

The Use and Consequences of Expressive Suppression in High-Risk and Low-Risk Relationship Discussions

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Expressive suppression, which involves hiding emotions, is a common emotion regulation behavior in relationships but interferes with perceived responsiveness and closeness. These relationship costs make it important to identify the contexts in which the use and harmful correlates of expressive suppression are more likely to occur. Building from theory positing that different contexts entail different risks of rejection, we investigated whether expressive suppression was (a) more intense and (b) associated with worse relational outcomes in high-risk than low-risk relationship interaction contexts. In two studies (conducted in 2016–2017 and 2022), Belgian couples engaged in separate discussions about each other's most annoying characteristics (high-risk context) and valuable characteristics (low-risk context). For each discussion, each couple member reported how much they had suppressed their emotions, felt their partner was responsive toward them, and felt close to their partner. In Study 1 ($n = 101$ couples), expressive suppression was assessed for emotions in general. In Study 2 ($n = 130$ couples), expressive suppression was assessed for negative and positive emotions separately. In both studies, participants reported suppressing emotions more intensely in high-risk than in low-risk contexts. Actors' (and sometimes partners') expressive suppression was also associated with lower perceived responsiveness and closeness. However, results regarding whether suppression was associated with worse relational outcomes in the high-risk versus low-risk context were inconsistent, depending on the specificity of emotions assessed with the suppression measure (general, negative, or positive) and the relational outcome. The findings suggest that expressive suppression might be harmful regardless of the risk of relationship interactions.

Keywords: expressive suppression, close relationships, perceived partner responsiveness, closeness

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Expressive suppression is an emotion regulation strategy that involves hiding the outward expression of emotion from others (Gross, 1998). Suppression often comes with relationship costs (Chervonsky & Hunt, 2017), meaning it is important to identify factors that predict its occurrence and effects in close relationships. The risk regulation model (Murray et al., 2006) describes how relational behaviors arise in service of balancing the need for closeness with the risk of rejection. In this research, we apply this model to examine whether expressive suppression varies by context. Advancing recent work showing that expressive suppression may serve as a self-protective behavior when rejection risk is high

(Thomson et al., 2018), we investigate whether expressive suppression (a) is more intense and (b) is associated with poorer relational outcomes (lower perceived responsiveness and closeness) in high-risk interaction contexts (e.g., discussions of annoying partner characteristics) than low-risk contexts (e.g., discussions of valuable partner characteristics).

Risk Level as a Predictor of Expressive Suppression

The risk regulation model posits that social interactions that risk rejection trigger assessments of whether partners will reject or be

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responsive to emotions and needs (Murray et al., 2006). High-risk situations involve a heightened possibility of one partner perceiving that their value is not fully appreciated. Examples include conflicts, disagreements, and perceived imbalances in investments. These situations tend to promote self-protective behaviors that minimize rejection risk (e.g., Murray et al., 2003, 2008).

Expressive suppression is likely to be a common self-protective behavior because expressing emotions leaves people vulnerable, especially when partners cannot be trusted to react responsively (also see Righetti et al., 2015; Ruan et al., 2020). Providing supporting evidence, low trust in partners (Righetti et al., 2015) or perceiving lower regard from partners (Thomson et al., 2018) predicts greater expressive suppression during risky relationship situations, such as when needing to sacrifice or resolve conflict. Possessing low relationship power—and thus being at greater risk—also predicts greater expressive suppression (Overall et al., 2020), especially when partners are perceived as less responsive (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2021).

In line with the reasoning that expressive suppression is particularly prevalent in high-risk situations, research examining expressive suppression has primarily focused on challenging relationship interactions involving conflicts or sacrifices (e.g., Impett et al., 2012; Low et al., 2017; Righetti et al., 2015; Thomson et al., 2018). Much less attention has been paid to the prevalence of expressive suppression in lower risk situations. Yet, the majority of interactions in couples' daily lives do not contain high levels of rejection risk. For instance, couples report having many more positive than negative interactions in daily life (e.g., Gable et al., 2003) and report talking about mundane topics (like their surroundings and what they see on television) much more than they report high-risk interactions such as conflict (Alberts et al., 2005).

From a risk regulation perspective, the need to engage in expressive suppression is likely greater in high-risk interaction contexts, as they can activate doubts about the partner's regard and positive qualities and therefore promote self-protective behavior including suppression (Thomson et al., 2018). Additionally, many high-risk topics include the sharing of negative feelings that are less common during the discussion of low-risk topics and that could potentially hurt the partner and elicit negative reactions (Overall et al., 2016; L. J. Roberts & Greenberg, 2002; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

In this study, we offer the first direct test of whether situational risk predicts the intensity of expressive suppression in relationship interactions, testing both low- and high-risk interactions. In contrast to the individual differences that often have been a focus in past research, the risk level is a situational variable that changes within couples. As such, it is a proximal predictor of expressive suppression that enables a deeper understanding of how expressive suppression works in natural relationship interactions.

Outcomes of Expressive Suppression: Why Risk Might Matter

According to the risk regulation model, self-protective behavior that is used to reduce the risk of rejection and dependence on one's partner could increase distance and hence reduce closeness between partners. If expressive suppression is such a self-protective behavior, it would hamper relationships by reducing closeness. Indeed, expressive

suppression has established harmful relational consequences, including reduced closeness. In close relationships, expressive suppression has been associated with reduced rapport and willingness to start a relationship in experiments that manipulated suppression (Butler et al., 2003), more distancing and less relatedness (Cameron & Overall, 2018), and reduced support and closeness (Low et al., 2017). More generally, self-reported expressive suppression during interactions is associated with lower relationship well-being for the suppressor (Cameron & Overall, 2018; Impett et al., 2012; Low et al., 2017; Peters & Jamieson, 2016; Righetti et al., 2015) and often also for their partner (Impett et al., 2012; Low et al., 2017; Peters & Jamieson, 2016; Sasaki et al., 2022).

