

The role of disclosure in relationships

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Self-disclosure happens between people and lies at the heart of almost all relationships. It elicits a dynamic process that shapes and is shaped by, relationships. We review theoretical and empirical milestones in our understanding of how and why disclosure develops, is maintained, and unravels in relationships. We show that people use their and their partners' disclosure to discern relationship quality and negotiate relationship development.

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Current Opinion in Psychology 2020, 31:33–37

This review comes from a themed issue on **Privacy and disclosure, online and in social interactions**

Edited by **Leslie K John, Michael Slepian, and Diana Tamir**

For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

Available online 21st July 2019

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2019.07.032>

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If one were to ask people to name a core ingredient of relationships, most will mention *self-disclosure*. Self-disclosure is a communicative, dynamic process by which people make themselves known to others [1]. It indicates the revelation of any personal information, including past experiences, future plans, feelings, attitudes, or beliefs. Through self-disclosure, people reveal their inner thoughts and feelings, but communicate more than the actual content: disclosure in relationships also communicates information about the relationship, including trust, social support (by showing acceptance, love) or social disapproval (by expressing suspicion, anger, rejection). It is this relational aspect which explains why self-disclosure is a core ingredient of interpersonal relationships — from business partners to friendships, from romantic partners to parents and children.

Why is self-disclosure important?

The current literature leaves little doubt that self-disclosure is conducive to both personal and relational well-being. Revealing one's feelings, thoughts, and emotions to others is intrinsically rewarding. Research found that the activity in neural and cognitive mechanisms during self-disclosure is similar to the activity elicited by primary rewards such as food and sex [2]. Self-disclosure helps people to overcome feelings of stress. Disclosing emotions and thoughts to one's intimate partner helps people to cope with intrusive worries and alleviates physical tension [3], even when disclosure happens online [4]. Self-disclosure fosters social connectedness and social support. Social connectedness and support, in turn, are predictors for physical and psychological well-being, with a large meta-analysis indicating that the influence of social connectedness on longevity is greater than the influence of well-established protective factors such as physical activity (for a review see, Ref. [5**]).

Self-disclosure is key for the *initiation and development of relationships*. When people meet for the first time, they are likely to disclose their names and age, and perhaps discuss mundane information such as tomorrow's weather forecast. It is hard to imagine how relationships get started without such a disclosure. As relationships become more stable and intimate, people are more likely to broaden their disclosure topics and reveal more personal information, such as goals, dreams, and insecurities. This process is captured by the social penetration theory, positing that relationship development is closely tied to systematic changes in disclosure, with an increase in disclosure of range of topics (breadth) and intimate topics (depth) over the course of relationship formation [6]. Across all types of close relationships — siblings, friendships, and romantic relationships — disclosure reciprocity is predictive of healthy relationship outcomes such as closeness, satisfaction, and trust [7,8]. When both partners mutually disclose to each other, they experience more happiness and connectedness than when one person discloses and the other listens [9]. When people disclose to one-another, they start liking each other more and feel they know each other better, which is essential for the disclosure of more intimate information and the development of intimate relationships [10].

Not surprisingly, self-disclosure is important for the *maintenance of lasting relationships*. As relationships develop, the content and impact of disclosure changes. For example, in newly developed relationships, people engage in fast and direct mutual disclosure by which they become more predictable and trustworthy to each other. In established relationships, partners disclose to each other without the

expectation of instant reciprocation because they increasingly care for each other's welfare. Mutual disclosure remains essential to the maintenance of relationships, whether it pertains to mundane issues such as happenings at work or to serious issues such as insecurities with the partner [11,12^{*}]. Intimate disclosures foster emotional involvement, trust, and intimacy [10]. They are conducive to happiness within the relationship across all types of close relationships and cultural contexts, because such disclosures signal that we trust the other, that we value them, and that we care about them. They can lessen and deescalate conflict in times of stress, further contributing to the maintenance of long-term relationships [13].

