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# Being Me While Loving You: The Role of Autonomy in the Association Between Insecure Attachment and Relationship Satisfaction

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## ABSTRACT

One way that couples can maintain relationship satisfaction is by acting according to who they are, or autonomously, within their romantic relationships. However, feeling autonomous can be challenging for romantic partners, especially those with attachment insecurities. In two dyadic and longitudinal studies, we tested whether the daily feeling of being autonomous within romantic relationships accounted for associations between attachment insecurities and daily and over time relationship satisfaction in long-term romantic relationships. Across both studies, dyadic mediation models showed that people higher in attachment avoidance reported less daily autonomy in their relationships and, in turn, reported lower relationship satisfaction daily and 3-months later. In Study 2, people higher in attachment anxiety reported less daily autonomy in their relationships and this was associated with lower satisfaction, both daily and over time. Findings highlight the role of autonomy as one explanation for the lower levels of relationship satisfaction among insecure romantic partners.

According to self-determination theory (SDT), the autonomy need (i.e., feeling free to be one's true self) within a relationship is essential for the maintenance of a satisfying romantic relationship (Deci and Ryan 2000). Many theories suggest that relationship maintenance is linked, in part, to a person's ability to experience autonomy in their relationship (e.g., attachment theory, Bowlby 1969; SDT, R. M. Ryan and Deci 2000; self-expansion theory, Aron and Aron 1986). Yet, feeling autonomous in relationships can be challenging (Patrick et al. 2007), particularly for people with attachment insecurities (i.e., high avoidant or anxious attachment). At times, autonomous pursuits, such as spending time in a way that expresses one's true self (e.g., watching a hockey game), might be compromised over

other relatedness goals (McClure and Lydon 2018), such as wanting to spend time with a partner who does not want to watch the game. However, when both partners can be autonomous in their relationship (i.e., want to watch the hockey game together), they tend to report greater relationship satisfaction (Patrick et al. 2007).

People with attachment insecurities tend to be challenged in feeling that they can act autonomously in a relationship—possibly because it is not clear what their “true Self” is (the formation of their identity being thwarted by their developmental history) or because they do not feel comfortable expressing their true self in their relationships (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016).

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Those who are high in attachment anxiety or avoidance also tend to report lower relationship satisfaction (Feeney 2016). Examining whether autonomy may explain the associations between attachment insecurities and lower relationship satisfaction would improve the current theoretical understanding of why insecure partners are less satisfied in their relationships on a day-to-day basis and over time. Autonomy issues are frequent reasons to seek couple therapy (Anderson 2020; Doss et al. 2004). Although attachment insecurities are risk factors to low relationship satisfaction, they are not easy to change (Fraley et al. 2013). However, daily autonomy—as a mediator between attachment insecurities and relationship satisfaction—could represent a key factor on which interventions would have direct effects (MacKinnon et al. 2000). In the present study, we examined the associations between romantic partners' attachment insecurities and the daily feeling of being autonomous to predict daily and over time relationship satisfaction in two samples of long-term couples.

## 1 | Feeling Autonomous Within a Relationship

Autonomy need refers to the degree to which a person's behavior is initiated by one's true self and to the degree to which a person feels free to act according to their interests, values, and personality (Deci and Ryan 2002). SDT suggests that the *true self* involves acting in a way that is internally motivated and personally meaningful (W. S. Ryan and Ryan 2019). Autonomy does not mean independence (R. M. Ryan and Deci 2000). SDT argues that people can be autonomously independent, dependent, or interdependent in different contexts (W. S. Ryan and Ryan 2019). Autonomy does “not entail being subject to no external influences (...), rather, it concerns whether following external inputs reflects mere obedience or whether it reflects an acceptance and valuing of the direction or guidance that these inputs provide” (R. M. Ryan and Deci 2000, p. 57). For example, a man engaged in a relationship can express a different opinion during a negotiation with his partner and then let go of his initial opinion and be autonomous at the same time if it reflects a process of acceptance—and not mere submission—on his part. In fact, Lenton et al. (2016) found that being autonomous does not mean rejecting external influences. In their study, accepting external influence was related to an increased experience of authenticity. Knee et al. (2005) found that one's own and one's partner's relationship autonomy was associated with relationship satisfaction through defensive responses to conflict. In other words, an individual is less likely to be defensive after a conflict with their partner if they and their partner have higher levels of relationship autonomy, which is positively associated with relationship satisfaction.

In the long tradition of family research, the capacity *to be an individual while being part of a group* has been an important component of relationship functioning (Kerr and Bowen 1988). Romantic relationships are inherently different than any other type of relationships (e.g., degree of intimacy and sexual experiences, Weinstein et al. 2016), and people tend to act more authentically with their friends and their romantic partners than in other relationships or roles (Sheldon and Krieger 2014). People with high levels of autonomy are more responsive, less defensive, and engage in healthier ways with their partner

around differences and disagreements (see Anderson 2020 for a review), which is in line with the predictions of SDT (accepting influence, open to differences, and better self-reflection, W. S. Ryan and Ryan 2019). Removing constraints, coercion, or pressure will not guarantee an autonomous functioning (W. S. Ryan and Ryan 2019) and understanding those additional inhibitors (e.g., attachment insecurities) can give us opportunities to appreciate autonomy resilience—when individuals remain autonomous despite their unsupportive environments. Past work has shown that even if relatedness goals can be positively associated with autonomous goal satisfaction, over time and with limited resources, it is the autonomous pursuits that will be foregone (McClure and Lydon 2018). Indeed, the need to be in a relationship and feeling autonomous can be complementary, but also antagonistic (Hadden and Girme 2020). In other words, although most people seek to be themselves in their relationship (Deci and Ryan 2000), they may experience tension in acting according to who they really are while being in a relationship (Girme et al. 2019). For example, revealing one's true self within romantic relationships may expose romantic partners to the relational risks of conflict and rejection, which might involve making compromises that can threaten a person's autonomy (Kluwer et al. 2020). As suggested by McClure and Lydon (2018), it is possible that the repeated and continued prioritization of relatedness goals over autonomous pursuits would lead to less desirable outcomes for partners, such as low relationship satisfaction, considering that both autonomy and relatedness needs satisfaction are equally important for well-being (Deci and Ryan 2002).

