

The Role of Communication in the Physical Health of Cancer Patients

Introduction

The Impact of Cancer on Couples

- A cancer diagnosis impacts both the patient and spouse in profound ways
- Spouses of cancer patients often take on significant caregiving roles
- Couples' communication in this context can have profound impacts on many aspects of the patient's life

Communication is Key

- Adaptive communication can help couples navigate a cancer diagnosis
- Adaptive communication may consist of³:
 1. Reciprocal self-disclosure - sharing intimate thoughts and feelings regarding the cancer experience
 2. Partner responsiveness - each partner feels understood, cared for, and accepted by the other
 3. Relationship engagement - engaging in behaviors that enhance the quality of the relationship while dealing with cancer

A Novel Approach

- Couples' communication research has primarily relied on self-report data, and few have focused on the linkages between observed communication and physical health outcomes
- We use a novel observational coding approach to obtain observed communication data, which reduces potential confounders associated with self-reported data
- The findings of this study may inform improved couples' communication that could lead to better physical health for cancer patients

Research Question

What is the association between patient-observed communication behaviors and patient-reported physical health symptoms?

Methods

Data Collection

1. Couples engaged in a 10 minute conversation about a cancer-related topic of their choosing.
2. The Asymmetric Behavior Coding System (ABCS) was used to code communication behaviors for the patient.
 - The ABCS codes of disclosure, maintaining/deepening, and intimacy building were chosen to model adaptive communication.
3. The Condensed Memorial Symptom Assessment Scale (CMSAS) scale was filled out by the patient and used to quantify severity and absolute number of physical symptoms.

Data Analysis

Study aim was tested using ordinary least-squares linear regression. Separate models were estimated where patient reported symptoms (CMSAS) was the dependent variable with each hypothesized communication behavior code (disclosure, maintaining/deepening, and intimacy building) as the independent variable.

Results

1. Patients who displayed more intimacy building behaviors tended to report more physical health symptoms ($p = 0.06$).
2. Disclosure and maintaining/deepening communication behaviors were not associated with either severity or absolute number of physical health symptoms.

Discussion

- Contrary to expectations, disclosure and maintaining/deepening communication behaviors were not significantly associated with physical health symptoms
- However, intimacy building behaviors were associated with greater reporting of physical health symptoms
- Relationship engagement and intimacy building communication behaviors improve the quality of patient-caregiver relationships
- Stronger and deeper relationships benefit each individual partner
- It is possible that patients involved in higher-quality relationships feel more comfortable acknowledging and reflecting upon physical symptoms, leading to greater self-reporting
- Detection of associated communication behaviors may have been limited by the sample size of data or choice of communication behaviors

Future Studies

- Future research may explore the role of relationship intimacy in mediating associations between communication behaviors and physical health symptoms
- Additional studies may include a different choice of communication behaviors to study, such as negative approach or negative avoidance behaviors
- This observational coding approach is promising for investigating any research regarding communication behaviors

³Manne, S., & Badr, H. (2008). Intimacy and relationship processes in couples' psychosocial adaptation to cancer. *Cancer*, 112(S11), 2541–2555. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cncr.23450>