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Wanting Less Closeness in Romantic Relationships

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Although the experience of closeness has received considerable attention in the close relationships literature, *wanting less closeness* with a romantic partner is less understood. Study 1 identified the lay understanding of what it means to want less closeness in a romantic relationship. In Studies 2 and 3, participants primed with descriptors of wanting less closeness, compared to those primed with control words, reported wanting significantly less closeness in their current relationship. As would be expected from models of adult attachment, those high on attachment-related avoidance responded more strongly to the experimental manipulation than those low on this dimension.

In spite of our human tendency to seek out and maintain intimate bonds, it is nevertheless possible to desire less of the very thing that is at the heart of intimate relationships: closeness. What does it mean to want less closeness in the context of an ongoing intimate relationship? The studies reported in the current article take a two-stage approach to examine this question. First, we borrow strategies from the prototype method developed by Fehr (e.g., 1988) to determine whether there is a consistent lay understanding of what it means to want less closeness and, if so, to identify the features that represent it (Study 1). Second, having initially determined that there does seem to be a consistent lay understanding of wanting less closeness and identifying the key content of that understanding, we conducted two experiments (Studies 2 and 3) to further test the existence and content of this understanding by showing that making it accessible causally increases the experience of desiring less closeness, particularly among those predisposed to such an experience by virtue of high attachment-related avoidance.

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DESIRING LESS CLOSENESS

This article examines what it means to want less closeness. Although closeness is a centrally important ingredient in intimate relating, the experience of wanting less closeness in an ongoing romantic relationship has received little attention in the empirical literature. This empirical hole is unfortunate given the importance the phenomenon may have for day-to-day relationship processes and quality (e.g., Baxter & Simon, 1993; Hess, 2002). Mashek and Sherman (2004) reported that, across samples of college students, individuals who want less closeness in their current relationships report low levels of relationship satisfaction, passionate love, and commitment. In contrast, individuals whose actual closeness matches their desired closeness report very high levels of relationship quality.

We adopt the view that closeness is the inclusion of other in the self (Aron, Mashek, & Aron, 2004). The want for less closeness conceptually resides in the tension between being wholely separate from versus wholely unified with the other; including other in the self, but not to such an extent that the self becomes indistinguishable from other.

Despite our own theoretical leanings, we did not define closeness or wanting less closeness for the participants in the current studies. Instead, we summoned young people's understanding of desiring less closeness. Given that as many as 57% of undergraduate students involved in dating relationships have felt this desire within the past 3 months (Mashek & Sherman, 2004), and—for many—the newness of dating, this is an ideal population in which to gain a better understanding of the desire for less closeness, and especially perhaps of how that desire might be malleable in the same person (a theme that is a focus of our Studies 2 and 3).

Understanding this want for less closeness in relatively early-stage premarital relationships, although important in its own right, might also contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon in longer term marital and marriage-like relationships. Indeed, clinical and communications research with persons beyond the college years indicate that struggles to maintain optimal levels of closeness, and—related but not equivalent—optimal levels of intimacy (see Aron & Mashek, 2004, for a discussion of the similarities and differences between these constructs) do not simply disappear at some given point in development. The marital dynamic of rejection and intrusion (Napier, 1978)—described as the closeness/distance dance by Lerner (1985)—is typified by one member seeking less closeness in response to a partner's attempts to seek connection. At the individual level of analysis, Baxter and colleagues (e.g., Baxter, 1990; Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Baxter & Simon, 1993) have argued that individuals negotiate the tension created by opposing needs for autonomy and connectedness (Brewer & Pickett, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and that such contradictions are central to relationships.

DISPOSITIONAL DESIRE FOR LESS CLOSENESS: ATTACHMENT-RELATED AVOIDANCE

Of the major contemporary relationship perspectives in social psychology, attachment theory stands out for the importance it gives to the desire for less closeness in relationships. Ainsworth and colleagues documented a pattern of infant behavior typified by the creation of distance from the caregiver in times of distress (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Similar distancing and discomfort with closeness—generally labeled as attachment-related avoidance—are likewise identifiable in patterns of adult relating (for a review, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Thus, it is not surprising that self-report instruments of attachment include items such as, "I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others" (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), "I am uncomfortable getting close to others" (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), and "I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close" (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). A discomfort with closeness is further captured by items that mention explicitly the possibility of feeling *too close* to intimate others: "I am nervous when anyone gets too close" (Collins & Read, 1990), "I try to avoid getting too close to my partner" (Brennan et al., 1998), and "I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners" (Brennan et al., 1998).

These items highlight a major relational goal of avoidant individuals: wanting less closeness, and presumably a particular readiness to have that experience when situational factors might bring it to mind. Although much is known about attachment-related avoidance in general (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), this relational goal of wanting less closeness has been only minimally elaborated. Moreover, most of the emphasis has been on avoidance as indicating a relationship-general or person-general desire to avoid closeness, as opposed to a greater preparedness to experience it situationally, such that under different circumstances, even a person with a stable avoidant mental model of attachment will at one time feel a desire for more closeness and at other times a desire for less closeness. In fact, as noted, 57% of undergraduate students involved in dating relationships report feeling "too close" to their partner at some point in the preceding 3 months; yet only 7% to 19% of this same sample report feeling too close at a specific point in time (Mashek & Sherman, 2004). The difference between these two estimates (57% vs. 19%) likely points to the intraindividual and intrarelationship fluctuations in desiring less closeness, as well as to the likely situational malleability of the experience of wanting less closeness, perhaps especially for people who are high in attachment-related avoidance. Indeed, attachment theory explicitly allows for mental models of attachment to be more and less salient under different conditions (e.g., Mikulincer, Hirschberger, Nachmias, & Gillath, 2001; Taubman-Ben-Ari & Mikulincer, 2007)—an approach that has not to date been elaborated in the context of desiring less closeness.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES AND HYPOTHESES

The goal of Study 1 was to identify whether desiring less closeness is a coherent and common lay notion with discernable content. To this end, we employed methodologies with demonstrated utility in identifying the

characteristics that constitute a particular experience (e.g., Fehr, 1988; Fehr & Russell, 1991; Frei & Shaver, 2002; Le et al., 2009). Participants listed features related to the experience of wanting less closeness, then a new sample of participants rated these words for their centrality to wanting less closeness.

