

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

Gabby Braun<sup>1</sup>, Katherine Ramos, PhD<sup>2</sup>, Laura Porter, PhD<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Duke University, <sup>2</sup>Duke University Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences

## 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.

Figure 1:

**Anxiously attached patients** can effect their own physical well-being through the behavior of holding back (actor effect). Anxiously attached spouses, by holding back, can effect the patient's physical well-being (actor-partner effect).

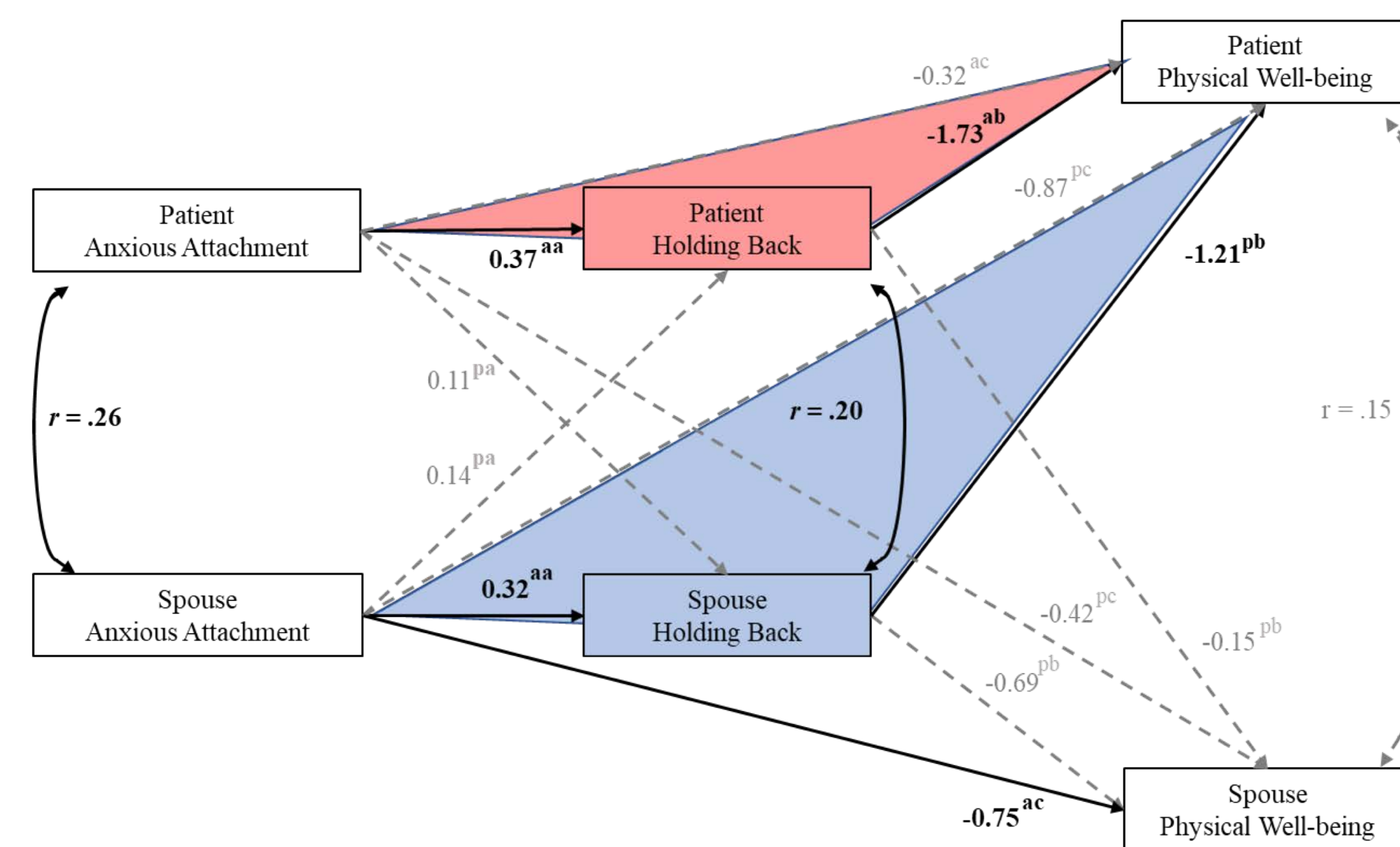


Figure 3:

**Avoidantly attached patients & spouses** can effect their own physical well-being through the behavior of holding back (actor effect). Avoidantly attached spouses, by holding back, can effect the patient's physical well-being (actor-partner effect).

