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Contextual Factors in Expressing and Regulating Emotions in Close Relationship Interactions

Feasibility of a Novel Open Question Design to Assess Shared Dyadic Events in Daily Life: A Daily Diary Study

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ABSTRACT

In dyadic daily life research, one is interested in how dyads navigate daily life events. A challenge in such research is how to make sure that dyad members report on the same events. We propose a novel open question design in which one dyad partner concisely describes an event; afterwards this description is automatically sent to the other partner by the data collection software. We tested the feasibility of this novel design in a three-week daily diary study in 107 romantic couples. Each day, one partner was asked to concisely describe the most negative event of that day that involved both partners and to rate the negativity of this event on a 0–100 scale. Next, the other partner was prompted with this event description and asked to rate recognition and their experienced negativity. The couple-wise compliance (i.e., both partners completed the diary) was high ($M = 89\%$). Partners recognized 97% of the events described by their partner. The experience of the chosen events was moderately negative with a higher intensity for the senders ($M = 41.10$) than for the receivers ($M = 32.98$). Overall, our findings demonstrate the feasibility of this method to report on shared daily life events.

1 | Introduction

Daily life methods such as diaries can offer a window on how people feel, think, and behave in response to real life events, while limiting recall bias and enhancing ecological validity (Bolger et al. 2003; Trull and Ebner-Priemer 2020). They are said to capture life as it is lived (Bolger et al. 2003). However, to truly understand the relation between psychological responses and events, it is crucial to have sufficient information about the events, since certain responses can be more adaptive in some events than in others (Myin-Germeys et al. 2018). For instance, profound sadness is expected in response to the loss of a dear one, but not in response to a cancellation of dinner plans. To capture these contexts or events, short questionnaires are used to assess what people were doing and who they were with.

Assessing the situations persons find themselves in becomes even more important when looking at interpersonal processes. For instance, in dyadic research (i.e., investigating units of two individuals), emotional similarity or interdependence is often studied, focusing on the emotional attunement of dyads within or across contexts. Recent work shows that the amount of emotional similarity between romantic partners strongly differs between as well as within couples (Carlier et al. 2026; Sels et al. 2020). This makes sense as emotional similarity can be beneficial in some situations, but detrimental in others, where complementarity is more adaptive (Lavallee and Campbell 1995). For instance, when a neighbor is having a loud party in the middle of the night, romantic partners can both be angry to achieve their joint goal of confronting this neighbor. However, when these partners are having an argument with each other, both being angry can lead to an escalation of the situation. Yet, such differences in similarity can also result from an important limitation of daily life dyadic research. In many studies it is unclear at best whether partners are actually rating the same event. In others, there is even evidence that partners strongly disagree about the occurrence of events (Ji et al. 2025). Therefore, to advance the study of

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emotional similarity as well as dyadic daily life research in general, we propose a new study design to make sure dyad partners are reporting on the same, shared event.

1.1 | Current Practices in Dyadic Daily Life Research

In current dyadic daily life research, participants are asked to keep electronic diaries by replying to short surveys once or multiple times a day. Typically, both partners receive simultaneous notifications and fill in the same survey (Laurenceau and Bolger 2012). In emotion research, the questions in these surveys typically probe participants' current mood, emotions or coping and a few short context items. These items can be who a person is with at the moment, if they had a positive or negative event or interaction with their partner or family, whether they shared their emotions with someone, whether they are home or at work and so on (Hicks and Diamond 2008; Lavee and Ben-Ari 2007; Reis et al. 2010; Reynolds et al. 2016; Sels et al. 2020; Tepeli Temiz and Bilican 2024). However, a specific challenge with these diaries is that partners often report conflicting context information, with one partner responding affirmative, while the other responds negative (Palmier-Claus et al. 2019). In previous dyadic studies, context items have therefore been used to select certain measurements, for instance, only moments when both dyad partners indicated to have been together were retained when computing emotional interdependence (Sels et al. 2020) or only events that were described as not involving the dyad partner were retained to investigate social sharing (Reis et al. 2010). Moreover, even if dyad partners do agree (e.g., both partners do affirm that they had a disagreement, see Ji et al. 2025) one can never be sure that partners are reporting the same event.