Building on this foundation, Study 2 and Study 3 examined experimentally whether making the desire for less closeness accessible causally increases the desire, possibly overall, but particularly for those with a mental model of avoidant attachment. Specifically, these studies tested whether individuals primed with words highly descriptive of wanting less closeness would report desiring less closeness with their current romantic partners more than would participants primed with other words; we expected this effect would be observed most strongly among those with high attachment-related avoidance.

STUDY 1

To discern the lay notion of wanting less closeness, we adapted Fehr's (1988) procedures (developed initially to identify the lay understanding of love) to the current context. These procedures involved two phases: generation (Study 1a) and rating (Study 1b).

Study 1a: Generation Phase

The purpose of Study 1a was to create a list of features associated with wanting less closeness. Seventy-five introductory psychology students (mostly White freshmen women) were instructed,

> Think for a moment about what it means to "want less closeness" with a romantic partner. Please list as many features or characteristics of "wanting less closeness" with a romantic partner as come to mind. For example, you might want to list things including what you feel like, think about, or things you do when you want less closeness with someone. Even if you've never wanted less closeness with a romantic partner, you can still write things relevant to what you think it might be like to want less closeness with a romantic partner. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not take more than about 3 minutes to complete this task.

To code the generated features, we transcribed the responses offered by participants; extracted words and phrases that described a single feature of what it means to want less closeness; and combined syntactic variants of words, descriptors with small variations in wording, and descriptors with objectively identical meanings.

Participants listed an average of 7.15 features of wanting less closeness ($SD = 3.19$; number of responses ranged 1–15, with a mode of 7). None reported any difficulty understanding the concept or being able to list features. The mean number of features listed is comparable to the numbers found in similar studies (e.g., forgiveness, $M = 8.86$, Kearns & Fincham, 2004; missing a partner, $M = 7.96$, Le et al., 2009). This ability to generate descriptors provides the first indication that desiring less closeness in a romantic relationship is a commonly understood, readily accessible construct.

Participants collectively generated 177 unique descriptors, with 99 descriptors listed by at least two respondents. This number of common descriptors is substantially higher than has been found in similar free listings of other relationship concepts in studies with similar sample sizes, again supporting the availability of the construct (78 in Kearns & Fincham, 2004; 77 in Le et al., 2009; 86 in Sharpsteen, 1993).

The most frequently listed features (those listed by five or more participants) are provided in Table 1.[1] The following features were listed by at least 10 participants: "needing time alone" (listed 24 times), "needing

TABLE 1
Features Most Frequently Listed in Study 1a

Feature	*Frequency*	*% of Participants Who Listed This Feature*
Needing time alone	24	32%
Needing space	22	29%
Spending less time together	18	24%
Wanting other interests and goals	13	17%
Being suffocated	13	17%
Spending more time with friends	13	17%
Needing independence	11	15%
Pushing partner away	9	12%
Wanting own activities	8	11%
Calling less	8	11%
Avoiding partner	8	11%
Being two different people	7	9%
Feeling guilty	6	8%
Not wanting to be together all the time	6	8%
Not wanting to share everything	6	8%
Distancing yourself	6	8%
Keeping things more to yourself	6	8%
Wanting less attachment	5	7%
Evaluating the relationship	5	7%
Partner is being clingy	5	7%
Being smothered	5	7%
Feeling relationship is unbalanced	5	7%
Feeling that partner is too dependent on you	5	7%
Frustrating	5	7%
Taking a break	5	7%
Talking less	5	7%
Wanting freedom	5	7%
Wanting to have differences of opinion	5	7%

Note. $N = 75$.

[1]The full list of 99 features is available from the first author.

space'' (22), ''spending less time together'' (18), ''wanting other interests and goals'' (13), ''being suffocated'' (13), ''spending more time with friends'' (13), and ''needing independence'' (11).

As noted, the number of descriptors offered by individual participants and the volume of descriptors listed overall suggest both that the participants had at least an intuitive impression of what it means to want less closeness and that they were able to articulate in written form some attributes of this impression.

Study 1b: Rating Phase

The purpose of Study 1b was to examine further the coherence of the construct among lay people and to evaluate the relative descriptiveness of the words generated in Study 1a in order to identify the content of that construct. In doing so, we sought to advance understanding of the construct, to provide a foundation on which future researchers might develop measures of it, and to provide a foundation for the priming methods to be used in Studies 2 and 3.

Eighty introductory psychology students (mostly White freshmen and sophomore women) rated the descriptiveness of the 99 features that were listed by at least two participants in Study 1a. Specifically, we told participants,

> We are interested in your thoughts about the experience of ''wanting less closeness'' with a romantic partner (i.e., wanting to be less close with someone). Listed below are a series of characteristics, or ''features,'' that may be associated with the experience of wanting less closeness. How central do you think each feature is to the experience of wanting less closeness? That is, do you think each feature is a key component of feeling too close? Using the provided scaled, please rate how central (i.e., typical vs. atypical) each of the following features is to the experience of ''wanting less closeness'' with a romantic partner.

Response options ranged from 1 (*extremely* atypical *feature of wanting less closeness*) to 7 (*extremely* typical *feature of wanting less closeness*). Participants completed the rating task on the computer; all words were presented in the same order for all participants.

The 20 attributes that received the highest centrality ratings are listed in Table 2. The 10 most central descriptors, in descending order of typicality, were ''withdrawing,'' ''seeing other people,'' ''feeling trapped,'' ''being smothered,'' ''needing space,'' ''partner wanting too much,'' ''wanting freedom,'' ''relationship not working,'' ''wanting separation,'' and ''thinking partner is 'not the one.' ''

There was a lack of correspondence in the frequency with which words were listed in Study 1a and the centrality ratings these words garnered in Study 1b. In fact, when treating each word or descriptor as its own case, the correlation between the frequency the word was listed in Study 1a with the centrality rating that word received in Study 1b resulted in a correlation of $r = .11$ ($p > .05$, $n = 99$ words); the magnitude of the association increases—though does not reach statistical significance—when looking at just those words that were listed by five or more people in Study 1a ($r = .20$, $p > .05$, $n = 28$ words). The low correlation between frequency and centrality perhaps points to the different cognitive processes involved in generating responses versus evaluating responses and is consistent with the low correlations published elsewhere between such variables. For example, Kearns and Fincham (2004) reported a correlation of .17 in their study of forgiveness. That said, Fehr (1988) reported a correlation of .38 in her study of love.