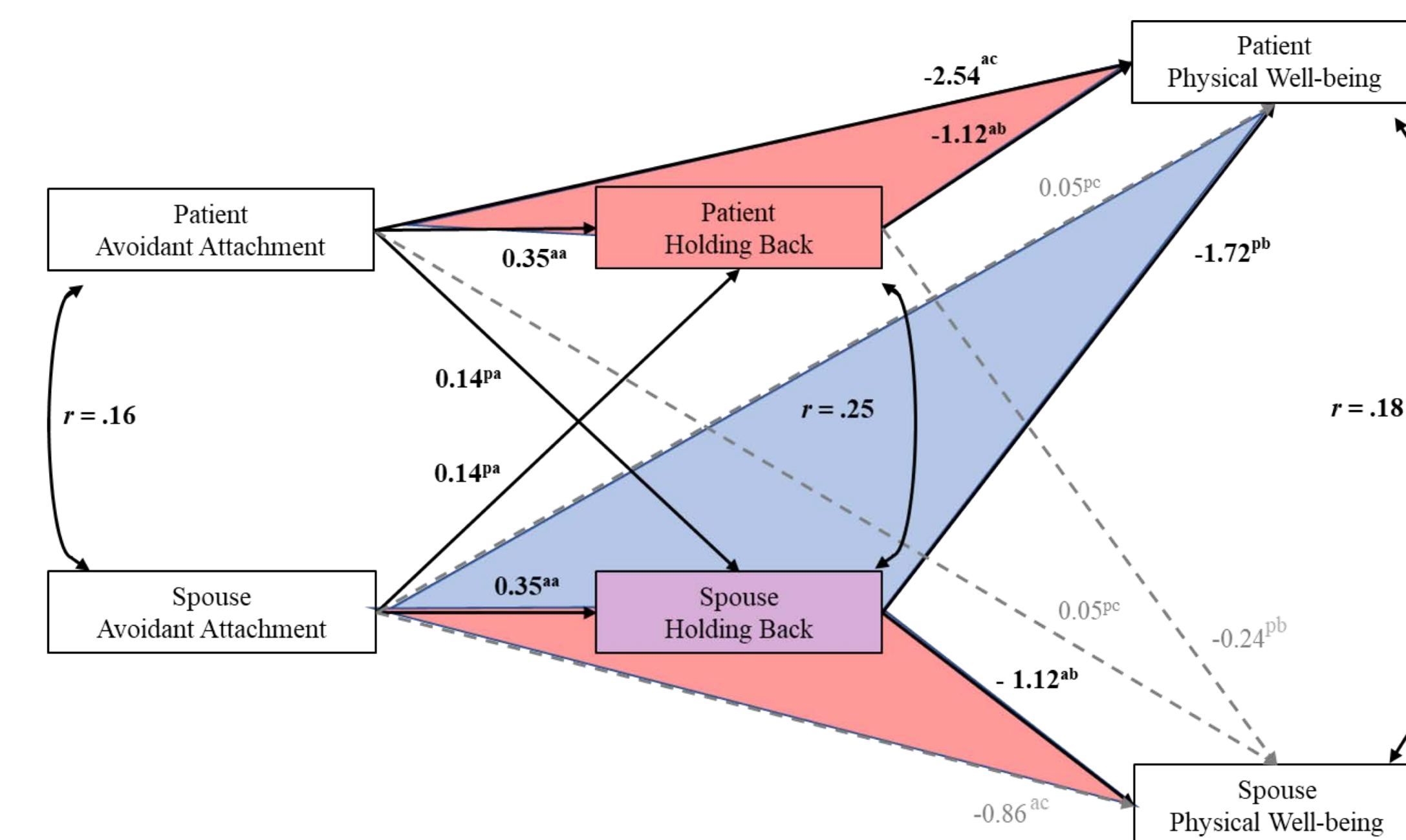


Figure 2:

**Anxiously attached patients & spouses** can effect their own physical well-being through the behavior of disclosure (actor effect). Anxiously attached spouses, through disclosure, can effect the patient's physical well-being (actor-partner effect).

