Attachment style, partner communication, and physical well-being among couples coping with cancer

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How attachment style, communication, & health-outcomes interrelate…

- A couple’s ability to cope with the medical and psychosocial challenges of cancer is often linked to perceptions of partner availability and responsiveness.
- Attachment styles not only influence emotional availability and strategies people use to cope, but also influence health outcomes, health-related responses, and behaviors (such as communication).
  - Anxiously attached individuals are emotionally preoccupied with closeness.
  - Avoidantly attached individuals are uncomfortable with intimacy and emotional closeness.
- Using actor-partner interdependence models (APIM), we examine how associations among attachment, emotional disclosure, and holding back (i.e., communication behaviors) interrelate and are associated with physical well-being in patients with cancer and their partners.

In This Study…

- Participants were enrolled in a larger observational study examining couple’s communication in cancer (R01CA201179).
- A total of 166 dyads participated in this study.
- Patients were diagnosed with either stage II-IV breast, lung, colon, or rectal cancer; within 2 years of diagnosis of current cancer stage; and with a life expectancy of at least 6 months.
- Patients and spouses independently completed measures of their:
  - Sociodemographic information
  - Attachment: Adult Attachment Scale
  - Communication: Emotional Disclosure Scale
  - Emotional expressivity: Emotional Expressivity Scale
  - Physical well-being: Physical Well-Being Subscale

APIM Results…

*Solid lines denote significant paths; dotted lines, non-significant. Colored triangles denote significant mediation paths. Red triangles = actor effects; Blue triangles = actor-partner effects.

Correlations Among Key Study Variables…

Significant negative correlations between attachment styles, physical well-being, and emotional expressivity. (Note: *p < .001; *p < .05)

Next Steps…

- Actor-partner interdependence mediation models indicated that insecure attachment styles were associated with greater self-report of two different and seemingly contradictory communicative behaviors (disclosure and holding back), which in turn were associated with poorer physical well-being.
- Findings underscore the importance of communication in context. Holding back and disclosure can function independently and be context specific.
- Future areas worth exploring include the examination of attachment in the context of relationship satisfaction, communication quality, and well-being in couples.
- Clinical interventions designed to improve couple’s communication in cancer may benefit from first exploring patient and partner styles of disclosure and delivery.

What We Found…

- Significant negative correlations between attachment styles, physical well-being, and emotional expressivity.

Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Attachment Anxiety</th>
<th>Attachment Avoidance</th>
<th>Disclosure</th>
<th>Holding Back</th>
<th>Physical Well-being</th>
<th>Emotional Expressivity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attachment anxiety</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.63**</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attachment avoidance</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>-.36**</td>
<td>-.45**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disclosure</td>
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<td>.08</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.39**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holding Back</td>
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<td>.24**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.42**</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Well-Being</td>
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<td>-.21**</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
<td>-.28**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional Expressivity</td>
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<td>-.51**</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Patients Mean (SD)

- 2.05 (0.93) 2.50 (0.67) 2.35 (0.87) 2.03 (0.92) 17.18 (5.00) 63.77 (14.14)

Spouses Mean (SD)

- 1.88 (0.78) 2.51 (0.67) 2.24 (0.83) 1.94 (0.76) 20.88 (3.06) 60.02 (14.54)

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