1.2 | A Novel Design to Assess the Experience of Shared Events in Dyadic Research

To address these shortcomings in current dyadic daily life methods, we propose a novel open question design. In this design, an electronic diary notification is sent randomly to one of the dyad partners. That partner is asked to concisely describe an event which involved both partners and to complete the survey with that event in mind. Depending on the research question, this event could be the most salient, positive or negative event since the start of the day or since the last notification. The sending partner has to make sure the event description is short but contains sufficient information for the other partner to recognize the event. Once the sending partner completes the diary, the receiving partner is prompted with that short description. To check whether both partners report on the same event, the question is asked whether the receiving partner recognizes the event described by the sending partner. Afterwards, the receiving partner also completes the survey questions with the sent event in mind. The resulting data thus include a short description of a shared event, an indication whether both partners recognize the shared event and both partners' (emotional) responses in reaction to that shared event. All these design choices can be implemented in the m-Path app for daily life assessments (Mestdagh et al. 2022).

1.3 | Current Study

The current study investigates the feasibility of this new open question design in a three-week end-of-day daily diary study in romantic couples. Each day, one partner is randomly selected and asked to describe the most negative event of the day that involved both partners. This could be a conflict or irritation between them, but also a shared concern for a family member or financial worries. Partners are also asked to answer some additional questions in response to this shared event.

Our first question with regard to the feasibility of this design is whether the couple-wise compliance (i.e., proportion of time both partners completed the daily diary) is high and in line with previous research. In addition, we take into account the number of "no event"-descriptions (e.g., "no event happened today"), because without an event description, we cannot be sure which event both partners have in mind while completing the diaries. Second, we question whether both partners had enough time to complete their diaries (on time). Our third question is how often the events described by the sending partner are recognized by the receiving partner. This is important to know whether the short descriptions are sufficiently informative. Word count and discussion of the events will also be taken into account, as recognition might be higher when more words are used or when partners have previously discussed the shared event. Lastly, we question whether partners indeed report daily hassles that are of some importance, based on the intensity of the shared events. Here, we also explore whether both partners differ in how negative they thought this event was.

2 | Method

2.1 | Recruitment and Participants

The participants in this study were 107 Flemish and Dutch romantic couples (102 mixed-gender, 5 same-gender) which consisted of 106 men, 107 women and one unspecified. The target sample size was 100 couples and was based on previous studies in our research group. The study took place between May 2023 and March 2024. Participants were recruited by three master thesis students in a first wave and two new master thesis students in a second wave, with flyers and posters on social media, university buildings, and through word of mouth. Criteria for admission to the study were: being at least 2 months in a romantic relationship, living together or spending the majority of time together, speaking Dutch (as the study was conducted entirely in Dutch), having a smartphone and being at least 18 years old. Couples could only participate if both partners met the criteria and agreed to participate. Participants were on average 36.69 years old (SD = 14.44, *Mdn* = 30, range: 18–74) and 12.71 years together (SD = 11.69, *Mdn* = 7.75, range: 8 months to 49.5 years). 46 of the couples were married, 29 officially lived together and 32 practically lived together. In addition, 39 of the couples reported having at least one child together. Participants were rewarded up to 40 euros for completing the whole study. This study was approved by the Social and Societal Ethics Committee of KU Leuven (G-2022-5960).

2.2 | Procedure

Couples first joined an intake session which occurred either face-to-face or online. In this session, general information on the study and specific information about the tasks was conveyed and inclusion criteria were checked by a researcher. If both partners agreed to participate, the m-Path app was installed on their smartphones (Mestdagh et al. 2022). After the intake session, both partners individually received an email with personal invitation links to a background questionnaire including informed consent, an emotion task with photo stimuli, and an emotion task with vignettes. Both partners had 48 h to complete all surveys, after which a daily diary part of 3 weeks was initiated, which constitutes the focus of the current study.