Taken as a whole, Study 1 allowed us to identify a set of descriptors most characteristic of what it means to want less closeness with an intimate other. That they were rated as characteristic of the experience of wanting less closeness provides an indication that they are in fact at the heart of the experience; however, experimentally demonstrating a causal association between these characteristics and the desire for less closeness would add confidence to the claim. Especially important, as described next, such a test would permit us to examine the malleability (vs. fixed individual difference) of feeling

TABLE 2
Features Receiving the Highest Centrality Ratings in Study 1b

	Descriptive Statistics	
Feature	*M*	*SD*
Withdrawing	5.77	1.45
Seeing other people	5.76	1.55
Feeling trapped	5.76	1.25
Being smothered	5.70	1.55
Needing space	5.69	1.29
Partner wanting too much	5.68	1.23
Wanting freedom	5.62	1.53
Relationship not working	5.61	1.70
Wanting separation	5.61	1.64
Thinking partner is ''not the one''	5.60	1.48
Partner is annoying	5.60	1.54
Not being in love	5.55	1.55
Taking a break	5.51	1.60
Losing interest	5.51	1.54
Being suffocated	5.49	1.67
Distancing yourself	5.49	1.47
Feeling invaded	5.48	1.36
Having to escape	5.45	1.71
Being overwhelmed	5.42	1.35
Pulling away	5.41	1.53

Note. $N = 78$–80 (some participants failed to rate every word); words rated on a scale from 1 (*extremely* atypical *feature of wanting less closeness*) to 7 (*extremely* typical *feature of wanting less closeness*).

too close and its anticipated moderation by a fixed individual difference (attachment avoidance).

STUDY 2

If the characteristics of wanting less closeness generated in Study 1 are in fact associated with the experience of wanting less closeness, and not just abstractly but in the context of one's own actual relationship, it should be possible to use these characteristics as an experimental manipulation to prime wanting less closeness. In addition to allowing for a strong experimental test of whether these features are truly descriptive of people's feelings of being too close (as suggested by the results of Study 1), an especially important goal of this approach is to examine whether feeling too close is susceptible to situational variation, particularly among those predisposed to such feelings by virtue of attachment avoidance.

Method

Participants

Fifty-three English-fluent individuals from a large North American public university who were involved in romantic relationships participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 26 ($M = 19.9$ years, $SD = 1.89$). Self-reported relationship status varied from casually dating to married, although the majority of participants described their relationships as serious dating (51%). Relationships ranged in duration from 1 month to 84 months, with an average length of 23 months ($SD = 19$ months). Participants tended to be female (72%) and Caucasian (42% Caucasian, 30% Asian/Pacific Islander, 11% Black, 8% Hispanic, 2% Middle Eastern, 2% multiracial, 4% other; 1 person did not indicate race).

Design, Procedures, and Materials

This experiment took place over three phases: premanipulation, manipulation, and postmanipulation. Descriptions of the procedures and materials used in each phase appear next.

Premanipulation phase. In the premanipulation phase of the experiment, participants completed a randomly ordered battery of questionnaires assessing attachment-related avoidance and anxiety and relationship quality. These scales, which were completed via computer, served as moderators and covariates in the analyses. In addition, participants completed a brief demographic measure assessing age, gender, ethnicity, relationship status, and length of relationship.

The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (Brennan et al., 1998) served as a measure of attachment-related avoidance and anxiety. Items are evaluated using a 7-point scale ranging from *disagree strongly* to *agree strongly*. Sample questions from the 18-item Avoidance subscale include "I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down" and "I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners." Scores for the Avoidance subscale ranged from 1.06 to 5.06 ($\alpha = .90$). Although we did not have any predictions or research questions concerning attachment-related anxiety, we included it in the analyses as a covariate. Sample questions from the 18-item Anxiety subscale include "I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love" and "I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them." Scores ranged from 1.28 to 6.22 ($\alpha = .91$).

Two measures assessed relationship quality: the Passionate Love Scale (PLS; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986) and the Marital Opinion Scale (MOS; Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986); these measures served as covariates during hypothesis testing. We administered a shortened version of the PLS (the first seven items of the 15-item version) as part of the premanipulation packet. Sample items include "Sometimes my body trembles with excitement at the sight of my partner," and "Sometimes I feel I can't control my thoughts; they are obsessively on my partner." Participants provided responses on a 6-point scale ranging from *untrue* to *true*. Scale scores ranged from 2.57 to 5.86 ($\alpha = .85$); higher scores reflect higher levels of passionate love. The MOS assessed relationship satisfaction. Although this 11-item scale was originally used with married couples, it has been widely used with dating individuals as well (e.g., Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna & Heyman, 2000). Each participant indicates how she or he rates the relationship on a 6-point scale that is anchored by antonyms (e.g., "miserable" vs. "enjoyable"). Scale scores ranged from 3.55 to 6.00 ($\alpha = .85$); higher scores reflect greater relationship satisfaction.

Because many of the questionnaire items asked participants to report on socially relevant behaviors and feelings, their tendency to respond in socially desirable ways was assessed using the 20-item Impression Management subscale of Paulhus's (1988) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding. Sample items include "I sometimes tell lies if I have to" and "I never cover up my mistakes." Participants rated each item on a 7-point scale ranging from *not true* to *mostly true*. Following Paulhus's recommendation, we summed the number of items strongly endorsed by participants (i.e., answered as a 6 or 7, with appropriate items reversed). Number of items strongly endorsed ranged from 0 to 12 with a mean of 5.72 ($SD = 3.24$, $\alpha = .68$).