Whereas past cross-sectional research has examined feelings of autonomy in a way that implied a certain stability over time (e.g., Patrick et al. 2007), feeling autonomous can also fluctuate on a day-to-day basis. One day, the couple's preferred decision might make feel both partners autonomous (i.e., when both partners feel that the decision reflects their internal values, personality, and interests), and on another day, one partner might feel that the decision does not reflect what they want and still goes with the decision to make a compromise. In fact, fluctuations in daily feelings of autonomy in relationships have previously been associated with daily personal well-being (Reis et al. 2000). Anderson (2020) emphasized the importance of studying autonomy in relationships, given that the bulk of the research has traditionally focused on factors related to the partner, such as relatedness, closeness, or connectedness. According to SDT (La Guardia and Patrick 2008; R. M. Ryan and Deci 2000), romantic partners have to feel connected, but they also need to “feel autonomous” to feel satisfied or well in their relationships. Thus, examining the daily feeling of being autonomous in relationships would advance the current understanding of who is happier—or less happy—daily and over time in their relationships, while helping to identify who might be particularly challenged by this feeling.

Attachment theory (Bowlby 1969) recognizes the importance of being autonomous to foster well-being and growth. The attachment behavioral system helps provide protection and security from infancy to older age and helps seek protection and support from an attachment figure when needed (secure base). If the system's goal is attained (proximity-seeking as a primary and successful strategy), the individuals can explore their

environment and get to know themselves better (i.e., autonomy). Indeed, Hadden et al. (2015) found that autonomy support—encouraging partner to express their values and opinions and to pursue their choices with minimal pressure and coercion—provided by a secure base is related to the partner's autonomy need satisfaction. However, when an attachment figure (the romantic partner during adulthood, Hazan and Shaver 1987) does not provide consistent support, the person is prone to develop attachment insecurities (Bowlby 1969; Mikulincer and Shaver 2016). Attachment anxiety is characterized by the attachment system's chronic hyperactivation that is evidenced by hypervigilance to rejection cues, fear of abandonment, and overdependency toward a partner. In contrast, attachment avoidance is characterized by the attachment system's chronic deactivation that is evidenced by a denial of emotional needs, a discomfort with emotional proximity, and a compulsive self-reliance (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016).

Because attachment anxiety involves hypervigilance toward attachment figures and fears of abandonment, anxious individuals may prioritize their relationship over self-exploration. Partners of people high on attachment anxiety may also experience intrusive or coercive reassurance-seeking behaviors, which can further diminish their own autonomous feeling (Lavy et al. 2013). In a dyadic study on attachment and need fulfillment, Hadden et al. (2016) found that individuals partnered with an anxiously attached person reported feeling more connected to their partner, but their own autonomy tended to be lowered. Conversely, attachment avoidance is characterized by the denial of one's emotional needs. Although autonomy involves acting in line with one's true self and acknowledging one's emotional experience (including vulnerability), avoidant individuals may deny or suppress their core needs (e.g., support and reassurance) to protect themselves from hurt. Their partners may also feel less autonomous, as avoidant individuals often avoid negative emotions, leaving them to face their own emotional experiences alone (see Mikulincer and Shaver 2016 for a review). However, Hadden et al. (2016) found that when a romantic partner is more avoidant, individuals also report more autonomy while feeling less connected to their partner.

In general, insecure individuals (avoidant or anxious) are less satisfied with their romantic relationships (see Feeney 2016; Mikulincer and Shaver 2016, for reviews), but the daily reports of individuals higher in anxiety are less consistent. For example, in a dyadic study of cohabiting and noncohabiting couples ( $M$  relationship duration = 4 years), avoidantly attached individuals reported lower relationship quality over a 21-day period, whereas anxiously attached individuals reported higher relationship quality (Stanton et al. 2017). In contrast, other dyadic studies have shown lower levels of daily relationship satisfaction for more anxiously attached individuals in the early stages of a relationship (Jakubiak and Feeney 2016; Lavy et al. 2013), a period characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and ambivalence. In other words, the relationship satisfaction of more anxiously attached individuals tends to fluctuate at different time points in the relationship (Campbell et al. 2005). Given that the feeling of being autonomous in one's relationship also fluctuates, it is important to explore how insecure attachment relates to daily autonomy and whether lower autonomy is one explanation for reduced daily and over time relationship

satisfaction time—an understanding that can ultimately support clinicians working with individuals and couples facing relational challenges.

## 2 | The Present Study

In two dyadic and longitudinal studies, we aimed to test whether feeling autonomous in daily life explains the associations between attachment insecurities and relationship satisfaction, both in daily experiences and over time, in long-term romantic relationships. Daily diary designs have multiple advantages for providing insight into couples' relationship satisfaction as they: (1) allow researchers to evaluate more dynamic aspects of interpersonal relationships that are susceptible to fluctuations over a short period of time, (2) obtain more precise information about specific contextual factors modulating the assessment, and (3) minimize recall biases related to retrospective measures (Laurenceau and Bolger 2005). Longitudinal designs are also advantageous as they allow researchers to assess the persistence of effects. Two studies were thus designed to help clarify whether feeling autonomous in a relationship at a daily level may explain associations between attachment insecurities and relationship satisfaction, both daily and 3-months later.

