01], respectively). There was a significant indirect effect of actor relational hope on actor constructive conflict via goal challenge appraisal (95% CI [0.004, 0.06]) but not via goal threat appraisal (95% CI [−0.01, 0.01]).

Finally, we tested the longitudinal mediation model of relational hope predicting goal integration and commitment (Figure 5). Higher actor relational hope predicted increased actor, but not partner, goal integration at T2. Higher actor relational hope also predicted increased actor and partner commitment at T3. Actor goal integration at T2 predicted increased actor commitment at T3. There was a significant indirect effect of actor relational hope on actor commitment via goal integration (95% CI [0.001, 0.04]).

To summarize the results of our hypothesized models (Figure 1), we did not find support for the first model; relational hope predicted increased goal progress over time but not higher relationship satisfaction. The second model was partially supported such that those higher in relational hope engaged in more constructive conflict behaviors over time, in part, because they appraised their goals in a more adaptive way. However, the pathway to destructive conflict behaviors was not supported. The third model was supported such that those higher in relational hope were more committed to their relationship, in part, because they viewed their relationship goals as more integral to their desired future. Finally, turning to the partner benefits, relational hope predicted partner increased goal challenge appraisals and increased commitment over time but did not predict other hypothesized goal and relationship outcomes.

Accounting for Alternative Explanations

Next, we again tested the robustness of our findings against alternative explanations. As in Study 1, we first tested whether relational hope captures something unique beyond feeling satisfied in one's relationship. We also tested whether the findings were robust against optimism to ensure our results cannot be explained by having a general positive future orientation. We reconducted the longitudinal analyses while controlling for actor's relationship satisfaction at T1[8] in one set of models and actor's optimism at T1 in a separate set of models. The full results are in the additional online material (https://osf.io/uwf5n/overview), with a brief summary

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[7] We initially preregistered hypotheses examining three facets of hope (i.e., agency, pathways, and aspirations) as unique predictors of goal and relationship outcomes. However, the facets of hope were highly correlated ($0.46 \leq rs \leq 0.52$, $ps < .001$), leading to unstable results when entering all six actor and partner facets of relational hope as predictors in a single model. We instead report results using composite measures of actor and partner global relational hope. Nonetheless, we report results from the models as initially preregistered in the additional online material (https://osf.io/uwf5n/overview).

[8] Although relationship satisfaction was a key outcome in our theoretical model, we thought it was important to also treat as a control variable. We did this to ensure that the benefits of relational hope are not an artifact of generally feeling satisfied in one's relationship, such that satisfied people feel more hopeful or report better goal and relationship outcomes. The model predicting goal progress and relationship satisfaction remains unchanged since the original model already controls for T1 relationship satisfaction to model change over time.

Figure 2

*Relational Hope Predicting Goal Progress and Relationship Satisfaction Over Time*
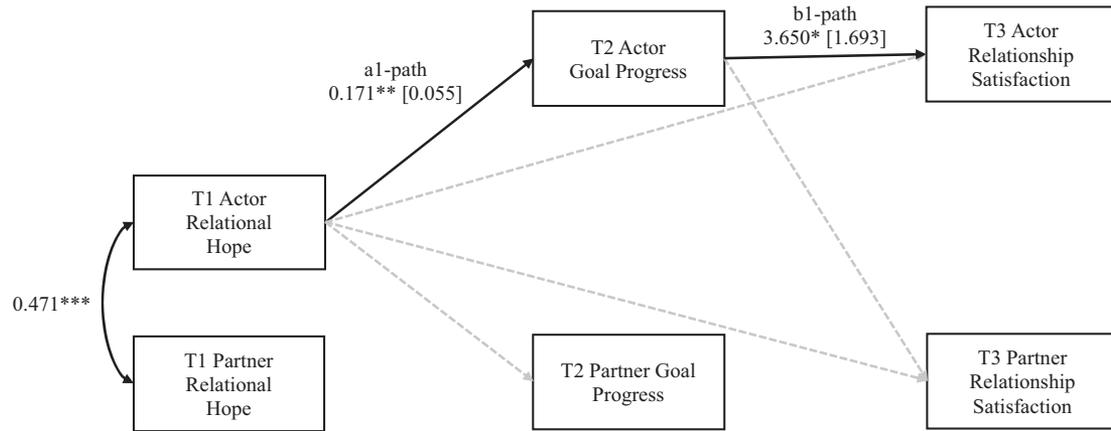
Note. Models control for T1 actor and partner goal progress and actor relationship satisfaction. Values indicate unstandardized multilevel coefficients and standard errors (in brackets). The value on the curved arrow is a correlation. Black solid arrows indicate significant paths, while gray dashed arrows indicate nonsignificant paths. T = time.
* $p < .05$.   ** $p < .01$.   *** $p < .001$.