The research to date shows that there are relational costs to suppression, but little is known about how context may shape the outcomes of suppression. Differentiating costs in high-risk (e.g., conflicts) versus low-risk (e.g., positive discussions) interaction contexts is an important starting point. In high-risk interaction contexts, tensions arise between relationship motives like forging a connection and personal motives like protecting the self from potential rejection (e.g., Kelley et al., 2003). As a result, in high-risk contexts, partners need to engage in self-regulation, collaborate with their partner, and use conflict resolution skills, which are all processes that are obstructed when engaging in expressive suppression. Moreover, when there are conflicts or opposing needs, open communication between partners is beneficial (e.g., McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall & McNulty, 2017), whereas failing to express emotions predicts declines in people's connection and commitment (e.g., Overall, 2018).

By contrast, personal and relationship motives more closely align in low-risk contexts. When there is no need for conflict resolution or open communication of negative emotions, suppressing the expression of negative emotions might be particularly beneficial. Expressing negative feelings might hurt, and elicit negative feelings in, the partner, thereby harming the relationship (also see Overall & McNulty, 2017). Indeed, McNulty and Russell (2010) found that direct, negative verbal behavior, such as criticizing a partner's behavior, predicted improved relationship quality when couples were facing serious problems but worse quality when facing minor issues. Outside the context of conflicts, when focusing on the positive aspects of a relationship, even discussing mixed positive and negative feelings might detract from relationship closeness (Zoppolat et al., 2024). Taken together, this work suggests that holding back negative and ambivalent emotions in low-risk contexts might actually sustain relationship well-being. In line with this idea, Thomson et al. (2018) found that expressive suppression in daily life was negatively associated with perceived partner regard on conflict days but positively associated on no-conflict days.

To our knowledge, only one recent study has examined expressive suppression and relational outcomes for both the suppressor and the partner during negatively (discussion of a conflict) and positively valenced (discussion of a positive area in couples' relationship) interaction topics (Zerwas et al., 2022). A conflict interaction could be seen as a high-risk context, and positive interactions as a low-risk context. In this study, participants who suppressed more reported lower connectedness and conversation quality in both contexts, with no differences in physiological activation. While these findings suggest similar relational costs in high- and low-risk contexts, the study did not explicitly compare suppression levels or effects across these contexts. It is necessary

to directly compare differences in suppression across contexts, as any differences in relational costs in this study could stem from suppression not occurring as much in low-risk versus high-risk contexts. Moreover, interactional behaviors enacted in response to high- and low-risk contexts might have specific relational consequences. For instance, behaviors enacted in response to positive versus negative relationship events are different and sometimes even more closely related to later relationship well-being and break-up (Gable et al., 2006).

The Current Research

We aimed to investigate if risk level predicted the intensity and associated outcomes of expressive suppression. Adopting a risk regulation perspective, we first tested whether suppression occurred more in high-risk (e.g., discussing annoying partner characteristics) than in low-risk interaction contexts (e.g., discussing valuable partner characteristics). Next, we investigated whether the associations between the person's own suppression (actor effects) and their partner's suppression (partner effects) with perceived partner responsiveness and closeness varied according to risk level. We focused on perceived partner responsiveness and closeness as important outcomes of self-protective behavior arising from risk regulation and expressive suppression in particular. We expected that expressive suppression would be associated with worse relational outcomes in the high-risk than in the low-risk interaction context. This expectation applied especially to suppressors' (actor effects), and possibly to partners' suppression (partner effects), as suppression obstructs relational processes that likely impact both actors and partners. However, although some studies show partner effects on relational outcomes (Impett et al., 2012; Low et al., 2017; Peters & Jamieson, 2016; Sasaki et al., 2022), others find no or inconsistent partner effects of suppression (e.g., Butler et al., 2003; Impett et al., 2012; Peters & Jamieson, 2016; Zerwas et al., 2022), making hypotheses about partner effects more exploratory. Finally, because greater negative and lower positive emotion is associated with greater expressive suppression (Dixon-Gordon et al., 2015), it is important to rule out that any contextual effects are not driven solely by emotional experience. Thus, we repeated all analyses controlling for the emotional intensity of the interaction.

Study 1

We adopted the dyadic interaction paradigm (N. A. Roberts et al., 2007) involving couples being recorded while discussing topics of different risk levels. The first topic involved a discussion about both partners' most annoying characteristics (high-risk interaction context). The second topic involved a discussion about both partners' most valued characteristics (low-risk interaction context). After each topic, both partners self-reported their use of expressive suppression, perceived partner responsiveness, and felt closeness during the discussion.

Method

Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, data exclusions (if any), and manipulations. All measures in the study and the

data and code to replicate the analyses are available at <https://osf.io/rp5ue/>. Data were analyzed using R Version 4.0.0 (R Core Team, 2021). This study's design and its analyses were not preregistered. Data were drawn from a larger study investigating emotional processes in relationships (see <https://osf.io/rp5ue/> for publications using these data). As a consequence, this study consisted of multiple parts not relevant to the current focus and not discussed. None of the previous publications investigated suppression.

Participants and Procedure

Using social media and posters, we recruited 101 couples in 2016–2017 around Leuven, Belgium. Thirty-seven percent of these couples were not (yet) cohabiting, 57% were cohabiting but not married, and 6% were married. All couples self-identified as heterosexual, and couples had been together an average of 4.5 years ($SD = 2.58$, range = 7 months–21 years). The average age of participants was 26 ($SD = 5.00$, range = 18–53). The large majority of the sample reported a Belgian nationality (92%) and a higher education (71%).

Because data were drawn from a larger study, sample size was not chosen to optimize power for the current research question. We refrain from post hoc power statements given these are criticized (Lakens, 2022), but conducted a sensitivity analysis to get an estimate of the effects we are able to detect given a sample of 100 couples. We used a simulation-based approach based on specified key effects for covariances, assuming small to moderate effect sizes, and on parameter estimates for the means and variances of expressive suppression and perceived responsiveness. With 100 couples, we are able to detect a difference in contexts when the association between expressive suppression and responsiveness is $-.35$ in the high-risk context and $-.25$ in the low-risk context, with a power of .70.