## 3 | Study 1

In Study 1, we tested the actor hypothesis that people higher in attachment anxiety or avoidance would be less likely to feel autonomous in their daily interactions with their partner and, in turn, would report lower relationship satisfaction (daily and over time). We also tested the partner hypothesis, that people with partners higher in attachment insecurities would be less likely to feel autonomous, which, in turn, would explain their lower relationship satisfaction (daily and over time).

### 3.1 | Method

#### 3.1.1 | Participants

Participants were recruited through online (e.g., Reddit, Kijiji, Facebook, and Craigslist) and physical (e.g., Canadian university campuses and public transportation centers) advertisements in Canada and the United States. Our final sample consisted of 121 couples (113 mixed-gender couples and 18 same-gender couples) and 46.7% were married. See Table 1 for demographic details. Post hoc power analyses for multilevel studies (Kleiman 2021) indicated that with 242 participants and 5082 days, we had 99% power to detect a small effect.

#### 3.1.2 | Procedure

To take part in this study, both partners had to agree to participate. Couples were prescreened for eligibility via email and telephone. Eligible couples were currently living together or seeing each other at least 5 days/week, sexually active, 18 years

**TABLE 1** | Descriptive statistics of Samples 1 and 2.

Characteristic	Sample 1			Sample 2		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%
Couple duration (years)	4.44	3.46	—	9.24	4.91	—
Age	32.63	10.17	—	31.10	7.44	—
Gender						
Men			47.5			48.7
Women			51.2			51.3
Other			0.8			—
Married	—	—	46.7	—	—	29.9
At least one child	—	—	31.4	—	—	35.4
Ethnicity						
White	—	—	65.3	—	—	94.2
Black	—	—	4.5	—	—	1.2
Latino/Hispanic	—	—	4.1	—	—	3.6
Middle East	—	—	7.4	—	—	1.6
Asian	—	—	8.3	—	—	0.6

Note: Participants in Sample 2 were allowed to identify themselves with more than one ethnicity.

**TABLE 2** | Descriptive statistics and correlations among attachment insecurities, aggregated daily variables, and relationship satisfaction ( $N_1 = 121$  couples;  $N_2 = 154$  couples).

	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Range	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Study 1</i>								
1. Avoidance	2.03 (0.90)	1–7	0.79	<b>0.34***</b>	0.42***	−0.53***	−0.42***	−0.38***
2. Anxiety	3.40 (1.12)	1–7	0.71	0.44***	<b>0.20**</b>	−0.34***	−0.31***	−0.35***
3. Daily autonomy	5.92 (1.11)	1–7	—	−0.30***	−0.28***	<b>0.51***</b>	0.72***	0.48***
4. Daily relationship satisfaction	6.01 (0.89)	1–7	—	−0.36***	−0.27***	0.55***	<b>0.62***</b>	0.61***
5. Follow-up relationship satisfaction	5.97 (1.16)	1–7	0.94	−0.24**	−0.28***	0.28***	0.45***	<b>0.65***</b>
<i>Study 2</i>								
1. Avoidance	2.15 (1.03)	1–7	0.84	<b>0.02</b>	0.08	−0.25***	−0.38***	−0.41***
2. Anxiety	3.51 (1.28)	1–7	0.88	0.20***	<b>0.30***</b>	−0.24***	−0.27***	−0.26***
3. Daily autonomy <sup>a</sup>	2.17 (1.34)	1–10	—	−0.03	−0.25***	<b>0.23***</b>	0.37***	0.35***
4. Daily relationship satisfaction	8.12 (1.48)	1–10	—	−0.22***	−0.26***	0.20***	<b>0.56***</b>	0.61***
5. Follow-up relationship satisfaction	16.05 (2.98)	1–21	0.73	−0.20***	−0.32***	0.12*	0.39***	<b>0.52***</b>

Note: Correlations above the diagonal are between each of the actor variables, and correlations along (in bold) and below the diagonal are between the actor and partner variables.

<sup>a</sup>The item scores were reversed before calculations. Correlations are inflated by the use of daily diaries reports.

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

of age or older, residing in Canada or the United States, able to read and understand English, and had daily access to a computer with internet. Once eligibility and consent were confirmed, each partner completed a 60-min online background survey (Phase 1), followed the next day, by a daily 15-min online survey for 21 consecutive days (Phase 2), and a 20-min online follow-up survey 3-months later (Phase 3). The average number of diaries completed was high ( $M = 18.5$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ ). We compensated each partner up to CAD \$60 for their participation. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of the researchers' institution.

### 3.1.3 | Measures

**3.1.3.1 | Baseline and Follow-Up Surveys.** Table 2 shows the internal consistency coefficients of the measures at baseline and follow-up phases. Attachment insecurities were measured at baseline using the Experiences in Close Relationships Short-Form scale (ECR-S, Wei et al. 2007). This 12-item scale is rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 “disagree strongly” to 7 “agree strongly.” Items were averaged to create a score for anxiety and a score for avoidance, with higher scores indicating higher insecurity. The ECR-S factorial



structure was assessed, and internal consistency was demonstrated (anxiety,  $\alpha = 0.71$ ; avoidance,  $\alpha = 0.84$ ; Wei et al. 2007). Relationship satisfaction was assessed at baseline and 3-months later (follow-up) using the Relationship Satisfaction subscale of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (PRQC, Fletcher et al. 2000). This subscale includes three items rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 “not at all” to 7 “extremely.” Higher scores indicate higher satisfaction. The construct validity and the reliability ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) of the PRQC relationship satisfaction subscale have been demonstrated (Fletcher et al. 2000).