Manipulation phase. Following completion of the premanipulation measures, participants were randomly assigned to experimental condition (described next); conditions differed solely in terms of the content of a

key "puzzle" embedded within a larger task completed by the participants. Following typical procedures in priming experiments, (e.g., Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977) in order to protect the integrity of the manipulation and to ensure that participants remained unaware of the manipulation's relevance to the dependent variable, we led participants to believe that the task was unrelated to the prepriming questionnaires. We accomplished this as follows: When participants first arrived and the study was being explained to them, participants were told that the experimenter was helping a colleague run her "puzzle study" and that the puzzle experiment would be "tacked on to this one." The experimenter then explained that he had not quite finished preparing the second half of the relationship study and that participants should begin the first half (i.e., the battery of questionnaires) while he finished. The experimenter then left the room, returning 10 min later to explain that it was taking longer than expected to prepare the second half of the relationship study and that once participants had completed the first half, they should then start the puzzle study. The experimenter then distributed copies of the puzzle study and exited the room. The experimenter waited another 20 min and then returned to the room; if not all participants had completed the premanipulation questionnaires, the experimenter pretended to check something on one of the computers and exited for another few minutes. Participants were then instructed to bring the puzzle study to him once completed and to then complete the relationship study.

To further disguise the nature of the experimental manipulation, the key puzzle (a priming task) was preceded by two filler puzzles. These two filler puzzles were of neutral subject matter and simple design, taking just a couple of minutes to complete. The first filler puzzle was a hidden-picture task. The second filler puzzle asked participants to circle the two pictures in a set of four that were identical to each other; the other two pictures in the set varied only slightly from the matched pair.

The study included two conditions relevant to the current article: Too Close and Neutral Control.[2] The actual experimental manipulation consisted of a single search-a-word puzzle that contained 15 words embedded in a 12×13-letter matrix; participants received a list of the words they were to locate. In the Too Close condition, participants received a puzzle containing eight descriptors highly descriptive of wanting less closeness with a romantic partner, as determined in Study 1b. Descriptors included in the puzzle had received the highest centrality ratings, with the qualification that they be of an appropriate syntactical nature to allow inclusion in a search-a-word puzzle, so as not to be obviously distinct from other words and phrases in the puzzle (i.e., so that the experimental manipulation was not transparent). The descriptors obtained from Study 1b that met these criteria included "want separation," "need space," "trapped," "suffocated," "not working," "want freedom," "smothered," and "withdrawing." Most two-word descriptors were shortened to one word by removing the preceding verb in order to not draw attention to these words and to further ensure that participants would be unable to distinguish between target words and neutral words. The final embedded words were "separation," "space," "trapped," "suffocated," "not working," "freedom," "smothered," and "withdrawing."[3] Along with these priming descriptors, the puzzle contained seven embedded filler words: "video," "frequent," "quotation," "placement," "poured," "translated," and "appointed."

Participants in the comparison condition, referred to as the Neutral Control condition, likewise completed a search-a-word puzzle. This puzzle was populated with 15 words: the same seven filler words as used in the Too Close condition and eight other words chosen by the researchers for their general lack of valence or relationship relevance: "baseball," "cabinet," "chimney," "hatchback," "suspenders," "phone," "trimming," and "shopping mall."

We pilot tested the words used in the Neutral Control and Too Close conditions to assess whether they differed significantly in their perceived positivity and negativity. An independent sample of 31 college students participated in the rating task. Participants responded to the question, "How positive or negative is each word? Please rate the positivity or negativity of each word." Participants were provided with a 7-point Likert scale ranging from -3 (*very negative*) to 0 (*neutral*) to 3 (*very positive*). Results indicate that the target words included in the Too Close condition were perceived as significantly more negative ($M = -1.28$, $SD = .49$) than those included in the Neutral Control condition ($M = .11$, $SD = .28$), $t(30) = 13.72$, $p < .001$.

We sought to promote deep processing of the embedded words based on research showing that more

[2]To explore the possibility of an underlying prototype structure, we originally included a puzzle populated by words that had received the *lowest* centrality ratings in Study 1b. Exploratory analyses suggested the concept "wanting less closeness" is not cognitively organized as a prototype. That is, peripheral features also significantly affected desired closeness; if this concept were organized as a prototype, one would expect the central features, but not the peripheral features, to affect desired closeness. To streamline the presentation of results relevant to the questions at the heart of the current article, we include data only from the Too Close and Neutral Control conditions.

[3]We realized too late that the meaning of "space" and "freedom" are antithetical to the meaning of "need space" and "want freedom." If anything, their inclusion in the Study 2 and Study 3 priming tasks should weaken the effectiveness of the manipulation and could thus be expected to work against our hypotheses.

semantic involvement with priming words (i.e., thinking about what the words mean, using them in sentences, etc.) leads to deeper processing of these words, which in turn facilitates the priming effect (Bretzing & Kullhavy, 1979; Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Craik & Tulving, 1975). Once participants completed the search-a-word puzzle, they wrote a brief story using as many of the words from the search-a-word task as possible (we also told them they would be asked to recall the words later in the study). We counted the number of "target" words (the eight words unique to each condition's search-a-word puzzle) and "filler" words (the seven words that appeared in both conditions' search-a-word puzzles) participants used in their stories. A 2 within (word type: target vs. filler) × 2 between (condition: Too Close vs. Neutral Control) mixed analysis of variance indicated that target words were more likely to be included in the story than filler words, $F(1, 51) = 100.54$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .66$, but this tendency was *not* more pronounced in one condition compared to the other, $F(1, 51) = .13$, $p = .72$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$. The number of target words used in the story served as an indicator of depth of processing and was controlled for in the analysis.

Finally, research assistants blind to the experimental conditions and hypotheses evaluated the extent to which each story was relevant to close relationships. Codes ranged 0 (*not at all relevant*), 1 (*somewhat relevant*), and 2 (*definitely relevant*). Stories generated in the Too Close condition received these codes 42%, 8%, and 50% of the time, respectively, and stories generated in the Neutral Control condition received these codes 93%, 4%, and 4%, respectively (within this condition, percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding error). The chi-square for these observed rates is significant, $\chi^2(2) = 16.05$, $p < .001$.