After both partners provided consent, they completed an online survey separately. Next, each couple visited the lab. To orient them to the lab, the couples spent 2 min discussing a neutral topic and were then escorted to separate rooms where they were asked to describe (in a textbox) what characteristic they found most annoying about their partner and why, and then rated how annoying the characteristic was. Upon returning to the common room, the couples discussed the characteristics both partners had written down to create a high-risk interaction context. To allow for a natural flow, couples could choose who started and when they would switch to the characteristic selected by the other partner. Participants were instructed to try to end on a good note. Couples were left alone to discuss for 10 min. After completing this conversation, participants went back to separate rooms to fill out questionnaires assessing expressive suppression, emotional experience, perceived partner responsiveness, and closeness. Participants also described the characteristic they valued most about their partner (and why), and on return to the common room, they discussed these valued characteristics for 10 min to create a low-risk interaction context. After completing this conversation, participants were once again separated and completed the questionnaires assessing expressive suppression, emotional experience, perceived partner responsiveness, and closeness during the low-risk interaction. Finally, they engaged in a video-mediated recall, in which they watched the interactions and provided their emotional experience during each

interaction on a second-to-second basis. Couples were reimbursed 100 euros for completing all parts of the study. This study was carried out in accordance with the recommendations of the University of Leuven's Social and Societal Ethics Committee and after having obtained its approval.

Measures

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for key variables, including Cronbach's alpha for each measure in each context. The following variables were measured after each interaction.

Expressive suppression was measured using two items adapted from the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003). Participants rated to what extent they had "tried to hide their emotions" and had "kept their emotions to themselves" during each interaction on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Supplemental Figure S1 shows the distribution of expressive suppression. Scores ranged from 1 to 6.

Perceived partner responsiveness was measured using three items (Reis et al., 2004). Participants rated to what extent they had felt that their partner "understood them," "cared for them," and "appreciated their opinion" during each interaction on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Closeness was measured using two items. Participants rated to what extent they felt (a) "loving toward" and (b) "close with" their partner at that moment on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Emotional experience was measured in two different ways, capturing (a) how people felt during the interactions using video-mediated recall and (b) after the interactions using postinteraction questionnaires. We used both measurements to conduct robustness checks that distinguished the effects of expressive suppression from the effects of how negative or positive people felt during and after the interactions.

To rate emotional experience during the interactions, participants viewed recordings of their conversations and rated them on how they had been feeling on a moment-to-moment basis, by continuously adjusting a joystick to the left (−1 = very negative) and the right (1 = very positive), so that it closely matched their feelings. We calculated participants' video-mediated recalled emotional experience by averaging the score across all moments.

After each interaction, we measured participants' momentary negative and positive emotions, capturing participants' emotional experience after the conversation. We measured negative emotions using the average of the items "angry," "sad," and "anxious" on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We measured positive

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables Study 1 and Study 2

Variable	α	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
Study 1									
High-risk context									
1. Expressive suppression	.90	2.25	1.09	.05					
2. Perceived partner responsiveness	.80	5.79	0.82	−.40**	.27				
3. Closeness	.80	6.09	0.65	−.35**	.61**	.34			
4. Video-mediated recall emotion (range:−1 to 1)		0.13	0.23	−.38**	.44**	.46**	.33		
5. Negative emotions after interaction	.81	1.69	0.79	.41**	−.27**	−.40**	−.49**	.28	
6. Positive emotions after interaction	.60	5.25	0.82	−.36**	.29**	.42**	.59**	−.58**	.15
Low-risk context									
1. Expressive suppression	.93	2.03	1.07	.16					
2. Perceived partner responsiveness	.71	6.25	0.58	−.30**	.16				
3. Closeness	.71	6.32	0.66	−.33**	.66**	.25			
4. Video-mediated recall emotion (range:−1 to 1)		0.37	0.21	−.24**	.43**	.43**	.33		
5. Negative emotions	.75	1.41	0.56	.47**	−.33**	−.38**	−.29**	.30	
6. Positive emotions	.67	5.68	0.75	−.38**	.33**	.41**	.45**	−.50**	0
Study 2									
High-risk context									
1. Expressive NE suppression	.93	0.87	1.25	.10					
2. Expressive PE suppression	.91	0.39	0.82	.60**	.05				
3. Perceived partner responsiveness	.89	5.84	1.15	−.31**	−.29**	.55			
4. Closeness	.90	6.08	1.04	−.32**	−.29**	.71**	.45		
5. Negative emotions	.83	0.53	0.82	.47**	.38**	−.43**	−.45**	.11	
6. Positive emotions	.91	4.58	1.37	−.33**	−.20**	.56**	.55**	−.54**	.34
Low-risk context									
1. Expressive NE suppression	.90	0.49	1.01	.24					
2. Expressive PE suppression	.92	0.31	0.80	.50**	.13				
3. Perceived partner responsiveness	.88	6.30	0.84	−.38**	−.15*	.39			
4. Closeness	.89	6.27	0.92	−.33**	−.20**	.73**	.45		
5. Negative emotions	.73	0.26	0.51	.38**	.18**	−.38**	−.44**	.04	
6. Positive emotions	.87	5.18	1.19	−.32**	−.13**	.47**	.55**	−.50**	.34

Note. Scales range from 1 to 7 for all variables except for video-mediated recall in Study 1 and from 0 to 7 for all variables in Study 2. The intraclass correlation for each variable is shown on the diagonal. NE = negative emotion; PE = positive emotion.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$, accounting for nonindependence between partners.

emotions using the average of “happy” and “relaxed” on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).¹

Results

We used multilevel models to account for dependencies that could arise due to the dyadic nature of the data and the multiple conversations couples had. The specific code for the models can be found on the Open Science Framework. Specifically, contexts were nested into couples, and a compound symmetry covariance structure was used, assuming that observations within the same context and couple were correlated.

To test if expressive suppression was more intense in high-risk than in low-risk interaction contexts, we regressed expressive suppression on context. The context was coded high-risk = -0.5 and low-risk = 0.5 so that the intercept represented the overall mean and context represented the difference in the means between the high- and low-risk contexts.