**3.1.3.2 | Daily Diary Surveys.** The daily feeling of being autonomous within the romantic relationship was assessed with the following item, “Today, when I was with my partner, I felt free to be who I am,” adapted for the daily context from the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction Scale (BPNSS, La Guardia et al. 2000). This daily item was rated on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 “not at all true” to 7 “very true,” and it has been validated in the autonomy subscale from the BPNSS to assess the autonomy need (La Guardia et al.) Daily relationship satisfaction was assessed with one item from the PRQC (Fletcher et al. 2000): “Today, how satisfied were you with your relationship?” on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 “not at all” to 7 “extremely.”

## 3.2 | Analyses

Descriptive analyses and bivariate correlations were performed using SPSS 25.0. Multilevel models (MLMs) based on the Actor–Partner Interdependence Mediation Model (APIMeM, Ledermann et al. 2011) were conducted using Mplus Version 8 (Muthén and Muthén 2017). These analyses consider the non-independence of dyadic data, allow us to test both actor and partner effects, and are suited for intensive longitudinal studies (daily diaries, Laurenceau and Bolger 2005). Following Bolger and Laurenceau’s (2013) recommendations for daily dyadic data, we used a two-level MLM in which both partners’ scores were modeled as multivariate outcomes and residual terms were correlated between partners. Because this sample included both same-gender and mixed-gender couples, gender could not distinguish all dyads and no other variable could; thus, dyads were conceptually considered indistinguishable. Daily reports (level-1) were considered as nested within couples (level-2) with each partner being randomly assigned to “partner 1” and “partner 2” and adding equality constraints on all parameters between partners (i.e., variance, actor effects, partner effects, means, and intercepts). Level-2 predictors were grand mean-centered and level-1 predictors were person-mean centered (i.e., centered around each person’s own average). We examined two mediation models of the “daily feeling of being autonomous in the relationship” to explain the associations between both partners’ attachment insecurities and (1) their daily and (2) over time (3-months later) relationship satisfaction. The APIMeM (Ledermann et al. 2011) guided the analyses as we tested indirect actor effects (e.g., the association between one’s own attachment insecurities and own daily and over time relationship satisfaction through their daily feeling of being autonomous), controlling for indirect partner effects (e.g., the association between one’s attachment insecurities and their partners’ daily and over time

relationship satisfaction through their daily feeling of being autonomous), as well as indirect partner effects controlling for indirect actor effects. We also controlled for linear time in the daily relationship satisfaction model, as well as relationship satisfaction at baseline in the model testing relationship satisfaction 3-months later. The multilevel analyses were performed with the maximum likelihood method for parameter estimation with robust standard errors and missing data were handled using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML, Muthén and Muthén 2017). Indirect effects (IEs) were tested according to the Sobel Test (or Delta Method, Sobel 1982).

## 3.3 | Results

The 242 participants (121 couples) individually completed a total of 4746 diaries out of 5082 (242 partners, 21 days) for a completion rate of 93.4%. Out of the 121 couples who completed the daily experience study, 102 couples (84.3%) completed the 3-month follow-up survey. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of all measures (means, standard deviations, bivariate correlations). Correlations showed that a person’s daily feeling of being autonomous was negatively associated with attachment insecurities and was positively associated with both partners’ daily and over time relationship satisfaction.

Preliminary correlations were also conducted between the aggregated mediator (i.e., average feeling of being autonomous across the diaries) and relationship satisfaction outcomes (i.e., aggregated and 3-months later) with sociodemographic variables (i.e., age, relationship length, marital status, and presence of children) to examine the need to control these variables. No demographic variables were significantly associated with the feeling of being autonomous nor with relationship satisfaction ( $p > 0.05$ ). As such, they were not retained in our final models.

### 3.3.1 | Mediation Models

Table 3 shows the IEs’ unstandardized regression coefficients.

Partly consistent with our hypothesis, we found significant indirect “actor effects” indicating that people higher in avoidance are less likely to report feeling autonomous in their daily interactions with their partners, which in turn, is related to their lower level of relationship satisfaction at a daily level ( $IE = -0.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and 3-months later ( $IE = -0.14$ ,  $p = 0.036$ ). We also found an indirect “partner effect” of higher avoidance on their partner’s lower daily relationship satisfaction through their partner’s lower daily autonomy ( $IE = -0.09$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ). That is, higher avoidance is related to the partner’s lower autonomy, and in turn is associated with a lower level of satisfaction for the partner at a daily level. There were no significant IEs for the associations between attachment anxiety and relationship satisfaction.

## 4 | Study 2

In Study 2, we aimed to replicate the results of Study 1 using a different assessment of daily autonomy that asks about one’s propensity toward low autonomy (Study 2: “Today, I got the

**TABLE 3** | Indirect effects between attachment insecurities, daily relationship satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction over time through romantic partners' daily autonomy in Study 1 ( $N = 121$  couples, days = 4746).