Self-disclosure, or rather the decrease and negativity of self-disclosure, also plays a key role in the *deterioration and ending of relationships*. A breakdown in disclosure and communication — when partners stop sharing their inner thoughts and feelings — is the most common reason for decreases in relationship quality and relationship breakup. While increases in self-disclosure enhance relationship quality, decreases in self-disclosure are a sign of dissatisfaction with the relationship. Negative self-disclosures, including negative emotions (e.g. anger, sadness), experiences (e.g. loss, frustration), or criticism (e.g. discontentment with partner) typically elicit negative disclosure of the partner, potentially resulting in negative reciprocity and relationship break-up when negative disclosure outweighs positive disclosure [14], or when revealed in weak tie relationships where partners are reluctant to marshal the social and emotional support necessary to cope with the issue raised in the disclosure [15]. Thus, self-disclosure is a key ingredient in relationship initiation, maintenance, and ending, for better *and* for worse.

Self-disclosure is a dynamic process between people

Disclosure and relationships are 'mutually transformative', because disclosure and relationships mutually change each other [16]. The frequency, content, and impact of self-disclosure define the nature of the relationship, and the nature of the relationship affects the frequency, content, and impact of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is not, as suggested by social penetration theory, a linear process where partners increasingly deepen and broaden their self-disclosure as their relationship becomes more intimate. Rather, self-disclosure should be viewed as a dynamic process with disclosing partners continuously oscillating between more and less openness within [17] and across relationships [18]. This is well-portrayed in diary studies, which find that cohabiting couples show less self-disclosure on days following a conflict than on other days [12^{*},19]. Hence, highlighting the dynamic nature of self-disclosure, partners disclose intimate feelings and thoughts on days when things are going well, but need a 'time out' when things go awry. In ongoing relationships, partners negotiate the need for feeling connected by revealing information

about themselves and the need for autonomy and independence by keeping information to themselves. Key to maintaining high-quality relationships is the skill to oscillate between high and low self-disclosure and weigh their benefits and costs for the self (e.g. signaling trust versus being hurt) and the relationship (e.g. being open versus hurting the other) [11,20^{**}]. Self-disclosure happens between people: partner responses to the self-disclosure of the other are crucial in determining the dynamics and development of the disclosure process. Partners can facilitate the disclosure process by responding in a sensitive and kind manner, but they can also hinder disclosure by responding in a disinterested or hurtful manner [21]. People use their partners' response to their disclosures to calibrate their levels of disclosure in the relationship. For example, people disclose less to partners who express negative feelings than to partners who rarely do so [22]. Additionally, people use their partner's disclosure as a diagnostic cue for relationship quality. When people detect topic avoidance and concealment by their partner, they start questioning the foundations of their trust and love in the relationship which, in turn, increases conflict over time [23]. Thereby, self-disclosure represents a pattern of mutual influence between relationship partners that dynamically transforms and shapes the relationship over time.

Offline and online self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is traditionally considered as a process involving face-to-face interaction. However, rapid developments in communication technology, such as the Internet and social media, increasingly influence ways in which relationships are initiated, maintained, and ended. This rapid change sparks a debate on the benefits and costs of these technologies for human interactions, and self-disclosure in particular, a debate that is as yet far from settled [24^{**}]. Many studies emphasize the benefits of technology mediated self-disclosure. Online contact stimulates people to disclose more intimate information; it enables them to freely discuss sensitive topics which, in turn, enhances the quality of their friendship [25,26]. For example, a study on online messaging in adolescent relationships showed positive longitudinal effects of online messaging on the quality of existing friendships [27]. Online communication facilitates building and sustaining relationships that face obstacles such as differing work schedules, varying time zones, or long distances [28]. Also, it allows people who are shy to initiate and develop relationships online, where they feel more secure to disclose their true selves [29].

A systematic review comparing online and offline self-disclosure showed that people self-disclose more in computer-mediated communication than in offline dyadic interactions [30]. Yet, people do not report differences in the depth of their online and offline disclosures. Similarly, a study comparing offline and online friendships showed that offline friendships involved more breadth, depth, and commitment than online friendships,

yet this difference diminished over time [31], probably because as friendships develop people use online contexts to strengthen offline relationships [32].