Because the dyads were distinguishable by gender, we investigated if the variance and the mean of the outcome (suppression) differed for male and female partners (Gistelinck et al., 2018; Kenny et al., 2006). With regard to differences in variance, we compared the fit of a model in which the variances were allowed to differ between men and women with a model in which they were considered similar. Because the model in which couples were treated as distinguishable by gender had a better fit ($p = .03$), we treated the data structure as distinguishable. With regard to differences in means, we tested if the fixed effect of context differed by gender (as this was our key effect of interest), finding no moderating gender effects ($p = .66$) and thus no evidence that the means differed for male and female partners with regard to the effects of context. We therefore pooled the fixed effects across gender. However, models in which we assessed interactions with gender can be found in the [Supplemental Materials](#), which revealed no meaningful differences. Continuous predictors were grand-mean centered to ease interpretation (Kenny et al., 2006). As expected, people reported significantly less expressive suppression in the low-risk than in the high-risk context ($B = -0.22$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-0.35, -0.09]$).

Next, we applied actor–partner interdependence models (Kenny et al., 2006) to examine whether one’s own and one’s partner’s expressive suppression were associated with perceived partner responsiveness and closeness in high-risk and low-risk contexts. We first regressed perceived responsiveness on both one’s own (modeling actor effects) and the partner’s (modeling partner effects) expressive suppression and added interactions with context. The results are shown in [Table 2](#).

Overall, a significant actor effect indicated that the more people engaged in expressive suppression, the less they perceived their partner as responsive across contexts. Additionally, a significant interaction between actor’s expressive suppression and context emerged (see [Figure 1](#)). A simple slope analysis in which both contexts were modeled with dummy variables indicated that the actor effect of suppression in the high-risk ($B = -0.27$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-0.35, -0.19]$) was stronger than in the low-risk context ($B = -0.12$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .01$, 95% CI $[-0.20, -0.03]$). There were no significant partner effects.

An analogous model testing closeness as an outcome revealed a significant actor effect across contexts: Individuals’ own higher expressive suppression was associated with lower feelings of

Table 2

The Main and Interaction Effects of Context and Emotion Suppression on Perceived Partner Responsiveness and Closeness

Predictor	Estimate (SE)	95% CI	p
Perceived partner responsiveness			
Intercept	6.02 (0.04)	[5.94, 6.11]	<.001
Actor suppression	−0.19 (0.03)	[−0.26, −0.13]	<.001
Partner suppression	−0.04 (0.03)	[−0.11, 0.02]	.211
Context	0.46 (0.06)	[0.34, 0.57]	<.001
Actor Suppression × Context	0.15 (0.05)	[0.05, 0.26]	.005
Partner Suppression × Context	0.01 (0.05)	[−0.10, 0.11]	.905
Closeness			
Intercept	6.21 (0.04)	[6.12, 6.30]	<.001
Actor suppression	−0.12 (0.03)	[−0.18, −0.06]	<.001
Partner suppression	−0.08 (0.03)	[−0.14, −0.03]	.003
Context	0.23 (0.04)	[0.16, 0.30]	<.001
Actor Suppression × Context	0.04 (0.04)	[−0.03, 0.11]	.267
Partner Suppression × Context	0.08 (0.04)	[0.00, 0.15]	.043

Note. SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

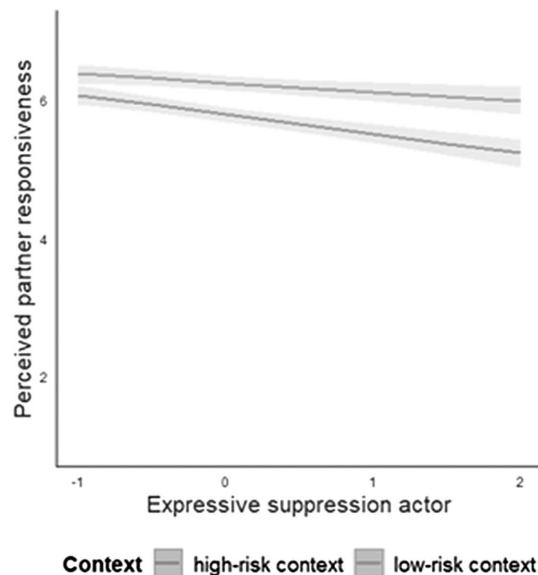
closeness (see [Table 2](#)). The interaction effect was not significant, meaning that associations between expressive suppression and closeness were similar across high- and low-risk contexts for the suppressor. An overall partner effect was also found: People felt less close toward their partner when their partner suppressed, but a significant interaction indicated that this partner effect differed across contexts. A simple slope analysis revealed that the partner effect of expressive suppression on closeness was significant in the high-risk ($B = -0.12$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .003$, 95% CI $[-0.19, -0.06]$) but not in the low-risk context ($B = -0.05$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .18$, 95% CI $[-0.11, 0.02]$).

Robustness Check

We repeated the analyses outlined above, controlling for participants’ emotional experiences during and after the interactions (see <https://osf.io/rp5ue/>). Findings for emotional experience during and after the interactions were similar. Participants reported more negative emotions during the high-risk interaction and more negative and less positive emotions after this interaction, which predicted more suppression. However, even when controlling for emotional experience, participants still reported more suppression in the high-risk than in the low-risk context ($p < .01$). We also found that more negative emotions during the high-risk context, and more negative and less positive emotions after the interaction in both contexts, predicted less perceived responsiveness and closeness. The association between actors’ expressive suppression and lower perceived partner responsiveness was still stronger in the high-risk context when controlling for participants’ emotional experience

¹ We selected these two items to provide domain coverage for both high and low arousal positive emotions, which explains the lower reliability compared to the other scales (see [Table 1](#)). Nonetheless, the Cronbach’s alphas were in the acceptable range for two-item scales. To address this potential concern, Study 2 included four items to measure positive emotions.

Figure 1
The Interaction Between Context and Expressive Suppression



Note. The negative association between actors' expressive suppression and perceived partner responsiveness was stronger in the high-risk than in the low-risk interaction context.

during ($p = .03$) and after ($p < .001$) the interactions. However, the interaction between partners' suppression and context on felt closeness was no longer significant ($p = .06$ for emotional experience during the interaction, and $p = .07$ for negative and positive emotions reported after the interaction), although the main partner effect remained.