Postmanipulation phase. Participants then returned to the computer to complete the postmanipulation questionnaire, which contained two questions about closeness. First, they completed the Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS) Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), which assessed participants' feelings of closeness to their romantic partner. The IOS Scale is a single-item pictorial scale consisting of seven pairs of overlapping circles; each pair of circles overlaps slightly more than the preceding pair. One circle in each pair is labeled as "self" and the second is labeled as "other." Participants indicated the pair of circles that best described their current relationship with their partner. It is notable that during the development of this scale, Aron et al. (1992) asked samples of undergraduates and adults to describe what the overlapping circles meant. Participants conveyed that the measure assessed "closeness" using exactly the kinds of terms that the current study's participants described having too much of—interconnections of selves, interdependence, integration of lives.

Second, echoing the methods used by Mashek and Sherman (2004), participants completed a modified version of the IOS that asked them to indicate which pair of circles best describes their described relationship with their romantic partner.

Finally, the experimenter fully debriefed participants, who were then thanked and dismissed from the research lab.

Results and Discussion

Table 3 shows the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the premanipulation and postmanipulation scales for each of the two conditions.

The main focus of Study 2 was to test whether individuals primed with words associated with wanting less closeness would desire less closeness than participants primed with other words, particularly among those high in attachment avoidance. Thus, we employed hierarchical regression to predict desired closeness from (Step 1) current closeness, social desirability, depth of processing (i.e., the number of target words that appeared in the story), pretest passionate love and relationship satisfaction (to control for overall relationship quality), length of relationship, sex of respondent, and the relationship relevance of the story written by the participant; (Step 2) experimental condition, attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance; and (Step 3) Anxiety × Avoidance, Condition × Anxiety, Condition × Avoidance.[4] We included attachment-related anxiety and the interaction between anxiety and avoidance for exploratory purposes; we did not have any predictions or research questions concerning anxiety. Continuous predictor variables involved in product terms were centered prior to the analysis.

Table 4 provides the regression coefficients for this analysis. Experimental condition significantly predicted desired closeness, even after controlling for current closeness, social desirability, depth of processing, pretest levels of relationship quality, length of the relationship, sex, and the relationship relevance of the story ($\beta = -.33$, $p < .05$). The pattern of means was in the expected direction, such that exposure to words centrally associated with the desire for less closeness created the desire for less closeness. Specifically, the adjusted mean for desired closeness in the Too Close condition was 5.40 ($SE = .22$) versus 6.21 ($SE = .22$) in the Neutral Control

[4]An alternate analytic approach predicts the discrepancy between desired IOS and current IOS. In both Study 2 and Study 3, the same key results emerge when using discrepancy scores as when using regressed change. In particular, the main effect for condition and the interaction between condition and avoidance remain significant and in the predicted direction.

TABLE 3
Mean, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Study 2

			Premanipulation Variables					*Postmanipulation Variables*	
	M	*SD*	*1.*	*2.*	*3.*	*4.*	*5.*	*6.*	*7.*
Premanipulation variables									
1. Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding									
Neutral Control	5.68	3.13	—						
Too Close	5.76	3.41	—						
2. Passionate Love Scale									
Neutral Control	4.85	.80	.30	—					
Too Close	4.64	1.01	.01	—					
3. Marital Opinion Scale									
Neutral Control	5.38	.40	.49*	.24	—				
Too Close	5.20	.56	.22	.60**	—				
4. Attachment-related anxiety									
Neutral Control	3.31	1.07	−.03	.26	−.15	—			
Too Close	3.63	1.21	−.22	.29	−.27	—			
5. Attachment-related avoidance									
Neutral Control	2.26	1.06	−.30	−.31	−.17	−.08	—		
Too Close	2.62	.77	−.34†	−.41*	−.40*	.09	—		
Postmanipulation variables									
6. Actual closeness									
Neutral Control	5.35	1.38	.18	.33	.14	.05	−.47*	—	
Too Close	4.69	1.57	.17	−.06	.50**	−.51**	−.28	—	
7. Desired closeness									
Neutral Control	6.15	.93	−.13	.55**	−.23	.11	−.20	.46*	—
Too Close	5.35	1.50	.23	.45*	.58**	.15	−.34†	.59**	—

Note. For the Neutral Control condition, sample sizes for correlations ranged from 26 to 27; sample size for the Too Close condition was 26. None of the premanipulation variables differed significantly between the two experimental conditions (*p*s ranged from .17 to .93). Although actual closeness did not differ significantly between conditions ($p = .12$), desired closeness did, $t(50) = 2.34$, $p = .02$.

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

TABLE 4
Coefficients for Regressions Predicting Desired Closeness in Study 2 and Study 3

	Study 2				*Study 3*			
	Too Close vs. Neutral Control				*Too Close vs. Negative Control*			
Desired Closeness	ΔR^2	*B*	*SE*	*β*	ΔR^2	*B*	*SE*	*β*
Step 1	.50***				.48***			
Current closeness		.42	.11	.48**		.54	.09	.57***
Social desirability		−.01	.05	−.02		−.06	.04	−.16
Depth of processing		.03	.08	.04		−.11	.06	−.15†
Pretest passionate love		.66	.19	.47**		.19	.16	.12
Pretest satisfaction		−.11	.39	−.04		.05	.20	.02
Length of relationship		.00	.01	.02		.00	.01	.06
Sex		.15	.38	.05		.17	.29	.05
Relationship relevance of story		.11	.18	.08		−.01	.13	−.01
Step 2	.09†				.04			
Condition		−.82	.35	−.33*		−.55	.24	−.21*
Anxiety		.20	.14	.17		−.01	.12	−.01
Avoidance		.11	.17	.08		−.09	.14	−.07
Step 3	.08†				.05*			
Anxiety × Avoidance		−.21	.15	−.16		−.25	.12	−.19*
Condition × Anxiety		.65	.30	.42*		−.04	.21	−.03
Condition × Avoidance		−.61	.33	−.27†		−.51	.22	−.30*

Note. Variables included in interactions were centered prior to analysis. Step 1 statistics are from Model 1, Step 2 statistics are from Model 2, and so on. In Study 2, the Neutral Control condition received dummy code 0 and the Too Close condition received dummy code 1. In Study 3, the Negative Control condition received dummy code 0 and the Too Close condition received dummy code 1.