During this daily diary part, every evening at 8 PM (first collection wave) or 7 PM (second collection wave), one of the two partners received a notification on their smartphone to start the daily survey in the m-Path app. This partner chose the most negative event from that day, in which the other partner was involved as well, and briefly described this event. The exact instruction was "Describe the most negative event of today, in which your partner was also involved or present. Your partner will fill out his/her questionnaire based on your description. Be concise and objective, but make sure your partner recognizes the event." The sending partner was always instructed to report a negative event, even the smallest hassle. This question could not be skipped. Irrespective of the content of this event, all following questions were presented. Next, they answered some questions about themselves and their partners in the context of this event, along with a few very short context questions: how negative was this event, and did you discuss this event with your partner? Once the sending partner had completed the survey, the other, receiving partner received a notification via m-Path and was prompted with the verbatim short description of the event given by the partner. They then completed the same survey which contained an additional question assessing whether they recognized the described event. If the receiving partner did not recognize the event, they were instructed to try to imagine such an event and fill out the survey with that in mind. For neither partner, the survey could thus be shortened by giving a certain response. The role of sending and receiving partner was randomly switched between partners over the 21 days so that each partner had the sending role on either 10 or 11 days. Each partner had 4 h to complete their survey. Partners were not allowed to complete the diary the next morning because thoughts and feelings about events of the past day might have changed too much overnight. We clearly instructed participants to make sure that their partners had enough time to complete the diary if they were the first to be notified. The exact survey can be found on osf.io/zqm4b. Instructions on how to share responses from one participant with another one can be found in the m-Path manual on their website under "Share data between participants."

2.3 | Measures

Two single-item contextual variables were assessed in each diary, namely how negatively did the participant rate the event in general (0–100) and did the participant discuss this event with the partner (1) or not (0). Whereas the diary of the sending partner contained the question to describe the negative event, the diary of the receiving partner included the single-item question whether they recognized the event described by their partner (1) or not (0). Also, the timestamps generated in m-Path will be used in the analyses.

2.4 | Data Analysis

2.4.1 | Pre-Processing

When computing compliance, daily diary entries were only considered filled in if both partners completed the survey of that day and, more strictly, when the description conveyed a negative event. To identify "no event"—descriptions, all events were extracted that contained the Dutch words "niets," "niks" or "geen" which translate to "no," "none" or "nothing." The 248 extracted events were then coded by hand as containing "no event" if the description gave no event-specific information that either partner could base their following answers on (e.g., "no negative event today" or "nothing I can think of"). This was the case for only 78 out of those 248. The couple-wise compliance was then computed as the proportion of retained dyadic events per couple out of the 21 requested ones. Word count was computed as the number of words used in every description.

2.4.2 | Analyses

The descriptives (mean, standard deviation, minimum, first quartile, median, third quartile, maximum) of the compliance, the "no event"—descriptions, the time difference between the end of the sending partner and start of the receiving partner's diaries, the time needed to complete the diaries, the discussion of the event, the word count and the general negativity rating were computed. A bivariate proportion table was computed for the agreement on whether partners discussed the event and the time difference between both partners' diaries. To test whether the general negativity rating significantly differed between senders and receivers, we conducted multilevel linear regression nesting the events in the participants. The model included a random intercept per participant and the fixed effect of a level-one dummy variable that indicated per event whether the participant acted as a sender or a receiver. For this last analysis, we have conducted a sensitivity power analysis to check the expected power of the collected data for a range of possible effect sizes (Lakens 2022). As effect sizes, we have departed from the current study's fixed effect and ranged from −3 to +3 standard deviations. We have followed the tutorial *Power: Mixed Effects Models (Random intercepts)* by Jordan (2021) to incorporate random effects and found a very high power for the full range of effect sizes ($1-\beta > 0.999$). The analysis scripts can be found on osf.io/zqm4b.

3 | Results

An example of two event descriptions and the corresponding negativity ratings can be found in Figure 1. The couple-wise compliance in this study was overall good ($M = 0.89$, SD = 0.12, see Table 1). When removing the diaries that had "no event"

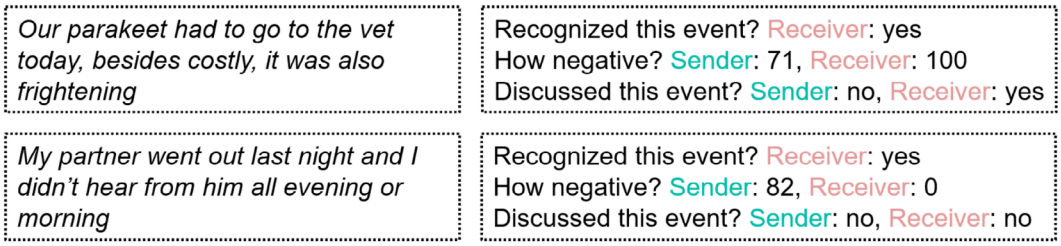

FIGURE 1 | Examples of two shared dyadic events and corresponding ratings by sender and receiver.