reported here. Controlling for optimism did not meaningfully change any conclusions about the actor or partner effects of hope on goal or relationship outcomes. When controlling for relationship satisfaction, the majority of the actor effects of relational hope remained robust, but the partner effects became nonsignificant. Finally, the majority of the mediation models held, indicating that relational hope predicted relationship benefits via goal processes even when accounting for relationship satisfaction or optimism.
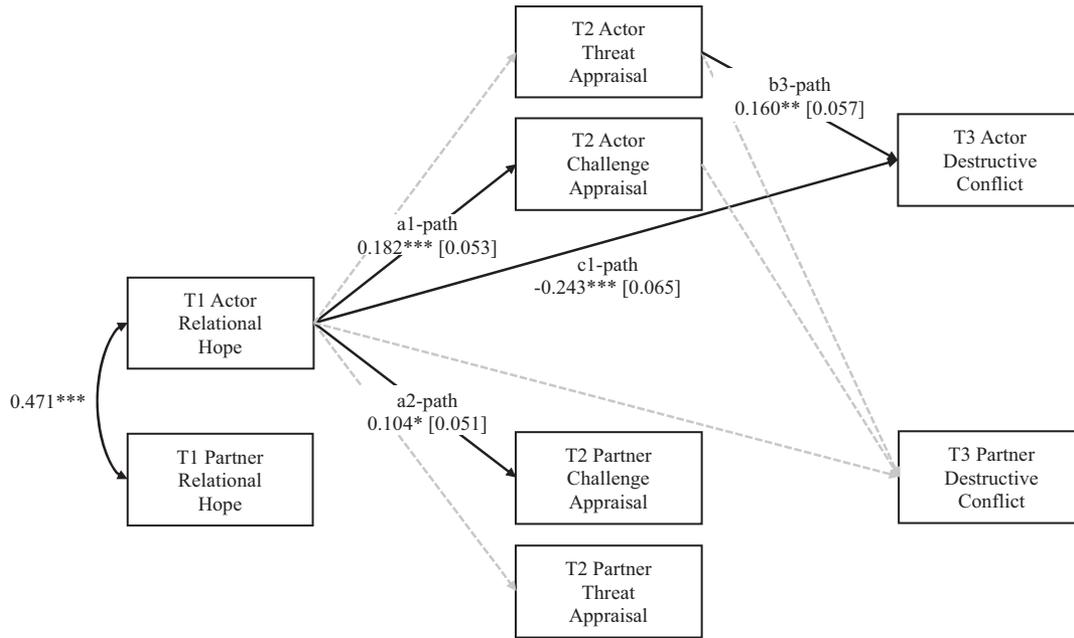
Figure 3

Relational Hope Predicting Goal Appraisals and Constructive Conflict Over Time
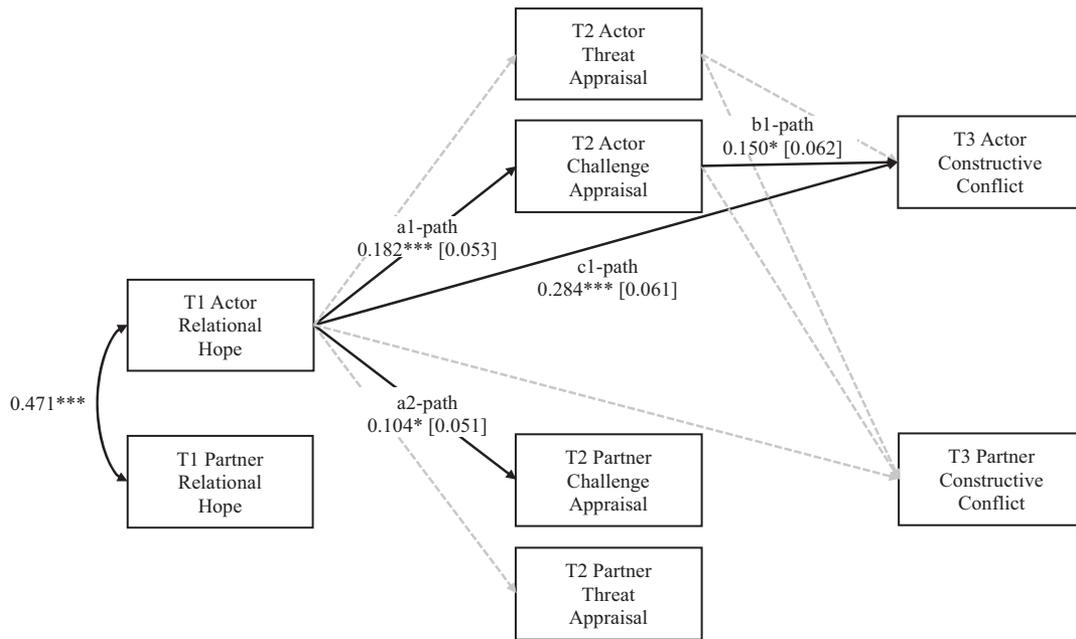
Note. Models control for T1 actor and partner goal challenge and threat appraisals and actor constructive conflict. Values indicate unstandardized multilevel coefficients and standard errors (in brackets). The value on the curved arrow is a correlation. Black solid arrows indicate significant paths, while gray dashed arrows indicate nonsignificant paths. T = time.
* $p < .05$.   *** $p < .001$.