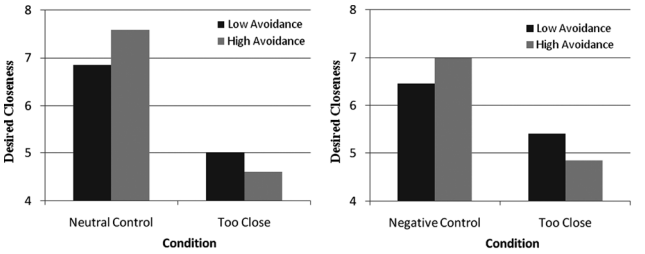
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p = .01$.

condition. However, this main effect was qualified by a marginally significant interaction with attachment avoidance ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .10$).

As shown in Figure 1a, individuals in the Too Close condition showed a greater overall tendency to want less closeness than individuals in the Neutral Control condition. And, as expected, the manipulation had more of an impact on those high in avoidance (though the simple slope for the Too Close condition was not significant; simple slope $t = -.83$, $p = .41$). The simple slope for the Neutral Control condition was in the other direction (*simple slope* $t = 1.95$, $p = .06$).[5,6]

STUDY 3

Although exposure to words centrally associated with desiring less closeness successfully triggered a desire for less closeness, particularly among those high in attachment-related avoidance, the mechanism through which this occurred remains unclear. Study 2's Too Close condition may have had an effect relative to the neutral control condition because it indeed primed participants to want less closeness. Alternatively, it may have had an effect simply as a function of the negativity of the words populating the prime. That is, negative words—rather than words associated with desiring less closeness—may be sufficient to trigger the desire for less closeness. We felt it was crucial to test the issue directly. Thus, Study 3 offered a more stringent test of the hypotheses by pitting the Too Close condition against an intentionally Negative Control condition and provided an opportunity to replicate the basic results in a new sample and with slightly different procedures.



(a) Study 2: Neutral Control vs. Too Close (b) Study 3: Negative Control vs. Too Close

FIGURE 1 Pattern of interaction between condition and avoidance in Study 2 and Study 3. *Note*. Low avoidance is plotted at M − 1 SD; high avoidance is plotted at M + 1 SD.

Method

Participants

Ninety-six English-fluent individuals from a large North American public university, all of whom were involved in romantic relationships, participated in the study. During debriefing, three participants evidenced knowledge of the hypotheses and were removed from the study prior to analysis. Of the remaining 93 participants, a priori one female participant was removed from the sample because she was an extreme outlier on both age and relationship length, deeming it unlikely that she represented the population of interest. One additional participant evidenced an obvious response set across a number of the inventories used in this study; his data were removed from analysis.

The final sample consisted of 91 participants, ranging in age from 18 to 36 ($M = 20.18$, $SD = 3.75$). Self-reported relationship status varied from casually dating to married, although the majority of participants described their relationships as serious dating (70%). Relationships ranged in duration from 2 months to 106 months, with an average length of 20 months ($SD = 19$ months). Participants tended to be female (79%) and Caucasian (57% Caucasian, 22% Asian/Pacific Islander, 8% Black, 4% Hispanic, 3% Middle Eastern, 3% multiracial, and 2% other).

Design, Procedures, and Materials

All premanipulation attachment orientation and relationship questionnaires were identical to those used in Study 2. Scores for the 18-item Avoidance subscale of the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale ranged from 1.00 to 5.17 ($\alpha = .94$); scores for the 18-item Anxiety subscale ranged from 1.00 to 5.67 ($\alpha = .91$) Scores on the PLS ranged from 2.00 to 6.00 ($\alpha = .77$), and scores on the MOS ranged from 3.27 to 6.00 ($\alpha = .92$). Finally, the number of items strongly endorsed on the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (the Social Desirability scale) ranged from 0 to 15 with a mean of 6.98 ($SD = 3.43$, $\alpha = .70$).

[5]Although we didn't have any specific predictions regarding attachment-related anxiety, the significant interaction between it and condition is notable ($\beta = .42$, $p < .05$). The pattern of the effect suggests that, for participants in the Too Close condition, attachment-related anxiety was positively associated with a desire for relatively more closeness (simple slope $t = 2.83$, $p < .05$); that is, the manipulation—populated with words an anxious person would find threatening to the relationship—created a yearning for connection. In the Neutral Control condition, attachment-related anxiety was not much associated with desired closeness (simple slope $t = -.80$, *ns*). This effect did not replicate in Study 3.

[6]To evaluate whether the manipulation influenced actual closeness, we predicted actual closeness using the same set of predictors and covariates as those used when predicting desired closeness. Although condition did not significantly predict actual closeness, condition and attachment-related anxiety interacted to significantly predict actual closeness ($p < .01$). For individuals in the Neutral Control condition, attachment-related anxiety was positively associated with actual closeness (simple slope $t = 2.29$, $p < .05$), but for individuals in the Too Close condition, anxiety was negatively associated with actual closeness (simple slope $t = -2.34$, $p < .05$).

Once participants completed the initial measures, they were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (described next), differentiated only by the content of the search-a-word puzzle. As in Study 2, participants were led to believe that the puzzle task was unrelated to the relationship questionnaires in order to ensure the validity of the manipulation and the effects of the prime on the dependent variable. The cover story was essentially the same as in Study 2; a few changes were made to reflect the pen-and-paper administration of Study 3 (e.g., the researcher ran out of copies vs. hadn't yet finished the online questionnaire). As in Study 2, the key puzzle (the priming task) was preceded by two filler puzzles; these two puzzles were the same hidden-picture and picture-matching puzzles used in Study 2.