Study 2

Study 2 extended Study 1 to address potential methodological limitations. In Study 1, couples first discussed a high-risk topic and then a low-risk topic. Discussing the high-risk topic might have activated negative thoughts and feelings about one's partner, which might have transferred to, and thus impacted, the effects of suppression in low-risk contexts. According to the risk regulation model, high-risk events should especially be strongly associated with gauging one's partner's responsiveness and potential self-protective behavior. Thus, carryover effects from the high-risk topic could provide an alternative explanation for the effects of suppression in low-risk interaction contexts. In Study 2, we address this potential limitation by counterbalancing the order of topics that the couples discussed.

In Study 1, we assessed expressive suppression in general, without including the valence of the emotions suppressed. As outlined in the introduction, most relationship research also assesses suppression in general or for negative emotions only. Following this research and the risk regulation model, our theorizing primarily applied to negative emotions. However, people might also suppress positive emotions during high-risk interaction contexts to decrease the risk of rejection. In addition, our findings showed that people also suppressed emotions in low-risk interaction contexts (although to a lesser extent), and positive emotions may be more common in

these contexts. Given these findings, and research showing regulating negative and positive emotions can have different functions and outcomes (Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008; Yu et al., 2023), in Study 2, we assessed positive and negative emotion suppression separately. Finally, Study 1 was not specifically designed for the research question and was not optimized to detect the effect of interest. As such, a sensitivity analysis revealed that the study was somewhat underpowered to detect small to moderate effects, with a power of 0.70, which is slightly below the conventional threshold of 0.80. This underscores the need to replicate these findings in a larger study.

Method

Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, data exclusions (if any), and manipulations. All measures in the study and the data and code to replicate the analyses are available at <https://osf.io/rp5ue/> (Sels et al., 2024). Data were analyzed using R, Version 4.0.0 (R Core Team, 2021). The specific hypotheses and data analyses of this study were preregistered and can be found at <https://osf.io/t97re>. No data from this study have been published yet.

Participants and Procedure

We conducted an a priori multilevel power analysis using a simulation-based approach (following Lafit et al., 2022). Specifically, we simulated a large number of data sets based on parameter estimates from Study 1 (means, variances, and covariances of key variables). Each simulated data set was then analyzed with an interaction model in which perceived responsiveness was predicted by both the actor's and partner's expressive suppression, context, and interactions between the actor's and partner's expressive suppression and context. This model addressed our second research question: Are the effects of expressive suppression associated with more harmful outcomes according to risk level? This power analysis showed that with 120 couples, a power of .80 would be reached for our smallest effect in Study 1: the interaction between context and partner suppression. We gathered more participants to ensure enough power in the event of missing data. We recruited 134 couples via (social) media, posters, and local networks in 2022 in Ghent, Belgium. There were two inclusion criteria: (a) couples had to be at least 20 years old and (b) had to be together for more than 6 months. Four couples did not attend the lab session, leaving a final sample of 130 couples or 260 participants for this study.

Participants were on average 28 years old ($SD = 10$) and together for 6 years ($SD = 7.26$). Sixty percent of these couples were not (yet) cohabiting, 25% were cohabiting but not married, and 15% were married. We recruited an inclusive sample of couples, resulting in 120 different-sex and 10 same-sex couples. Of these couples, 123 participants self-identified as male, 136 as female, and 1 as nonbinary. The large majority of the sample had a Belgian nationality (only four participants reported different or double nationalities, including Canadian, German, Dutch, and Spanish), did not identify with an immigrant background (94%), and had received higher education (69%).

After both partners provided consent, they were sent an online survey to complete separately. Next, each couple visited the lab. To orient them to the lab, they spent 2 min discussing a neutral topic.

Similar to Study 1, participants filled in online questions about the most annoying and valuable characteristics of their partner in separate rooms. When partners returned to the common room, couples were asked to discuss the (a) most annoying and (b) most valuable characteristics they identified with each other for 7 min² each. In contrast to Study 1, the order of the high- and low-risk interaction contexts was counterbalanced, resulting in 67 of the included couples discussing the most annoying characteristics first and 63 couples discussing the most valuable characteristics first. Following every conversation, partners returned to separate rooms to fill in online questionnaires about these interactions, including expressive suppression, perceived partner responsiveness, and closeness. After the lab session, each couple received 30 euros. This study was approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University, Belgium.

Measures

Table 1 includes the descriptive statistics for key variables, including Cronbach's alpha for each measure in each context. All measures below were taken after each interaction.

Expressive suppression was measured using similar items to Study 1, but with regard to negative and positive emotions separately. Two items assessed expressive suppression of negative emotions by asking how much participants had "tried to hide their negative emotions" and had "kept their negative emotions to themselves" during each interaction on an 8-point scale (0 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Analogous items assessed expressive suppression of positive emotions. See Supplemental Figure S1 for the distribution of expressive suppression for positive and negative emotions. Scores ranged from 0 to 6.

Perceived partner responsiveness was measured using three items similar to Study 1, on an 8-point scale (0 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Closeness was measured using two items similar to Study 1 on an 8-point scale (0 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Emotional experience was measured using postinteraction questionnaires. As in Study 1, these measurements enabled robustness checks that distinguish the effects of expressive suppression from emotional experience. Because Study 1 revealed no differences for emotional experience during versus after the interactions, we only assessed self-reported emotional experience after each conversation (being less time-intensive for participants). Negative emotions were measured using the average of the same three items as in Study 1. Positive emotions were using the average of four items: "satisfied," "happy," "relaxed," and "enthusiastic." Both were assessed on an 8-point scale (0 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Results

We used analogous multilevel models in Study 1. However, because we had an inclusive sample (rather than a sample in which partners were distinguishable by gender as in Study 1), we used models for indistinguishable dyads. All analyses were conducted with expressive suppression of negative emotions and suppression of positive emotions as separate outcomes or predictors.