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics of all variables of interest.

	Mean	SD	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	3rd Qu.	Max.
Couple-wise compliance[a]	0.89	0.12	0.38	0.86	0.90	0.95	1.10[b]
Compliance without "no event's"[a]	0.85	0.14	0.38	0.81	0.86	0.95	1.10[b]
Number of "no event's"[a]	0.73	1.44	0	0	0	1	9
Time gap sender-receiver[a]	42.51	17.93	5.68	29.15	40.90	52.81	97.83
Time to fill in[c]	5.61	4.43	1.05	2.93	4.29	6.69	35.65
Proportion events recognized[a]	0.97	0.05	0.72	0.95	1	1	1
Word count per event[a]	19.97	12.29	3.12	10.25	19.74	26.85	64.75
Proportion events discussed[c]	0.47	0.24	0	0.29	0.47	0.62	1
Proportion agreement event discussed[a]	0.73	0.15	0.28	0.63	0.75	0.84	1
How negative on average[c]	37.07	17.02	1.80	23.61	36.95	48.28	83.14
Sender	41.08	19.86	2.33	25.96	40.88	55.29	86.09
Receiver	33.01	17.30	0.82	21.28	32.35	43.37	84.20

[a]Aggregated per couple.
[b]One couple accidentally initiated two diaries on two days, all were kept.
[c]Aggregated per person.

descriptions, the couple-wise compliance remained high ($M = 0.85$, SD = 0.14). 67% of the couples never had a "no event" description; 15% used a "no event" description only once.

Participants needed on average 5.61 (SD = 4.44) minutes to complete a diary and the time gap between sender and receiver was on average 40.68 min (SD = 17.63). Figure 2 displays when diaries were completed, revealing that most diaries of both senders and receivers were completed before midnight.

Partners almost always recognized the dyadic events chosen by their partners based on their short descriptions (0.97). In addition, partners indicated that they had discussed the chosen event only in 47% of the diaries. With an average word count of 19.94 words, the open question design seems to be short and effective (see Table 1). However, partners did not always agree whether they discussed the event or not. Only in 73% of reported events did the sender and receiver agree whether they discussed the event. In 13% of the diaries, only the receiver said they discussed the event. In 14% of the diaries, only the sender indicated they had discussed the event. The distribution of non-agreement does not seem to depend on how much time elapsed between the completion of the diary by the sender and the start of the receiver (Table 2).

Participants rated the reported events on average only moderately negatively ($M = 37.06$, SD = 17.04). The negativity of the events was found to be more intense for the sending partner than for the receiving partner (−8.33, $t(3776.53) = -10.01$, $p < 0.001$, Table 3).

4 | Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the feasibility of a novel open question design to assess dyadic events in daily life. This was done in a daily diary study assessing the most negative dyadic event of romantic couples for 21 consecutive evenings. To assess the feasibility, the couple-wise compliance, the number of "no event"—descriptions, the time variables, the recognition of the events, the discussion of the events, the word count and the general negativity were taken into account. First, although 21 days is on the longer end for diary studies, this daily diary showed a high concurrent compliance of both dyadic partners (89%), which is in line with other relational daily diary studies in individuals and couples (Howland and Rafaeli 2010; Morin et al. 2024; Neff and Karney 2009; Pollmann et al. 2021; Reis et al. 2010; Reynolds et al. 2016; Verhees et al. 2024; Wrzus and Neubauer 2023). In addition, when removing diaries that