Both search-a-word puzzles used in Study 3 contained 15 words embedded in a 12×13-letter matrix; participants received a list of the words they were to locate. The Too Close condition was identical to the experimental condition used in Study 2. As a departure from Study 2's use of a Neutral Control group, Study 3 employed a Negative Control group. The puzzle used in the Negative Control condition contained the seven filler words described for Study 2 and eight words that were not listed by participants in Study 1 but were intended to be of a similar negative valence as the words in the Too Close puzzle: "irritate," "darken," "sulking," "disappointed," "distaste," "shallow," "regret," and "bitter." This was done to control for any effects that generally negative words might have on the dependant variables, regardless of their relevance to wanting less closeness.

An independent sample of 26 college students evaluated the perceived positivity and negativity of the words included in the puzzles. The question and rating scale were identical to those used in the Study 2 pilot test. The target words in the Too Close condition were rated as significantly less negative ($M = -1.10$, $SD = .62$) than the target words in the Negative Control condition ($M = -1.90$, $SD = .72$), $t(25) = 7.50$, $p < .001$. Notably, words from both conditions were rated as negative in valence.

Depth of processing of the embedded words was encouraged using the same method as in Study 2. Participants wrote a brief story using the search-a-word descriptors and were told they would have to recall the words at the end of the study. A 2 within (word type: target vs. filler) $\times$ 2 between (condition: Too Close vs. Negative Control) mixed analysis of variance indicated that target words were more likely to be included in the story than filler words, $F(1, 89) = 65.92$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .43$, but this tendency was *not* significantly more pronounced in one condition compared to the other, $F(1, 89) = 2.30$, $p = .13$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$.

Research assistants coded the relationship relevance of the stories written by participants. Codes ranged 0 (*not at all relevant*), 1 (*somewhat relevant*), and 2 (*definitely relevant*). Stories generated in the Too Close condition received these codes 50%, 8%, and 42% of the time, respectively; stories generated in the Negative Control condition received these codes 70%, 21%, and 9%, respectively. The chi-square for these observed rates is significant, $\chi^2(2) = 13.02$, $p = .001$.

Participants subsequently indicated actual and desired closeness using the IOS. Afterward, participants were fully debriefed, then dismissed from the lab.

Results and Discussion

Table 5 shows the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the premanipulation and postmanipulation scales for each experimental condition.

Analyses were identical to Study 2 (see Table 4 for regression coefficients) and yielded similar results. Once again, there was a main effect for experimental condition ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .05$), such that individuals in the Too Close condition desired less closeness (adjusted $M = 5.52$, $SE = .15$) than individuals in the Negative Control condition (adjusted $M = 6.07$, $SE = .17$). Further, as predicted, avoidance interacted significantly with condition in predicting the desire for less closeness ($\beta = -.30$, $p < .05$). As can be seen from Figure 1b, the pattern of the effect is quite similar to that seen in Study 2 and is also consistent with the prediction that individuals high in attachment avoidance would be especially sensitive to the prime. In the Too Close condition, the desired closeness of those individuals especially high in avoidance was lower than the desired closeness of individuals with lower avoidance (simple slope $t = -1.52$, $p = .13$). In the Negative Control condition, the effect was in the other direction (simple slope $t = 1.38$, $p = .17$).[7,8]

We suggested in Study 2 that the negativity of the words populating the puzzles, rather than the relevance of those words to the want for less closeness, may have accounted for the results. As a reminder, in Study 2, the Too Close words were perceived as more negative than the Neutral Control words, and, in Study 3, the

[7]Although attachment-related anxiety did not interact significantly with condition, as occurred in Study 2, it did interact significantly with attachment-related avoidance to predict desired closeness ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .05$). Among people with high attachment-related anxiety, also being high in attachment-related avoidance was negatively associated with desired closeness (simple slope $t = -2.33$, $p < .05$); this association was less pronounced among people low in attachment-related anxiety (simple slope $t = -1.79$, $p < .10$). This effect was not present in Study 2.

[8]To evaluate whether the manipulation influenced actual closeness, we predicted actual closeness using the same set of predictors and covariates as those used when predicting desired closeness. Neither condition nor its interactions with avoidance and anxiety significantly predicted actual closeness.

TABLE 5
Mean, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Study 3

			Premanipulation Variables					*Postmanipulation Variables*	
	M	*SD*	*1.*	*2.*	*3.*	*4.*	*5.*	*6.*	*7.*
Premanipulation variables									
1. Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding									
Negative Control	6.79	3.27	—						
Too Close	7.19	3.62	—						
2. Passionate Love Scale									
Negative Control	4.96	.78	−.03	—					
Too Close	4.83	.89	−.01	—					
3. Marital Opinion Scale									
Negative Control	5.29	.70	.31*	.46**	—				
Too Close	5.34	.61	.31*	.33*	—				
4. Attachment-related anxiety									
Negative Control	3.56	1.16	−.43**	−.04	−.43**	—			
Too Close	3.57	1.09	−.41**	.08	−.35*	—			
5. Attachment-related avoidance									
Negative Control	2.29	1.11	−.28†	−.60***	−.50**	.41**	—		
Too Close	2.27	1.05	−.30*	−.44**	−.49**	.31*	—		
Postmanipulation variables									
6. Actual closeness									
Negative Control	5.28	1.47	−.16	.45**	.19	−.19	−.32*	—	
Too Close	5.42	1.32	.15	.42**	.35*	−.13	−.33*	—	
7. Desired closeness									
Negative Control	6.02	1.34	−.49***	.33**	.01	−.01	−.09	.74***	—
Too Close	5.69	1.23	.16	.47***	.35*	−.06	−.49***	.59***	—

Note. For the Negative Control condition, sample sizes for correlations ranged from 42 to 43; for the Too Close condition, samples sizes ranged from 47 to 48. None of the premanipulation variables differed significantly between the two experimental conditions (*p*s ranged from .44 to .95). Neither actual closeness nor desired closeness differed significantly between the two experimental conditions (*p*s = .64 and .22, respectively).

