

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background

- Effective communication about cancer-related emotional experiences between partners is an important aspect of coping with the disease<sup>1</sup>
- Higher cancer stage has been associated with greater emotional difficulties, but the association between cancer stage and emotional expression is unclear<sup>2</sup>
- Regarding gender, male partners may be more likely to engage in affective suppression. Previous research in non-cancer populations showed that male partners experience high negativity but do not express this to their partners during conflict discussions<sup>3</sup>
- Observational methods can provide unique and nuanced information regarding communication<sup>3</sup>

#### Study Aim

- To examine patients' affective expressions as a function of cancer stage and gender, using observational methods.

### METHOD/ANALYSIS

#### Procedure

- Couples completed a 15-minute videotaped conversation about a cancer-related topic (e.g., disease progression, plans for the future).
- Undergraduate coders observationally coded all interactions for affective expression using the Relational Affective Topography System (RATS)<sup>3</sup>.

#### Measures

Affective Expression:

- Hard negative (e.g., anger)
- Soft negative (e.g., sadness)
- Positive joining (e.g., warmth)
- Positive individuating (e.g., amusement)
- Flat affect (e.g., indifference)

#### Participants

Patients ( $N = 266$ ):

- 31% stage 2, 28% stage 3, 41% stage cancers
- 44% breast, 18% lung, 38% colorectal cancers
- 65% female; 81% Caucasian
- Mean age of 53.9 years

#### Analysis

- One-Way ANOVA was used to analyze study aims

### DISCUSSION

- This study is the first to examine objective measures of affective expression in relation to cancer stage and gender.
- Results suggest that male patients may be more likely to suppress their emotional expressions, whereas female patients were more likely to show vulnerability and distress

#### Limitations

- Limited number of minority participants, which limits generalizability
- Individual-level instead of couple-level, did not look at partners' affective expressions

#### Implications/ Future Directions

- Future research is needed with a focus on partner affective expression and patient-partner interactions
- Objective data from couple conversations may help to inform and refine couple-based interventions for cancer



### RESULTS

- Result #1: Male-identifying patients showed higher flat affective expression compared to female patients

(I) gender	(J) gender	Mean Difference (I - J)	Significance
Male	Female	0.156	0.001

- Result #2: Female-identifying patients showed higher soft negative affective expression than male patients

(I) gender	(J) gender	Mean Difference (I - J)	Significance
Male	Female	- 0.244	0.001

- Result #3: Affective expressions did not significantly differ by cancer stage, nor did gender and cancer stage interact ( $p$ 's > .05).



### REFERENCES

1 – Manne et al., *J Cancer Surviv*, 2010  
3 – Leo et al. *J Fam Psychol*, 2020

2 – Vodermaier et al., *Br J Cancer*, 2011

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