	Daily relationship satisfaction						Relationship satisfaction 3-months later					
	Autonomy P1			Autonomy P2			Autonomy P1			Autonomy P2		
	IE <sup>a</sup> (SE)	95% CI	t	p	IE <sup>a</sup> (SE)	95% CI	t	p	IE <sup>a</sup> (SE)	95% CI	t	p
<i>Indirect actor effects</i>												
Anxiety	-0.05 (0.04)	[-0.12; 0.02]	-1.35	0.177	-0.01 (0.01)	[-0.03; 0.02]	-0.49	0.627	-0.03 (0.02)	[-0.06; 0.01]	-1.36	0.174
Avoidance	<b>-0.25 (0.05)</b>	<b>[-0.36; -0.15]</b>	<b>-4.86</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	-0.02 (0.02)	[-0.05; 0.01]	-1.16	0.246	<b>-0.14 (0.07)</b>	<b>[-0.26; -0.01]</b>	<b>-2.10</b>	<b>0.036</b>
<i>Indirect partner effects</i>												
Anxiety	-0.02 (0.03)	[-0.07; 0.05]	-0.48	0.631	-0.02 (0.01)	[-0.04; 0.05]	-1.28	0.202	-0.01 (0.02)	[-0.04; 0.02]	-0.49	0.625
Avoidance	-0.05 (0.04)	[-0.13; 0.03]	-1.24	0.214	<b>-0.09 (0.03)</b>	<b>[-0.16; -0.03]</b>	<b>-2.82</b>	<b>0.005</b>	-0.03 (0.03)	[-0.08; 0.02]	-1.07	0.284

<sup>a</sup>Unstandardized coefficients. IE = indirect effects, P1 = partner 1; P2 = partner 2. Bold = significant at  $p < 0.05$ . Linear time was included as a control variable for daily relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction at baseline was included as a control variable for relationship satisfaction 3-months later.

impression that I put aside my preferences, needs or opinions in my relationship with my partner.”), rather than high autonomy (Study 1: “Today, when I was with my partner, I felt free to be who I am”). We created the negative daily autonomous feeling item to capture the concrete indicators of the true self-expression (i.e., preferences, needs, or opinions) while examining a negative phrasing to capture the daily moments where partners felt less autonomous in their relationship. The autonomy item for Study 2 was not validated. We aimed to examine whether feeling less autonomous accounts for the association between insecure attachment and relationship satisfaction, both daily and over time. We also tested the partner hypothesis, that people with partners who are higher in attachment insecurities would be less likely to feel autonomous, which, in turn, would explain their lower relationship satisfaction daily and over time.

#### 4.1 | Methods

##### 4.1.1 | Participants

A sample of 154 couples (150 mixed-gender couples and 4 same-gender couples) involved in a couple relationship for at least 5 years (29.9% were married) was recruited using social media and posters in Canada. See Table 1 for more demographic details. Post hoc power analyses for multilevel studies (Kleiman 2021) indicated that with 308 participants and 6468 completed days, we had 99% power to detect a small effect.

##### 4.1.2 | Procedure

The study was part of a larger funded, longitudinal research project examining factors associated with sexual and relationship well-being in long-term couples. Couples were mainly recruited through ads posted in various Facebook groups. They were prescreened for eligibility via email and telephone. Both partners had to agree to participate. Eligible couples were engaged in a couple relationship for at least 5 years, currently living together for at least 6 months, sexually active, 18 years of age or older, residing in Canada, able to read and understand English or French, and had daily access to a computer with internet. Exclusion criteria included current pregnancy, newborn in the past 12 months, retired working status, and temporary separation from the current partner in the last 6 months. Eligible participants were sent individual links to a secured web platform (Qualtrics Research Suite) to complete separately from their partner an online baseline survey (Phase 1), followed 5–14 days later by a daily 10-min online survey to be completed on 21 consecutive days (Phase 2), and a 20-min online follow-up survey 3-months later (Phase 3). The average number of diaries completed was high ( $M = 18.5$ ,  $SD = 2.9$ ). Participants received up to CAD \$60, proportional to their participation in the daily diaries. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of the researchers' institution.

##### 4.1.3 | Measures

**4.1.3.1 | Baseline and Follow-Up Surveys.** Table 2 shows the internal consistency coefficients of the measures at

baseline and follow-up phases. Attachment insecurities were assessed at baseline by the ECR-12 (Lafontaine et al. 2016). This 12-item scale is rated on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 “disagree strongly” to 7 “agree strongly.” Items are averaged to create a score of anxiety and a score of avoidance, with higher scores indicating higher insecurity. The ECR-12 factorial structure was demonstrated among five samples—including community couples—and the scales’ internal consistency coefficients vary between 0.75 and 0.87 (Lafontaine et al. 2016). Relationship satisfaction was assessed at baseline and 3-months later (follow-up survey) using the abridged version of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-4, Sabourin et al. 2005; Spanier 1976). This scale includes four items rated on five- to seven-point scales, which are summed to create a global score of relationship satisfaction. Higher scores indicate higher satisfaction. The construct validity and reliability ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ) of the DAS-4 have been demonstrated (Sabourin et al. 2005).

**4.1.3.2 | Daily Diaries.** The daily feeling of being autonomous within the romantic relationship was assessed by the following item, which is then reverse coded such that higher scores represent more autonomy, “Today, I got the impression that I put aside my preferences, needs or opinions in my relationship with my partner.” This item was not validated. Daily relationship satisfaction was assessed with one item: “At the moment, how satisfied are you with your relationship with your partner?” All daily items were assessed on a 10-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 “not at all” to 10 “extremely.”