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Negative Control words were perceived as more negative than the Too Close words. Because the Study 3 results so closely parallel the Study 2 results, this alternative explanation can be ruled out. Had negativity accounted for the interactions observed in these studies, the pattern for Study 2 would have been opposite the pattern for Study 3.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Taken together, these three studies contribute a preliminary understanding of wanting less closeness to the broader relationship literature. They provide the field with a qualitative description of the phenomenon (Study 1) and demonstrate it is possible to use attributes of this description to influence individuals' desired closeness, particularly among those high in attachment-related avoidance (Studies 2 and 3). Especially important, these studies broaden the spectrum of closeness experiences typically studied by social psychologists, opening the door for challenging conceptual and theoretical questions.

Conceptually, perhaps the most pressing next step is to articulate a definition of wanting less closeness that integrates knowledge gained in the current article; theoretical traditions in social psychology, clinical psychology, and communications research; and potentially neighboring constructs from both basic and applied psychology. For example, to what extent is wanting less closeness distinct from social psychological notions of autonomy, power, and control; communication research articulations of intimacy and intrusion; and clinical description of fear of intimacy, enmeshment, fusion, and merger?

Moreover, it will be important to consider these definitional and conceptual questions in both Western and non-Western contexts. Considering cultural contexts seems particularly important given many of the descriptors of wanting less closeness are tinged with Western ideals of self and identity (e.g., needing time alone, needing independence, being two different people). These Western ideologies are not surprising given the college-aged North American samples that participated in these studies.

The age of these participants further contextualizes these results: Those in the late adolescent stage of psychosocial development continue to navigate the Eriksonian challenge of "intimacy versus isolation" (Erikson, 1963); moreover, they may be experiencing romantic relationships for the first time. Examining

the extent to which the notion of wanting less closeness resonates with populations other than college-age North Americans will be necessary to determine the generalizability of the current set of findings. That said, the marital therapy literature gives a strong indication that undergraduates have not cornered the phenomenological market of wanting less closeness.

Theoretical challenges necessarily fall from these conceptual challenges. Perhaps most interesting, how do the theories embraced by relationship scholars account for wanting less of a generally good (possibly even essential) thing? Theoretically, what should cause the desire for less closeness? And what relationship processes should unfold in the wake of wanting less closeness? For example, from a self-expansion (Aron & Aron, 1986) perspective, closeness is the inclusion of other in the self. Thus, feeling too close might be caused by over-including the other in the self such that the other dominates or smothers the self (or what is included of the other is undesirable). Optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer & Pickett, 1999) and object relations theory (Stierlin, 1976) likewise suggest that threat to identity—especially in the form of over-inclusion in a dyad and the developmental push to differentiate self from other, respectively—could create the desire for less closeness. Finding ways of asserting one's individuality might reconcile, at least temporarily, one's closeness needs. Indeed, some of the most central descriptors of wanting less closeness suggest concerns about individuality: wanting other interests and goals, wanting own activities, and not wanting to share everything. On the other hand, an interdependence theorist might predict that the chronic—and perhaps resented—transformation of motivation favoring the good of the relationship over the interests of the self might lead to the perception that the relationship is a controlling one. Such a perception could subsequently lead to a desire to reestablish one's autonomy (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000), perhaps by becoming less close. Some of the descriptors of wanting less closeness hint at an autonomy theme: feeling trapped, wanting freedom, partner wanting too much.

It is important to note that, in both Study 2 and Study 3, the Too Close condition created the desire for less closeness in general, and not just among people who have high attachment-related avoidance. Even among people who are not predisposed to feeling too close, the feeling can emerge given the right situation. How might exposure to words associated with wanting less closeness trigger that desire, even among individuals who are not closeness averse? The risk regulation system offered by Murray, Holmes, and Collins (2006) suggests a possible mechanism. Specifically, Murray et al. noted, "Experiencing rejection automatically triggers the perception of risk and the desire to distance oneself from the relationship" (p. 644). The primes used in the Too Close condition of Study 2 and Study 3 perhaps created a perceived risk and a subsequent distancing by creating a sense of rejection. We might expect, then, that real-world situations that create a sense of rejection—neglecting to return a phone call, cancelling a date at the last minute, a tense argument—might likewise trigger the desire for less closeness.

Of course, attachment theory offers a particularly useful framework for understanding the want for less closeness, especially among people predisposed to be closeness averse. Given distance is a major relational goal of people high in attachment-related avoidance, it is notable that Study 2 and Study 3 findings suggest that individuals oriented toward avoidant attachment are especially sensitive to situational and relational cues related to wanting less closeness. Future research will need to work toward a more precise understanding of the mechanisms involved. To this end, social cognitive findings indicate that individuals high in attachment-related avoidance, when subconsciously primed with the attachment-related threat word "separation," effectively suppress mental representations of attachment figures (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002; Study 2). Although the primes employed in the current set of studies are largely populated by words that could likewise be interpreted as attachment-related threat words (including "separation," which was also used by Mikulincer et al., 2002), these studies differ in at least two important ways from earlier work. First, the primes were presented supraliminally. Second, the outcome measures were explicit—they asked participants to report their current feelings about a relationship partner. This latter distinction seems particularly relevant in that it represents a process "downstream" from the rapid cognition tapped by reaction time studies. Once the thoughts and feelings that populate the working model become consciously accessible, participants asked to explicitly indicate their thoughts about the relationship indicate a want for less closeness.

Taken as a whole, this article points to the need for conceptual and theoretical work to better understand the mechanics and relational consequences of wanting less closeness—a phenomenon discussed in the clinical realm, triggered by context, and commonly experienced by young adults, though largely ignored in the research literature. The current work is a first step in this direction, and the results of these studies provide an empirical foundation for subsequent study of the experience of wanting less closeness. This experience is consistent with predictions from a number of theoretical perspectives, including attachment theory and the self-expansion model, and research building on these studies has the potential to shed light on basic dyadic processes and to be useful in developing clinical applications. Wanting less closeness may be much more common than has been assumed in interpersonal relationships, and attending to

this previously neglected interpersonal phenomenon may provide a wealth of information regarding how individuals balance interconnection and individuation.

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