Figure 4

*Relational Hope Predicting Goal Appraisals and Destructive Conflict Over Time*

Note. Models control for T1 actor and partner goal challenge and threat appraisals and actor destructive conflict. Values indicate unstandardized multilevel coefficients and standard errors (in brackets). The value on the curved arrow is a correlation. Black solid arrows indicate significant paths, while gray dashed arrows indicate nonsignificant paths. T = time.
* $p < .05.$ ** $p < .01.$ *** $p < .001.$

Exploring the Role of Goal Characteristics

To provide more context into the role of relational hope in goal pursuit, we conducted further analyses exploring types of relationship goals and their characteristics. First, given the multitude of goals reported in Study 2, we conducted qualitative content coding to identify broader organizing themes of people's relationship goals. We first used ChatGPT (GPT-5; OpenAI, 2025) to generate common themes for relationship goals, which provided a starting list of nine themes (V. V. Lee et al., 2024). After reading the first 40 participant goal responses, the first author revised and condensed this list into seven final themes with an additional "other" category added. Two

Figure 5

Relational Hope Predicting Goal Integration and Commitment Over Time
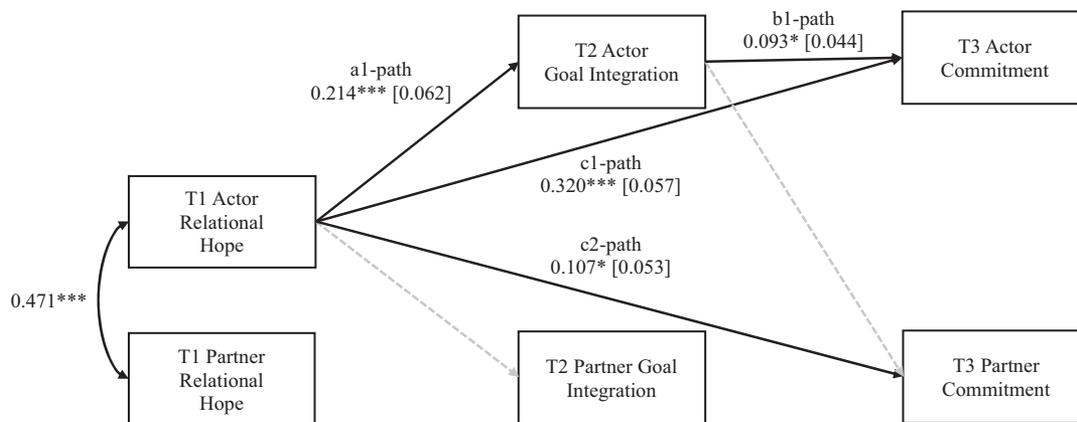
Note. Models control for T1 actor and partner goal integration and actor commitment. Values indicate unstandardized multilevel coefficients and standard errors (in brackets). The value on the curved arrow is a bivariate correlation. Black solid arrows indicate significant paths, while gray dashed arrows indicate nonsignificant paths. T = time.
* $p < .05.$ *** $p < .001.$

research assistants then rated all 975 goals; intercoder reliability was good ($\kappa = 0.75$). The first author resolved any discrepancies in coding and calculated total frequencies (Table 2). Participants reported a diverse array of relationship goals, from wanting to improve communication during conflict to increasing sexual intimacy.