## 4.2 | Analyses

The same analyses were performed as in Study 1. In Study 2, we tested two mediation models of the daily feeling of being autonomous in the relationship to explain the associations between both partners’ attachment insecurities (anxiety and avoidance) and their daily and over time (3-months later) relationship satisfaction. We also controlled for linear time in the daily relationship satisfaction model and for relationship satisfaction at baseline in the relationship satisfaction 3-months later model. IEs were tested according to the Sobel Test (or Delta Method; Sobel 1982). Although this approach has limitations, it is a commonly accepted alternative when bootstrapping is not feasible in MLMs (Zhang et al. 2009).

## 4.3 | Results

The 308 participants (154 couples) individually completed a total of 5793 diaries out of 6468 (308 partners, 21 days) for a completion rate of 89.6%. A total of 148 couples (96.1%) completed the 3-month follow-up questionnaire. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the measures (means, standard deviations, bivariate correlations). Correlations showed that a person’s daily feeling of being autonomous was negatively associated with attachment insecurities and was positively associated with both partners’ daily and over time relationship satisfaction.

Preliminary correlations were also conducted between the aggregated mediator (i.e., daily feeling of being autonomous) and relationship satisfaction outcomes (i.e., aggregated and 3-months later) with sociodemographic variables (i.e., age, relationship length, marital status, number of children, and income) to examine the need to control these variables. An individual’s number of children was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction at the daily level ( $r = -0.15$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and 3-months later ( $r = -0.22$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), so it was added as a covariate in the models. Also, an individual’s annual income ( $r = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction over time, and was added as a covariate in this model.

### 4.3.1 | Mediation Models

Table 4 shows the IEs’ unstandardized regression coefficients. Partly supporting our hypothesis and replicating Study 1 results, we found significant indirect “actor effects” of avoidance on daily (IE =  $-0.06$ ,  $p = 0.025$ ) and over time (IE =  $-0.09$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ) relationship satisfaction via the actor’s feeling of being autonomous within the relationship. The indirect “partner effect” between one’s avoidance and their partner’s daily relationship satisfaction through their partner’s feeling of acting autonomously was not replicated, as there were no significant indirect partner effects of avoidance on relationship satisfaction at the daily level and 3-months later.

There were, however, two additional significant indirect “actor effects” and two significant indirect “partner effects” between attachment-related anxiety and daily and over time relationship satisfaction through the actor’s feeling of being autonomous. That is, people higher in anxiety were less likely to feel autonomous in their daily interactions with their partners which, in turn, was related to their lower level of relationship satisfaction daily (IE =  $-0.05$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ) and 3-months later (IE =  $-0.08$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), as well as to their partner’s lower level of relationship satisfaction daily (IE =  $-0.04$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ) and 3-months later (IE =  $-0.07$ ,  $p = 0.018$ ).

## 5 | General Discussion

Adding to the literature on SDT and attachment theory (La Guardia and Patrick 2008), our findings provide insight into how insecurely attached partners feel less autonomous in their daily interactions with their partner, and how feeling less autonomous shapes their relationship satisfaction, both daily and over time. Across both studies, results showed that people who were higher in attachment avoidance reported daily difficulties feeling autonomous in their relationship, which in turn, was associated with their own lower daily and over time relationship satisfaction. In addition, in Study 1, the results showed that partners of people higher in avoidance tended to report feeling less autonomous in the relationship, and in turn, felt less satisfied in their relationship at a daily level. Finally, in Study 2, the findings showed that people higher in anxiety—and their partners—reported feeling less autonomous, which in turn was negatively related to their own and their partner’s daily and over time relationship satisfaction.

**TABLE 4** | Indirect effects between attachment insecurities, daily relationship satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction over time through romantic partners' daily autonomy in Study 2 (*N* = 154 couples, days = 5793).

	Daily relationship satisfaction						Relationship satisfaction 3-months later					
	Autonomy P1			Autonomy P2			Autonomy P1			Autonomy P2		
	IE <sup>a</sup> (SE)	95% CI	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	IE <sup>a</sup> (SE)	95% CI	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	IE <sup>a</sup> (SE)	95% CI	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Indirect actor effects</i>												
Anxiety	<b>−0.05 (0.02)</b>	[−0.09; −0.02]	<b>−2.76</b>	<b>0.006</b>	−0.01 (0.01)	[−0.03; 0.01]	−0.82	0.416	<b>−0.08 (0.03)</b>	[−0.13; −0.02]	<b>−2.78</b>	<b>0.005</b>
Avoidance	<b>−0.06 (0.03)</b>	[−0.12; −0.01]	<b>−2.23</b>	<b>0.025</b>	0.01 (0.01)	[−0.01; 0.02]	0.82	0.415	<b>−0.09 (0.05)</b>	[−0.18; −0.00]	<b>−2.05</b>	<b>0.004</b>
<i>Indirect partner effects</i>												
Anxiety	<b>−0.04 (0.02)</b>	[−0.08; −0.01]	<b>−2.63</b>	<b>0.008</b>	−0.01 (0.01)	[−0.03; 0.01]	−0.83	0.406	<b>−0.07 (0.03)</b>	[−0.12; −0.01]	<b>−2.36</b>	<b>0.018</b>
Avoidance	−0.01 (0.01)	[−0.01; 0.06]	1.64	0.101	−0.01 (0.01)	[−0.04; 0.01]	−0.90	0.367	0.04 (0.03)	[−0.01; 0.09]	1.57	0.118

<sup>a</sup>Unstandardized regression coefficients. IE = indirect effects, P1 = partner 1, P2 = partner 2. Bold = significant at *p* < 0.05. Linear time and number of children were included as covariates for relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction at baseline, number of children, and annual income were included as covariates for relationship satisfaction 3-months later.