To test if expressive suppression occurred more in high-risk than in low-risk interactions, we regressed expressive suppression on

context. People reported significantly less intense suppression in the low-risk than in the high-risk context for both negative ($B = -0.38$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-0.52, -0.24]$) and positive emotions ($B = -0.08$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .04$, 95% CI $[-0.16, -0.00]$).

Next, we examined whether expressive suppression was associated with poorer relational outcomes in the high-risk than low-risk context. The results are shown in Table 3. Turning first to actor effects, greater negative emotion suppression was associated with lower perceived partner responsiveness, and a nonsignificant interaction indicated that this association did not differ by context. Greater positive emotion suppression was also associated with reduced perceived partner responsiveness, but this effect was significantly moderated by context. A simple slope analysis revealed that the actor effect was stronger in the high-risk ($B = -0.31$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-0.44, -0.18]$) than in the low-risk context ($B = -0.16$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .02$, 95% CI $[-0.29, -0.02]$).

With regard to partner effects, partners' negative expressive suppression was not associated with perceived partner responsiveness, nor was this association moderated by context. Partners' positive emotion suppression was negatively associated with perceived partner responsiveness, and there was a significant interaction with context. A simple slope analysis revealed that the partner effect was significant in the high-risk ($B = -0.25$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-0.38, -0.13]$) but not in the low-risk context ($B = -0.10$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .11$, 95% CI $[-0.23, 0.02]$).

For closeness, we also found evidence for actor effects. The more people reported expressive suppression of both negative and positive emotions, the less close they felt to their partner afterward, and these effects did not differ by context. Partners' expressive suppression of negative or positive emotions was not associated with closeness.

Robustness Check

As in Study 1, we repeated our analyses controlling for participants' negative (for negative emotion suppression) or positive emotions (for positive emotion suppression). See the additional online materials on <https://osf.io/rp5ue/> for specific results. The conclusions with regard to negative emotion suppression did not change. However, the associations between positive emotion suppression and relational outcomes were no longer significant when controlling for positive emotions reported after the interaction. In addition, the contextual effects showing stronger effects of positive emotion suppression in the high-risk than in the low-risk context were no longer significant. Table 4 provides a summary of results across studies.

Additional Analyses

All analyses are explained and shown in more detail in the additional online material on <https://osf.io/rp5ue/>. First, we tested if the order in which participants carried out the two conversations might have impacted the results. While this would not impact the

² The decision to restrict both conversations to 7 min instead of 10 min was made because couples in Study 1 often reported that they were already finished discussing the topics before the time was up. They then started discussing irrelevant topics (observable in the video data), which could disturb the data. Pilot testing showed 7 min left enough room for discussion without going off-topic.

Table 3

The Main and Interaction Effects of Context and Emotional Suppression of Positive and Negative Emotions on Relational Outcomes in Study 2

Outcome and predictor	Perceived partner responsiveness			Closeness		
	Estimate (<i>SE</i>)	95% CI	<i>p</i>	Estimate (<i>SE</i>)	95% CI	<i>p</i>
NE suppression						
Intercept	6.08 (0.06)	[5.96, 6.21]	<.001	6.18 (0.07)	[6.04, 6.31]	<.001
Actor NE suppression	−0.20 (0.04)	[−0.27, −0.13]	<.001	−0.16 (0.03)	[−0.22, −0.10]	<.001
Partner NE suppression	−0.07 (0.04)	[−0.14, 0.01]	.071	−0.02 (0.03)	[−0.08, 0.04]	.527
Context	0.36 (0.07)	[0.22, 0.49]	<.001	0.12 (0.04)	[0.03, 0.21]	.007
Actor NE Suppression × Context	0.03 (0.05)	[−0.08, 0.14]	.599	−0.02 (0.04)	[−0.11, 0.07]	.629
Partner NE Suppression × Context	0.07 (0.05)	[−0.04, 0.18]	.192	0.05 (0.04)	[−0.04, 0.14]	.242
PE suppression						
Intercept	6.08 (0.06)	[5.95, 6.20]	<.001	6.18 (0.07)	[6.04, 6.31]	<.001
Actor PE suppression	−0.23 (0.05)	[−0.34, −0.13]	<.001	−0.18 (0.05)	[−0.27, −0.08]	<.001
Partner PE suppression	−0.18 (0.05)	[−0.28, −0.07]	.001	−0.04 (0.05)	[−0.13, 0.06]	.432
Context	0.42 (0.06)	[0.30, 0.54]	<.001	0.17 (0.04)	[0.09, 0.25]	<.001
Actor PE Suppression × Context	0.15 (0.07)	[0.01, 0.29]	.033	0.08 (0.06)	[−0.03, 0.19]	.155
Partner PE Suppression × Context	0.15 (0.07)	[0.00, 0.29]	.037	0.13 (0.06)	[0.02, 0.24]	.025

Note. NE = negative emotion; PE = positive emotion; *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

results of this study as the order of interactions was counterbalanced, it helps to understand if the fixed conversation order in Study 1 might have impacted the results. We included the order of conversation as a main and in an interaction effect with context in our analyses, revealing no main effect of condition and no relevant interaction effects.

Additionally, we investigated if the costs of expressive suppression depended on an emotion–context mismatch (Greenaway & Kalokerinos, 2017). For instance, suppressing negative emotions in a low-risk, more positive context could be more socially appropriate and less harmful than suppressing negative emotions in a high-risk, potentially negative context (for a detailed rationale, see Supplemental Materials). These analyses revealed only one difference: When participants suppressed their negative emotions in a low-risk (positive) context, they reported significantly less perceived partner responsiveness and closeness toward their partner, while suppressing their positive emotions in this context was not associated with these outcomes.

Discussion

In two studies, we used the risk regulation model to investigate whether expressive suppression was (a) more intense and (b) associated with worse relational outcomes (i.e., lower perceived responsiveness and closeness) in high-risk contexts (involving couples discussing each other's annoying characteristics) compared to low-risk contexts (involving couples discussing each other's valuable characteristics). People consistently suppressed their emotions more in high-risk than in low-risk contexts. However, context did not consistently moderate the association between suppression and relational outcomes. Instead, actors' own expressive suppression was consistently associated with worse relational outcomes across contexts, whereas partners' suppression was inconsistently associated with these outcomes. Study 2 also revealed different patterns for the suppression of positive and negative emotions, providing support for the recent claim that for a complete understanding, expressive suppression should be separated by valence (Yu et al., 2023).