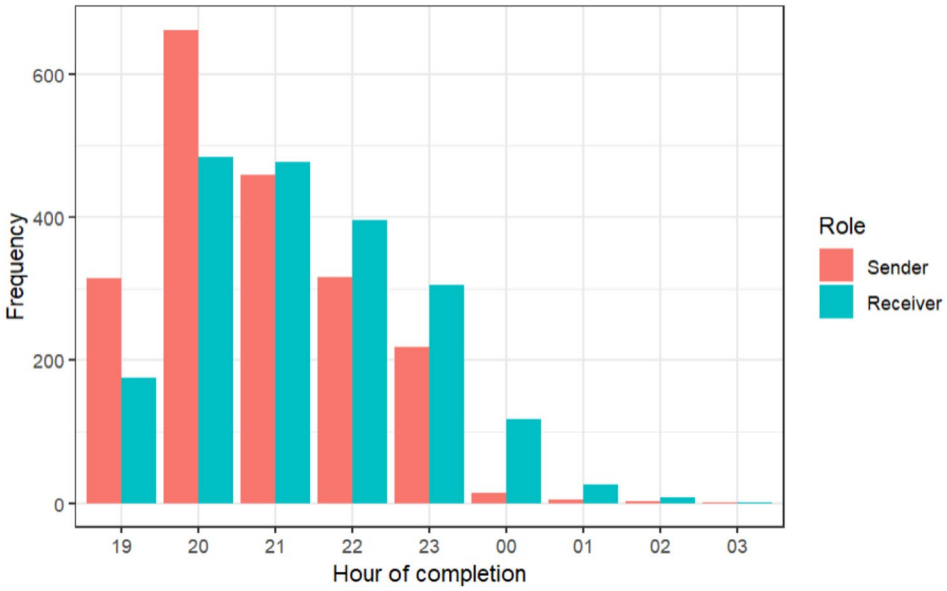

FIGURE 2 | Time of day when diaries were completed by senders and receivers over all participants and study days. *Note*: Due to unforeseen glitches, in rare cases it happened that a notification was sent incorrectly or a participant could still respond after 4 h. We have chosen not to eliminate these diaries here, only when they were outside the desired diary window of 19 to 3 h or 20 to 4 h.

TABLE 2 | Proportion of diaries per agreement on whether the event was discussed and per time elapsed between the completion of the diary by the sender and the start of the receiver (in hours).

Hour delay	Only sender "yes"	Agreed	Only receiver "yes"
0	0.08	0.44	0.07
1	0.04	0.19	0.03
2	0.02	0.07	0.01
3	0.005	0.02	0.006
4	0.002	0.01	0.004

TABLE 3 | Multilevel regression fixed effects of the comparison between senders and receivers.

	Coefficient	SD	*t*	df	*p*
Sender (intercept)	41.20	1.24	33.35	270.26	$p < 0.001$
Receiver	−8.33	0.83	−10.01	3776.53	$p < 0.001$

contained "no event"—descriptions, the couple-wise compliance remained high (85%). Second, the diaries did not take too long to complete and both partners had enough time to fill in the diaries on time. This shows that introducing the event description and counting on both partners to complete the diaries on the same days, does not impact the compliance negatively. Third, 97% of all described events were recognized by the partners and thus contain a clear distinct dyadic event. In addition, the results suggest that previously discussing the event is not necessary to recognize it later on, nor are lengthy descriptions, as the average word count is shorter than the average tweet (Şahinuç and Toraman 2021). In addition, partners did not always agree whether they discussed the event. This could be due to a difference in interpretation or because they did not discuss it at first, but then did after the sending and before the receiving partner's diary. However, in this study, we found no indication that the "non-agreement" was more frequent when the time in between completing first and starting second diaries was longer.

Last, the average negativity rating of the dyadic events was only moderate, indicating that they are rather perceived as daily hassles but still high enough to be of value. Research regarding daily hassles shows their importance in psychological well-being, experience of negative affect, and dyadic closeness (Hicks and Diamond 2008; Lavallee and Campbell 1995; Lavee and Ben-Ari 2007; Rauers and Riediger 2023). This design can thus help to pin down these moderately negative events and use them to prompt, for instance, emotional responses. It is necessary to remark here that it is possible that some participants felt uncomfortable sharing very sensitive experiences with their partners or the researchers, leading to a preference for moderately negative events (even though some participants tended to report events with high negativity and we clearly instructed them to be as objective as possible).

Moreover, there was a significant difference in the general negativity ratings between senders and receivers. In other words, the senders of the description of the negative events attributed a higher negativity to the events on average than the receivers of the description. This stresses the importance of sufficiently switching the roles of sender and receiver throughout the study, as individuals tend to attribute a different intensity to their own topics as opposed to the ones their partner chooses. This negativity difference might be similar to the signal-responder dynamics of partners in couples' therapy (Seedall and Wampler 2024) and also reflects that partners allocate more importance to different things (Lavallee and Campbell 1995; Rauers and Riediger 2023). In conclusion, the compliance, recognition, and general negativity confirm the feasibility of our novel open question design to capture meaningful negative events that partners shared in daily life.