These findings suggest how, given their developmental histories, insecurely attached partners are not as equipped to act according to who they really are in their intimate relationship. The possible difficulty to feel autonomous while being in a relationship could be resolved by an adaptive regulation of their autonomy when an individual expresses their true self with their partner (e.g., give one's opinion on a topic while listening to the partner's opinions and preferences, suggest activities that one likes and jointly decide on a satisfying activity for both partners). In contrast, previous research has found that repeatedly sacrificing autonomous pursuits over relatedness goals might reflect a maladaptive regulation strategy (e.g., choosing the relationship over one's true self, e.g., McClure and Lydon 2018). According to SDT (e.g., La Guardia and Patrick 2008), a chronic sacrifice of autonomy would lead to poorer relationship satisfaction in daily life and over time.

### 5.1 | Attachment Avoidance and Low Autonomy

Individuals high in attachment avoidance fear intimacy and distrust others' intentions (Bowlby 1973), and they often manage these concerns by minimizing dependence on their partners (for a review, see Mikulincer and Shaver 2016). We provide initial evidence that avoidantly attached individuals find it difficult to express their true self in their relationship and that these day-to-day difficulties are associated with lower daily and over time relationship satisfaction. Autonomy does not reflect a need for independence (which is often assumed for more avoidant people); rather, it reflects the need to feel free to act according to one's true self (Deci and Ryan 2000). Individuals higher in attachment avoidance tend to be disconnected from their true self, suppressing their feelings because they may have not been fully supported in their developmental history (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016). Consistently, people higher in attachment avoidance generally act according to avoidance motivations (i.e., doing something to avoid a negative outcome)—as opposed to approach motivations (i.e., doing something to achieve a positive outcome)—which may lead them to feel that their true self cannot be shown to their partner when they feel vulnerable, and want to protect themselves from potential relational harm (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016). This poor regulation of their autonomy, however, seems immediately negatively associated with their own relationship satisfaction, highlighted by their lower levels of relationship satisfaction on a daily basis. Not only does the present research suggest that it is immediately deleterious to feel that one's true self cannot be expressed in the relationship on a daily level, but the effect seems to persist over time. It is possible that autonomy deprioritization becomes chronic and has long-lasting effects, which might lead to other relational outcomes (i.e., separation and conflicts; Visserman et al. 2020).

Similarly, in Study 1, being high in avoidance is associated with the partner's difficulties to feel free to act according to one's true self and, in turn, is associated with the partner's lower level of daily relationship satisfaction. In a longitudinal study, Weinstein et al. (2016) found that greater interpersonal closeness was associated with perceptions that your partner supported your autonomy if you had higher levels of autonomy at the beginning of the study. Given that individuals with



attachment avoidance prefer distance rather than closeness (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016), their partners could perceive that their autonomy is not supported, which could possibly leave them feeling less seen and recognized, and in turn, could translate into the partner's lower daily satisfaction.

## 5.2 | Attachment Anxiety and Low Autonomy

On the one hand, people higher in anxiety might have ambivalent and conflictual attitudes toward feeling free to act according to their true self in their relationship. Specifically, they might be motivated to repress their true feelings or needs to preserve and prioritize their relationship (i.e., low autonomy). On the other hand, they might also act according to their attachment needs, as they often seek reassurance and proximity from their partners (i.e., high autonomy). In Study 2, our results showed that people higher in attachment-related anxiety tend to be less satisfied in their relationship at a daily level and 3-months later through their "low feeling of being autonomous in relationships." Given that people higher (vs. lower) in anxiety are hypervigilant toward their partner's responsiveness (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016 for a review), it is possible that they are more sensitive to their partner's lack of recognition of them putting the relationship first in their daily lives (Ruppel and Curran 2012). In other words, their expectations might modulate how they feel about their relationship, and this deleterious effect on their satisfaction seems to persist at a known minimum of 3-months later.

Moreover, indirect partner effects in Study 2 showed that people partnered with anxiously attached individuals reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction at a daily level and 3-months later through their own lower feeling of being autonomous in the relationship. Given that highly anxious individuals fear rejection, they are especially vigilant about their partners' availability and may be overly dependent on their partners (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016). It is possible that the constant demands for reassurance and proximity—sometimes experienced as intrusiveness (Lavy et al. 2013)—from a more anxiously attached partner contribute to lower daily relationship satisfaction because they feel that their partner is "overly clingy" in their relationship. Finally, partners of individuals high in anxiety might also feel that they sacrifice themselves in the relationship because their anxious partners make them feel indebted by exerting a relational pressure for them to invest more in the relationship as they perceived they do themselves (Ruppel and Curran 2012).

To summarize, in Studies 1 and 2, we found similar results about attachment-related avoidance and lower relationship satisfaction through lower autonomous feeling, whereas anxiety was only significant in Study 2. One reason might be the different ways in which the daily feeling of being autonomous was assessed in both studies. Autonomy, as assessed with the item from Study 1 (i.e., feeling free to act accordingly to who they are), might not capture the experience of people higher in anxiety beyond the role of avoidance, whereas as assessed in Study 2 (impression to put aside themselves), the effect of anxiety emerges at daily and over time levels. It is also possible that anxiously attached individuals present a sense of self that

has been developmentally thwarted, leading them to not really know what their true self is (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016). This could explain why asking them if they felt free to act according to their "true self" seemed less salient and representative for them. Another explanation is that the autonomy item from Study 2 used negative wording, possibly allowing to capture and recall more negative representations (i.e., low autonomy vs. high autonomy in Study 1). Indeed, attachment anxiety is associated with higher level of attention around negative events in their daily life as they are hypervigilant to perceived threat and rejection (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016). Another reason is that couples in the second study were together for twice the amount of time, showing the possible detrimental effects of attachment insecurities over the years through the feeling of being less autonomous in the relationship. Couples in longer-term relationships may face greater autonomy challenges due to higher interdependence (e.g., cohabitation, shared responsibilities, and children), which can lead to more sacrifices and reduced autonomy (Righetti and Impett 2017).