Risk Level as a Predictor of Expressive Suppression

In line with theorizing, participants reported more intense expressive suppression in high-risk than in low-risk contexts in both studies. In Study 1, participants reported more general emotion suppression in high-risk than in low-risk contexts, an effect that remained after controlling for video-recalled emotional experience during the interaction, as well as postinteraction negative and positive emotions. Study 2 replicated this finding for negative emotion suppression: There was more expressive suppression of negative emotion in high-risk than in low-risk interaction contexts, and this held controlling for postinteraction negative emotions. Participants also reported greater positive emotion suppression in the high- versus low-risk context, but this difference was no longer significant when controlling for postinteraction positive emotions.

These results suggest that risk level shapes expressive suppression in general (Study 1) and for negative emotions (Study 2). Past research has assessed expressive suppression in relationship interactions in general or for negative emotions only (e.g., Impett et al., 2012; Low et al., 2017; Peters & Jamieson, 2016; Sasaki et al., 2022; Thomson et al., 2018). In this regard, the few studies explicitly investigating predictors of expressive suppression provided evidence that such expressive suppression in relationship-threatening interactions is greater with factors that are expected to increase risk, such as low perceived regard (Thomson et al., 2018), low power (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2021), and insecure attachment (Girme et al., 2021). Our study extends these findings by showing that the risk level of interactions is another important predictor, emphasizing the context-dependent nature of expressive suppression. Indeed, conversational risk levels change constantly throughout couples' natural-occurring interactions, irrespective of the individual differences or relational dynamics that couples bring to their conversations. Our results emphasize the need to further investigate situational factors that can amplify or reduce suppression and tendencies to suppress, as much of couples' research on suppression is focused on individual differences in high-risk contexts only. Although suppression was more intense in high-risk relationship interactions, it was also present

Table 4
Summary of Main Results Across Studies 1 and 2

Dependent variable	Study 1: General suppression		Study 2: Negative suppression		Study 2: Positive suppression	
	Without control	With control	Without control	With control	Without control	With control
Suppression intensity						
Main effect of context	Negative association	Negative association	Negative association	Negative association	Negative association	x
Relational outcomes: Responsiveness						
Main actor effect of suppression	Negative association	Negative association	Negative association	Negative association	Negative association	Negative association
Main partner effect of suppression	x	x	x	x	Negative association	Negative association
Interaction effect between context and actor	Positive interaction	Positive interaction	x	x	Positive interaction	x
suppression						
Interaction effect between context and partner suppression	x	x	x	x	Positive interaction	x
Relational outcomes: Closeness						
Main actor effect of suppression	Negative association	x for NE and PE ($p = .07$), negative association for emotional experience	Negative association	Negative association	Negative association	Negative association
Main partner effect of suppression	Negative association	Negative association	x	x	x	x
Interaction effect between context and actor	x	x	x	x	x	x
suppression						
Interaction effect between context and partner suppression	Positive interaction	x	x	x	Positive interaction	x

Note. x = nonsignificant associations, significance was defined as $p < .05$. Context effects are shown in shaded cells. A negative main effect of context on suppression means that it occurs more intensely in the high-risk context than in the low-risk context. A positive interaction effect means that the detrimental effects of suppression on relational outcomes are worse in the high-risk than in the low-risk context. The columns called “Without control” refer to the main models reported in the article, while the columns “With control” refer to the reported robustness checks, controlling for emotional experience. NE = negative emotion as self-reported after the interaction; PE = positive emotion as self-reported after the interaction.

in low-risk interactions, and given the lack of research on suppression in low-risk contexts, this also suggests a need for further investigation.

Context effects appear not to extend to suppression of positive emotions in particular, as in Study 2, the context effect for positive emotion suppression was no longer significant after controlling for the intensity of positive emotion after the interaction. No previous study has directly compared the occurrence of expressive suppression for negative versus positive emotions in relationship interactions, which is surprising given the different functions that the two types of suppression serve (Kashdan et al., 2015; Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008; Yu et al., 2023). The less robust pattern for positive emotion suppression might indicate that negative emotion suppression is more sensitive to threat contexts. Identifying whether positive emotion suppression emerges from different situational contexts is an important direction for future research to advance the understanding of expressive suppression.

Outcomes of Expressive Suppression

Actors' suppression was associated with lower perceived partner responsiveness and lower closeness across studies, contexts, and valence of the emotion suppressed. The effects of partners' suppression were less clear. In Study 1, partners' suppression was associated with less closeness, but not less perceived responsiveness, across contexts. In Study 2, no partner effects emerged for negative emotion suppression, but partners' positive emotion suppression was associated with less perceived responsiveness, but not closeness, across contexts.

We hypothesized that there would be context differences in these effects, and we found some supporting evidence in Study 1: Actors' expressive suppression was more strongly associated with lower perceived responsiveness, and partners' expressive suppression with lower closeness, in high- than in low-risk contexts. However, context differences in the partner effect for closeness disappeared when we controlled for actors' emotional experiences during or after the interactions. Study 2 showed no context effects for the outcomes of negative emotion suppression, and while we found some context effects for the consequences of actors' and partners' positive emotion suppression, these effects disappeared when we controlled for actors' postinteraction positive emotions. Thus, with the exception of the context effect of actors' suppression on perceived responsiveness in Study 1, the results suggest that more negative and less positive emotional experiences during the high- versus the low-risk context might have prompted both more suppression in the actor and partner and worse relational outcomes.