4.1 | Limitations and Future Research

This design will allow future studies to have a closer look at similarity in emotions, but also different patterns of complementary emotions, since it captures specific events and pins down concurrent emotions regarding that same event. In addition, it will be possible to link these emotion patterns to the contexts identified from the short event descriptions. While longer descriptions allow for better recognition of topics by automated processes, 20–30 words already suffice for a good extraction of topics from brief texts (Şahinuç and Toraman 2021). Furthermore, pronoun and emotion word use in these short descriptions can also help to uncover interesting relationship dynamics (Slatcher et al. 2008). However, beware that to be able to code several aspects of the events, one should clearly instruct the participants to make the descriptions of the events clear for an outsider and not only the partner, as we did here. The descriptions in this study are sometimes very short or contain locations, names and references known to the partners, but without meaning to us, researchers.

This study also has some more limitations. First of all, while this novel design can be used to capture all kinds of events, this study has solely focused on negative dyadic events as this daily diary was part of a larger study primarily interested in (the similarity in) negative emotion patterns. Literature has proven that sharing positive events too has significant influences on our daily affect and shows interactions with negative events (Hicks and Diamond 2008; Reis et al. 2010; Totenhagen et al. 2012). Given that some couples at times indicated that no negative event had happened that day, future studies could opt to ask participants about their most salient event of the day, being either positive or negative. However, in this study, we have opted to force the description of a negative event to also be able to grasp the smaller irritations between partners. Another adaptation could be to ask about the most negative and the most positive event of the day, although this would double the time burden for participants, which can be accounted for by having fewer emotion items.

A second, smaller limitation was the time limit set to fulfill the diaries. Each partner had 4 h to complete their diary after the first notification was sent. This means that the longer the first partner waited, the later the second partner could start their diary, and might even have gone to bed by then. Future research will show if shortening these response periods can benefit dyadic compliance even more. In addition, the longer the second partner waited to complete their diary, the more could have changed in between both entries (e.g., talking about the chosen event, processing and reappraisal of felt emotions).

Third, this design will not be suitable for all types of dyads or dyadic phenomena. For instance, sometimes partners have more effects on their counterparts than is perceived by those counterparts. An example is invisible support. On the one hand, the receiver of such support cannot report something they are not aware of. On the other hand, the sender of such support might undo its effects by uncovering its existence. In addition, in dyads with (severe) power imbalances, like supervisor-intern, employer-employee, and toxic relationships, it can be more difficult for the individuals with less power to be honest in sharing sensitive events. Then it might be best to return to the individual reports again or ask about a neutral interaction, which might not be as informative.

Depending on the research question at hand, this design can be adapted in multiple ways to accommodate specific dyads, events, sender-receiver roles, and survey items. When investigating emotional support in mother–child dyads or dyads where one partner has a clinical diagnosis, the sender could always be the child or the patient, having the most vulnerable person choose the most salient/positive/negative dyadic event of the day. When working with other vulnerable dyads such as couples in therapy, asking about the most negative event can be too loaded. Then it is an option to ask about the most positive event only or even ask about the last interaction they had, rather than one with a specific sentiment. In addition to this, one can have them name the most negative interaction in private, without sharing it with the partner. When investigating varying relationship dynamics, it can be interesting to inquire about different types of events, such as relational events that happened between partners and events external to the relationship that happened to both of them, separately. In addition to different types of events, it is also possible to ask both partners different sets of questions about these events. For example, how one partner tried to influence the other partner's mood during this event and if the other partner experienced it that way. Or conversely, one may query how one partner experienced an influence on their mood and the other partner whether this was intended that way. And lastly, when studying empathic accuracy, for instance, this design can be used to link self-report items of one partner to items about the thoughts and feelings of the partner by the other partner. One thing to keep in mind when making adaptations to the design is to make sure that the diaries do not get too long in the end to assure good compliance.

5 | Conclusion

This study showed the feasibility of a novel open question design to capture dyadic negative events and emotional responses to those events in daily life. Compliance and recognition were high, ensuring that both partners rated their emotional experiences in response to the exact same events for the large majority of the study. These events were moderately negative, representing meaningful daily hassles, and romantic partners tended to attribute higher negative intensity to the events they signaled themselves as opposed to the ones their partners picked out.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

This study was not preregistered. The data are not publicly available because of the highly sensitive nature (descriptions of personal events, names, and places), analysis scripts, and the daily diary survey are available on osf.io/zqm4b.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** Supporting Information