To further explore these relationship goals, we conducted quantitative analyses to examine how key goal characteristics may influence our results. First, we tested whether the benefits of relational hope could be explained by hopeful people simply holding more important goals or setting goals that were easier to accomplish. We conducted control analyses accounting for self-reported goal importance (e.g., "How important is this goal to you in your life?") and goal difficulty (e.g., "This goal will take a lot of work"), which were rated for each of the three goals reported. People higher in relational hope rated their goals, on average, as more important ($b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .003$) and as less difficult to attain ($b = -0.14$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .031$). Nonetheless, after controlling for these positive goal qualities, all effects of relational hope on goal and relationship outcomes still held (full results in the additional online material at https://osf.io/uwf5n/overview).

Next, we examined whether the benefits of actor or partner relational hope depend on whether a goal is *shared* between partners. For example, the benefits of relational hope may be amplified for goals that are shared by both partners compared to goals held by one individual. We reran all models testing the interactions between actor and partner relational hope with actor self-reports of whether the goal is shared at T1 (i.e., "Does your partner also share this goal?") using a single dummy-coded variable (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no or unsure*). Out of all goals reported, 57.3% of goals were shared,

36.4% of goals were rated as unsure, and 6.3% of goals were not shared. We did not find any significant interactions between relational hope and shared goals predicting goal outcomes at T2, indicating that relational hope benefitted goal pursuit equivalently for both individual and shared relationship goals.

Discussion

In the current research, we tested whether relational hope may help couples navigate the ups and downs of their relationship by promoting striving toward relationship goals now and into the future. In Study 1, we found that higher relational hope was associated with short- and long-term goal benefits after a discussion with a partner in the lab, with these benefits largely being intrapersonal. In Study 2, we found that these goal benefits extended to building stronger relationships over time. In particular, people higher in relational hope were more likely to view their goals more positively over time, which predicted greater relationship well-being. The intrapersonal benefits of relational hope for one's own outcomes were mostly distinct from relationship satisfaction and optimism. Furthermore, relational hope benefitted goal pursuit regardless of the characteristics of the goal.

Using a novel theoretical model of relational hope, we identified benefits of hope for the pursuit of partner-focused or relationship goals. Relational hope is energizing, promoting action and efforts to maintain and improve one's relationship through pursuing important goals and changes. We found that people who feel relationally hopeful viewed their relationship goals more positively and were more likely to achieve these goals over time. There was also some

Table 2
Themes of Relationship Goals From Study 2

Theme	%	Example
Quality time, shared activities, and leisure	20	– Making more time for each other, especially without distractions (e.g., phones, kids) – Developing shared hobbies or interests – Planning a vacation together
Family and life planning	16	– Planning a move or relocating together – Advancing the relationship (e.g., marriage proposal) – Preparation to have children
Personal growth within the relationship	14	– Advancing personal goals within the relationship (e.g., exercising together, eating healthier) – Advancing professional goals within the relationship (e.g., supporting a partner's education or career change) – Navigating own or partner's insecurities, bad habits, or mental health challenges
Communication and conflict management	13	– Being more patient – Controlling one's temper – Setting up weekly check-ins to communicate
Practical issues and day-to-day functioning	13	– Coordinating finances or budgeting – Household tasks and division of labor – Changes to daily schedules (e.g., cooking meals, work–life balance)
Emotional intimacy, support, and care	11	– Being more open in sharing emotions and needs – Rebuilding trust – Small things (e.g., notes) to show love and care
Sexual and physical intimacy	8	– Improving quantity or quality of sexual activity – Navigating discrepancies in sexual desire or interests – Increasing affectionate touch
Other	5	– Finding new friends or community – Spirituality or religion (e.g., finding a new church) – Navigating new relationship structures (e.g., nonmonogamy)

evidence that relational hope may be a shared resource across partners' goal pursuits. Namely, for those higher in relational hope, both they and their partner felt a more positive, challenge-like state in pursuing their relationship goals. It could be that relational hope helps both partners frame their goals more adaptively as partners can capitalize on shared knowledge, skills, and resources within the couple unit to accomplish their goals (Fitzsimons et al., 2015; Kappes & Thomsen, 2020). However, we did not find evidence that relational hope was beneficial for any other factors of a partner's goal pursuit, such as goal progress. It is likely that individuals' own level of hope is most consequential when they are pursuing goals in day-to-day life, even among relationship goals that affect both partners.