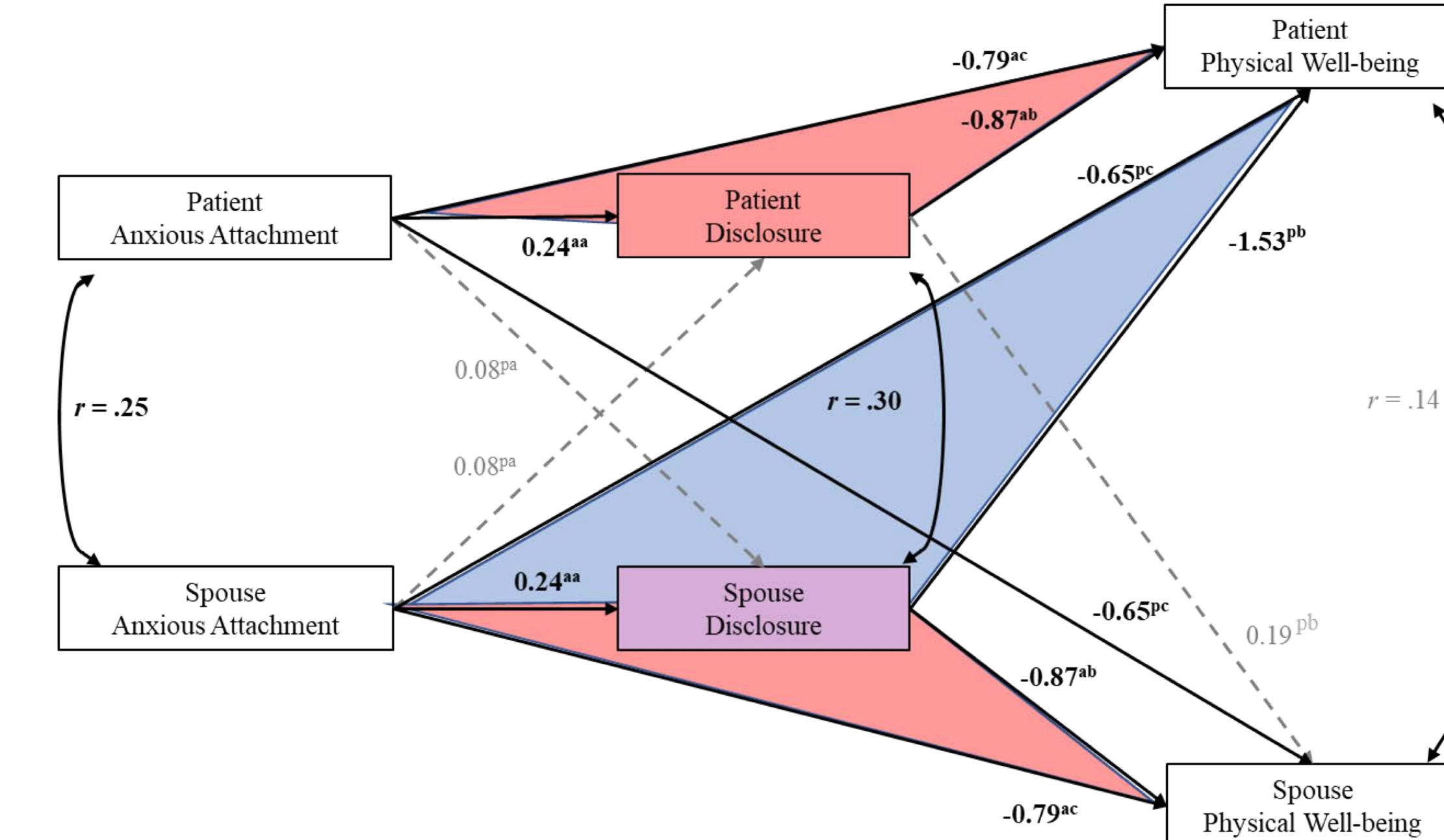
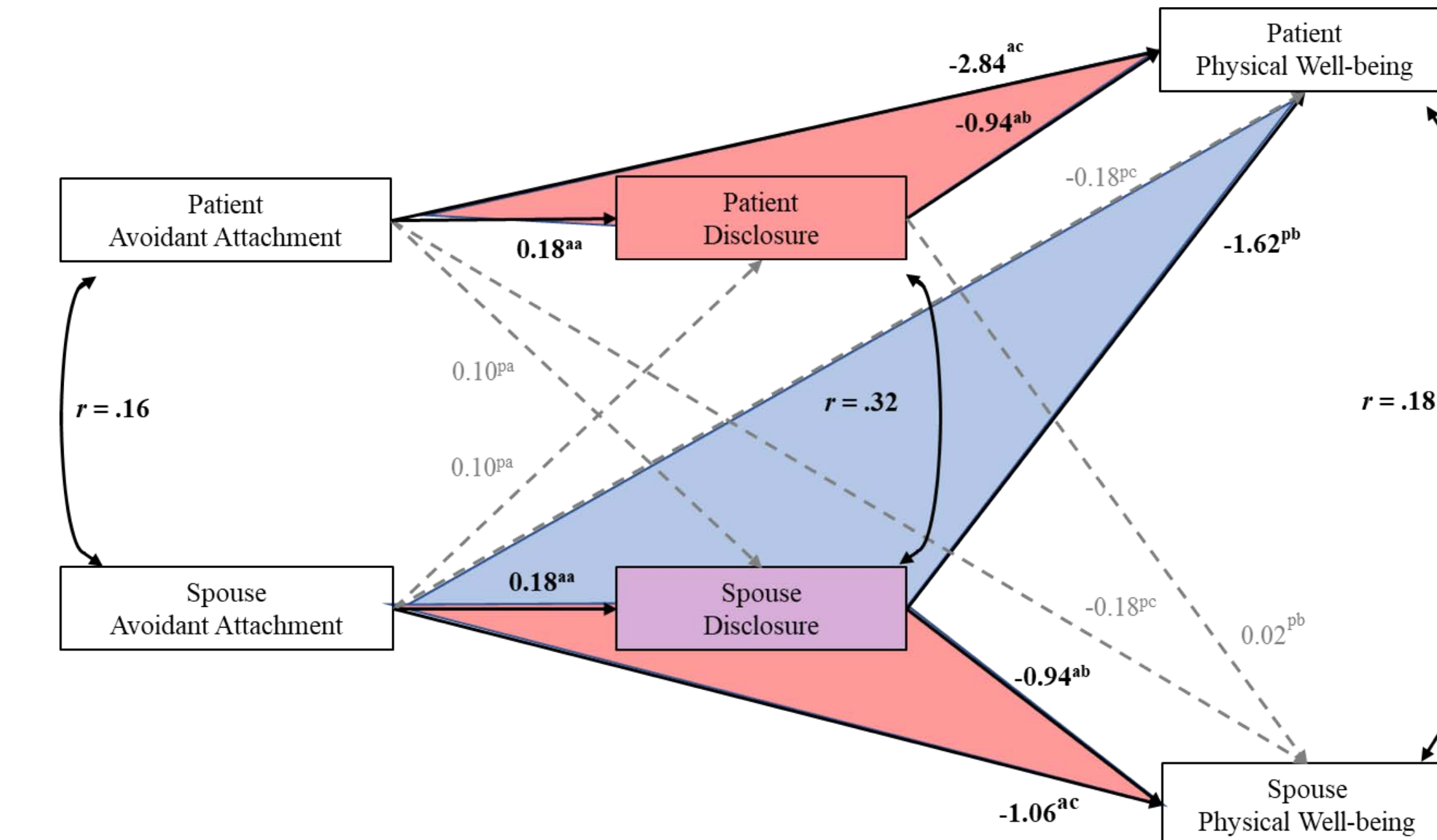


Figure 4:

**Avoidantly attached patients & spouses** can effect their own physical well-being through the behavior of disclosure (actor effect). Avoidantly attached spouses, through disclosure, can effect the patient's physical well-being (actor-partner effect).



## Correlations Among Key Study Variables...

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

Variables	Attachment Anxiety	Attachment Avoidance	Disclosure	Holding Back	Physical Well-being	Emotional Expressivity
Attachment anxiety	-	.63**	.28**	.43**	<b>-.26**</b>	-.12
Attachment avoidance	.53**	-	.15	.33**	<b>-.36**</b>	<b>-.45**</b>
Disclosure	.22**	.08	-	.39**	-.28**	-.05
Holding Back	.37**	.24**	.49**	-	-.42**	-.20*
Physical Well-Being	-.29**	-.21**	-.30**	-.28**	-	.04
Emotional Expressivity	-.14	-.51**	.09	-.02	.01	-
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)

## What We Found...

- 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.

## Next Steps...

- 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.