One limitation in Study 2, however, is that we only measured emotional experience after the interaction, unlike Study 1, where we measured experience both during and after. We found no difference between the measures in Study 1, and so we decided to drop measures of experience during the interaction because they were more time-consuming. However, upon reflection, emotional experience during the interaction is likely a better measure, given we aimed to control the influence of negative and positive emotions on suppression and interaction outcomes, but postinteraction reports of emotions may instead have been influenced by suppression. Thus, the absence of context effects of the use and outcomes of positive emotion suppression after controlling for emotion in Study 2 may result from suppression reducing positive emotions,

responsiveness, and closeness. Indeed, past research has shown that positive emotion suppression more strongly predicted decreased positive and increased negative affect than negative emotion suppression (Fernandes & Tone, 2021; Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008). This issue highlights the importance of timing and method in assessing emotions when studying suppression.

Although controlling for emotional experiences sometimes eliminated the moderating effect of context, the associations between suppression and relational outcomes remained: Expressive suppression was associated with lower relational well-being of the suppressor in both high- and low-risk contexts. Even when there was no conflict, and thus low threat, suppressing one's emotions was associated with perceiving the partner as less responsive and feeling less close to the partner. While there are contexts in which suppressing emotions might sometimes preserve harmony and benefit the relationship (e.g., Le & Impett, 2013), our findings suggest that, in general, suppression during relationship discussions is likely to be unhelpful.

Also consistent with past research (e.g., Thomson et al., 2018; Zerwas et al., 2022), associations between relational outcomes and actors' suppression were more consistent than those of partners' suppression. This may be because partners' suppression often goes unnoticed. For example, people often judge their partner's suppression according to their own levels of suppression (Peters & Overall, 2020). This biased perceptual process may also contribute to why actors' own suppression is associated with lower perceived partner responsiveness and closeness. Partners' suppression might be associated with relational outcomes not assessed in the present study or accumulate over time to harm relationship satisfaction. For example, rather than being immediately perceptible or felt with regard to perceived responsiveness and closeness, partners' suppression may hinder conflict resolution and problem solving, eventually undermining relationship quality (Low et al., 2019; Sasaki et al., 2022).

Strengths, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

This research had several strengths. We used data from two studies across ecologically valid contexts and preregistered the second study. In addition, few studies explore expressive suppression for negative and positive emotions separately, and examining these differences offered an important contribution. Study 2 also counteracted the potential limitations of Study 1 that (a) the limited power of Study 1 could reduce the ability to find a true effect and (b) the order in which conversations occurred (high-risk vs. low-risk topic first) could impact or account for the contextual effects of suppression. As this was not the case, this provides reassurance of the validity of Study 1 and other past research (e.g., Zerwas et al., 2022).

However, in Study 2, participants reported less expressive suppression than in Study 1, perhaps impeding the detection of context effects in these data. Additionally, as in prior studies assessing suppression in couples' conversations (e.g., Girme et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2018), the intensity of expressive suppression was quite low across studies, with suppression being skewed toward the lower ends of the response scales (see Supplemental Figure S1), limiting our general ability to find effects.

Future studies experimentally manipulating expressive suppression would allow a comparison between high and low levels of

suppression and stronger causal conclusions. Relatedly, future research could capture more intense negative emotions by investigating natural high-risk contexts, such as centering data collection around emotional times such as exams (e.g., DiGiovanni et al., 2024) or a pandemic (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2022).

In line with the risk regulation model, we focused on context as a factor predicting suppression and its outcomes, but our data were cross-sectional. Daily life studies in which expressive suppression and relational outcomes are assessed repeatedly over time would allow us to disentangle the directionality of effects and to examine bidirectional associations that likely better capture reality: Low closeness/responsiveness predicts more expressive suppression, which in turn predicts reduced closeness. Additionally, repeated measurements would allow us to build on research investigating flexibility and rigidity in emotion regulation use (e.g., Aldao et al., 2015). Some people might switch more frequently in their use of suppression across romantic interaction contexts, while others might use suppression more consistently, regardless of the context. Other individual differences might also be a fruitful avenue for future research. Individual differences in self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, or commitment are likely to moderate the perceived risk within a couple's interactions and the role of context in suppression.

Future research could also assess people's self-protection goals. The rationale underlying our study was that high-risk contexts increase the prioritization of self-protection goals. However, self-protection goals were not directly assessed, meaning the psychological mechanisms that differentiate high- versus low-risk contexts remain to be tested. Relatedly, experimental studies could include additional interaction contexts that are negatively valenced but may pose lower risk and elicit less self-protection (e.g., couples talking about a shared negative event external to their relationship) or positively valenced, high-risk contexts (e.g., discussing the possibility of marriage or having children). This would allow a clearer delineation of whether risk level and self-protection—rather than the valence of the topic—are driving the contextual differences found in the current studies. Additionally, distinguishing emotions in a more granular way would further advance the understanding of expressive suppression. For instance, the suppression of “hard” negative emotions such as anger might elicit different behavior and relational outcomes than the suppression of “soft” negative emotions such as sadness (Sanford, 2007).

Constraints on Generality

Our samples mainly included Western participants, but previous research suggests that costs of suppression might differ and are lower for Asian samples (e.g., Tsai & Lu, 2018), suggesting cross-cultural examination is necessary. Study 1 included only heterosexual couples, but Study 2 was inclusive in terms of gender and sexual orientation. The resulting proportions of sexual minorities were overall in line with general reported percentages in Belgium (De Schrijver et al., 2022). Due to the small absolute number of sexual minorities in our sample, we did not explicitly compare between these groups, but the use and consequences of suppression can vary with gender (e.g., Rogier et al., 2019; Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). It is notable, however, that tests of gender differences in Study 1 did not reveal meaningful differences in context between women and men.

Conclusion

The costs of expressive suppression make it important to identify situational factors that predict its occurrence and correlate in close relationships. As predicted, across two studies, expressive suppression occurred more in high-risk than in low-risk interaction contexts, suggesting that emotional suppression may often occur to manage risky situations. However, against predictions, expressive suppression was not clearly associated with worse relational outcomes in high- than in low-risk contexts: Our findings varied by study, relational outcome, and whether suppression was assessed generally or for negative or positive emotions. In sum, while suppression may be more likely in risky negative interactions, it appears to be associated with lower perceived partner responsiveness and closeness for the suppressor irrespective of contextual risk or the type of emotions suppressed.

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