We also found that those higher in relational hope experienced better relationship well-being, including better conflict management and stronger commitment. Instead of passively wishing for relationship problems to disappear, hopeful individuals actively work toward resolving conflict in their relationship, echoing findings from the relationship confidence literature (Hardy et al., 2015; Vennum & Fincham, 2011). Relational hope may be an important factor to help navigate conflict as those who are relationally hopeful may prioritize what is best for the relationship, rather than focusing on one's own self-interest (Merolla & Harman, 2018). Additionally, for individuals hopeful about their relationship, both they and their partners reported feeling more committed to their relationship in the long term. Relational hope may act as an important signal among romantic partners about one's investment and dedication to the relationship through the ups and downs that may occur, aligning with previous work on trust and commitment (Arriaga et al., 2006; Lemay, 2016).

Finally, the current work is novel in demonstrating goal pursuit as the mechanism through which hopeful individuals experience boosts to relationship well-being over time. That is, individuals who feel hopeful about their relationship not only believe their future will be bright, but they actively build this brighter future through pursuing important goals to benefit their relationship. However, we did not find evidence that goal progress was a mechanism through which hopeful partners felt higher relationship satisfaction. It is possible that making progress on relationship goals would have more localized benefits, beyond general satisfaction, but rather in the domain that the goal is targeted to address. For example, making progress on goals to pursue more shared activities, such as planning a new vacation, could provide direct benefits for couples' self-expansion, whereas progressing on goals to improve communication could provide more direct benefits to conflict management.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current work offers an initial test of the benefits of relational hope among romantic couples, but future work should continue to test the measurement of relational hope and probe its benefits among diverse samples. For example, research may consider whether the three facets of relational agency, pathways, and aspirations can be differentiated by unique benefits (Chang, 2003; Feldman et al., 2009) and how relational hope differs or relates to other relationship constructs (e.g., relationship confidence). Research should also test whether relational hope confers similar benefits as found here among relationships that are underrepresented, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender couples, or interracial couples who may face relationship-based discrimination. Although some research

suggests general hope may be a resiliency factor helping maintain well-being in the face of discrimination (Kwon & Hugelshofer, 2010), other research finds it could be a vulnerability, amplifying connections between discrimination and stress when positive expectations do not match the reality of one's experiences (McDermott et al., 2020). Therefore, further research is needed to elucidate whether relational hope may serve as a protective factor for diverse couples amid external relational threats.

Although the current work established relational hope as a precursor to positive goal outcomes, future work should test whether this is a bidirectional process. Hope is said to work in an iterative process in which the success or failure of one's goals feeds back to inform future hopeful thinking (Feldman et al., 2009; Snyder, 2000, 2002). Therefore, it could be that positive or negative goal and relationship experiences may bolster or diminish future levels of relational hope, respectively. This possibility would be supported by previous work that finds couples' negative interactions forecast lower relationship confidence (Whitton et al., 2007). In addition, future work should test other factors that promote hopefulness in relationships, including the use of psychoeducation and therapy (Cheavens & Whitted, 2023; Snyder, 1994). For example, relationship enrichment counseling, which specifically aims to build hope agency and pathways for the relationship, has been effective in promoting relationship skills and satisfaction (Worthington et al., 1997). In turn, boosting relationship skills may be an effective way to foster future hope for the relationship (Hawkins et al., 2017), again suggesting a cyclical process between the two.

Finally, although the current research centered the *benefits* of relational hope, it is important to acknowledge contexts in which the effects of hope could be attenuated, or even costly, for couples (Shimshock & Le, 2022). For example, encountering goal challenges or even failing at a goal is an inevitable part of life. It is possible that those high in relational hope have better recovery and re-engagement with new goal pursuits or, alternatively, they may be vulnerable to heightened distress given they may have developed a stronger attachment to a specific vision for the future. Additionally, the risk of relational hope in the case of maladaptive goals or threatening circumstances should receive further empirical attention. For example, hope may be costly when it keeps people in relationships that are bad for them if they have hope the partner can change (Crapolicchio et al., 2021). Future research should explore these and other potential downsides to provide a more balanced perspective of when relational hope is beneficial versus costly (McNulty, 2010).

Conclusion

Overall, the current work highlights the benefits of relational hope for building healthy couple relationships through pursuing relationship goals. Individuals who were hopeful about their relationship made advances in relational goal pursuit, viewing these goals more positively and making increased progress over time. In turn, these goal benefits predicted effective conflict management and strengthened commitment over time. These beneficial effects could not be fully explained by simply feeling more optimistic or more satisfied with one's relationship. Altogether, this work suggests that relational hope may be a positive resource to help couples pursue desired relational outcomes and achieve enduring bonds.

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