Although research suggests benefits of online self-disclosure, there are also studies that emphasize the risks of online self-disclosure to relationships. Most people disclose personal information to significant others [33], yet some prefer disclosure of information to a broad audience of strangers, for example, via social media [34]. Consistent with offline self-disclosure research, self-disclosure by one relationship partner to a wide audience is related to less relationship satisfaction in the other partner [35,36]. People want to feel special in a relationship, and like a person less when they feel that someone's self-disclosure is broadcasted to everybody, and not directed at them personally [37].

Online communication may erode partner's feelings of privacy and exclusivity [38]. People have less control over the responses to personal information that is disclosed online, and relationships may be burdened by online comments or feelings of threat when people are exposed to their partners' photos with potential rivals [39]. Similarly, online monitoring by partners and the social network may be perceived as a threat to one's feeling of freedom and autonomy [38]. Although online disclosure affords contact, this contact lacks the experiential aspects of relationships and disclosure. Physical touch in face-to-face communications is related to less depression in elderly people [40], an increase of intimacy in romantic relationships [41,42^{••}], and conflict resolution [43]. The mere presence of mobile devices during conversations may distract from intimacy and immediate physical connection [44]. During conversations, cell phone use decreases conversation quality and causes the other person to feel devalued and rejected, especially when people disclose intimate information [45[•]].

The upsurge of new technologies and use of social media seem a double-edged sword for disclosure in interpersonal relationships. An important implication is that the personal and relational outcomes of disclosure vary across time, within and across individuals, situations, and relationships. More research is needed to illuminate when, how, and why disclosure is beneficial versus harmful in relationships, online, offline, and in various combinations of the two. Also, we know little about how disclosure changes across age and cohorts. For example, is the impact of online and face-to-face communication on relationships different in younger generations, growing up with modern technology, as compared to older generations? Ideally, such a research would combine the examination of moment-to-moment 'micro-level' patterns of disclosure processes using experience sampling methodology and 'macro-level' development of relationships to identify small and larger building blocks of relationships [see Ref. 46, this issue].

Considering that self-disclosure is part of larger interaction sequences across relationships, it would be promising to examine how relationship partners negotiate disclosure across communication channels. Which aspects of self-disclosure are particularly diagnostic of relationship quality? For example, following a transgression, *when* and *why* is it sufficient to send a WhatsApp-message, and *when* and *why* do partners need to also repair the relationship in face-to-face conversations? Hopefully, such research would involve both relationship partners to illuminate the dynamics of self-disclosure processes and the mutual impacts on each partner and the relationship between them, because it is this pattern of mutual influence, rather than just the act of self-disclosure, that affects and shapes the relationship. Also, it would be fascinating to dive deeper into the added value of face-to-face conversations for feelings of connection. To illustrate, how do people know when to interrupt each other's disclosure, ask questions, or merely acknowledge the other's experience? Which cues do they rely on to leverage interruptions that further the relationship and maintain rapport? Face-to-face conversations do not need to happen at the table or in meetings but can also take place while walking side-by-side or engaging in other activities (e.g. baking, driving). Especially when disclosing significant or difficult information, such as misdemeanors or secrets, not having eye contact but being in the presence of the other, nevertheless, may make the conversation easier and less threatening.

To conclude, self-disclosure is a dynamic process that shapes, and is shaped by, relationships. The existing literature leaves little doubt that self-disclosure is important in relationships and illuminates some of the mechanisms why it is important. It serves as a monitor for relationship quality and is moulded by the relational context and the medium, in which it takes place. It is a core ingredient of all relationships and key to unraveling how people discern the quality of their relationships.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared

Funding

Y.E. Willems is supported by the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappen (NWO, Research Talent, 406-15-132). C. Finkenauer is supported by the European Union Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013, Grant No. 602768) and Dynamics of Youth (Utrecht University).

Conflict of interest statement

Y.E. Willems, C. Finkenauer, & P. Kerkhof report no financial interest or potential conflicts of interest. This work was supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO, Research Talent Fund, 406-15-132), the European Union Seventh Framework

Program (FP7/2007-2013, Grant No. 602768) and Dynamics of Youth (Utrecht University).

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