## 5.3 | Limitations and Future Directions

Although Studies 1 and 2 had several strengths, including surveying both partners in their daily lives and over time, there are limitations. First, the homogeneous samples recruited in both studies (i.e., relationship duration, sexual orientation, and ethnical diversity) limit the generalizability of the current results to a broader population. Second, possibly because of self-selection bias (Girme et al. 2019), our sample consisted of partners who are mostly satisfied and securely attached. Thus, the results may vary among people who have lower relationship satisfaction or more insecure attachment. Future research should examine autonomy expression strategies in more diverse samples and over longer periods of time. Third, autonomy was assessed in two different ways across studies (i.e., high vs. low autonomy in relationships). Future work would need to include both measures to determine if the forms of assessment contribute to different effects. Fourth, the data were correlational, and we are not able to confirm the causal direction of the findings. Future work could use experimental designs or interventions to help couples better express their autonomy in their relationship to determine if this can enhance satisfaction. Fifth, because attachment was only assessed once, we could only analyze attachment at the between-person level, preventing us from testing whether its daily variations related to autonomy and relationship satisfaction. Future work should examine all three variables at a within-person level. Finally, all measures were self-reported. Future work might include observational measures to determine how insecurely attached individuals express or display their autonomy needs. Despite these limitations, the current findings have implications for understanding how the low expression of one's autonomy is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and may be driven by attachment insecurity.

## 5.4 | Implications

This study suggests that targeting autonomy within relationships at a daily level (e.g., inviting a romantic partner to

participate in one's favorite activity and expressing one's opinion) may be an interesting avenue of clinical research for improving relationship satisfaction, both daily and over time. Indeed, clinicians could test whether focusing on daily autonomy in their interventions with couples might improve their relationship satisfaction. Moreover, it would be interesting to examine in experimental research whether secure attachment to a romantic partner can provide the secure base that supports exploration and autonomy (Johnson 2017) or whether it is higher autonomy that allows partners to feel more secure with their romantic partners (Anderson 2020).

Directing attention to chronic feelings of low autonomy may further demonstrate the challenges faced by insecurely attached people and their partners and emphasize the significance of helping them to express their true self in an adaptive way. However, self-disclosure during interactions that lacked expressed understanding was associated with negative outcomes, such as poorer relationship satisfaction (Poucher et al. 2022), highlighting the importance of the relational context around the expression of one's autonomy. Indeed, interventions based on Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (Johnson 2020) could represent a useful clinical avenue. This therapeutic framework aims to restructure couples' interactions by helping couples express their unmet needs, adjust their empathetic responses, and ultimately create and maintain a sense of security within the relationship. Interventions drawn from Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) could help couples acknowledge their autonomy need in a way that fosters authentic interactions between partners (i.e., express one's own autonomy alternatively, or simultaneously with their partner and support each other's autonomy) which would promote greater relationship satisfaction. Indeed, Burgess Moser et al. (2018) have shown that restructuration interventions in EFT increased positives changes in support (demands and offers) from romantic partners and have been associated with lower avoidance. It is possible that avoidant partners could offer better autonomy support for their partner through the experimentation of secure interactions during therapy but also facilitate the connection and the expression of their true—not defensive—self in the relationship. In another study, Burgess Moser et al. (2016) have shown that attachment anxiety is lowered at the end of EFT treatment, but only if partners successfully reached a blamer-softening event. The blamer-softening event represents the successful completion of the de-escalation and the withdrawer reengagement—to become more emotionally accessible and engaged. It is possible that through this event, avoidant individual's autonomous feeling is increased through their emotional reengagement, able now to support their own and their partner true self-expression while facilitating anxious partner asking—not blaming—for their partner to meet attachment needs which would translate into higher autonomy.

In addition, when assessing a partner's developmental history during Stage 1 of EFT, it would be important to examine whether children may have sacrificed their true self to maintain the bond with their parents (Lynch 2013). When autonomy is compromised for the sake of relatedness with the parents, less authentic behaviors are likely to become integrated into the self before later couple relationships. SDT has emphasized that individuals can foster autonomy even in unsupportive

environments, through the cultivation of mindfulness (e.g., promoting self-awareness; Brown and Ryan 2003) and the exercise of autonomy (e.g., attending both to their desires and to their enacted behaviors, and aligning the two; Sheldon and Krieger 2014). Conversely, parents who provide unconditional regard enable relatedness and autonomy to coexist, thereby supporting the development of higher levels of autonomy across the lifespan and safeguarding it within future relationships.

## 6 | Conclusion

These new findings provide reflections and interventions leads aiming to target not only support between romantic partners, but also to recognize the importance of the two differentiated self in the unity of the couple relationship. Indeed, these results highlight the relevance of individual factors (i.e., romantic attachment and feeling autonomous in the relationship) to explain relationship well-being on a day-to-day basis and over time, which facilitate the development of strategies supporting relational happiness and stability in couple relationships. Autonomy is officially back on the table (Anderson 2020) to study couple relationships and promote the nourishment of each partner's self, which composes a rich humanity and relationship landscape.

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