

The association between spousal reactions to chronic pain and pain-related outcomes: a systematic review

Donohue, G.F.², Meredith, P.J.^{3,4}, Strong, J.^{4,5}, Page, L.F.², Andrews, N.E.^{1,5,6}

Background

- Chronic pain has a negative impact on a variety of quality-of-life domains, including relationships
- Fordyce (1976) first proposed that solicitousness (expressing excessive concern) and punishing (expressing negative concern) responses from partners can impact on outcomes (see Figure 1)
- Other theories such as those based on intimacy or the Communal Coping Model of Catastrophising have considered reactions such as empathy or spousal catastrophising on pain outcomes
- Research supporting these theories are however inconsistent
- This project aimed to understand how spousal behaviours impact pain outcomes for people experiencing chronic pain

Figure 1: Solicitous and punishing response and their relationship with pain expression and behaviours as per operant theory

Research Question

WHAT IS THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SPOUSAL REACTIONS TO THEIR PARTNER’S CHRONIC PAIN BEHAVIOUR AND PAIN-RELATED OUTCOMES?

Methodology

Inclusion Criteria

To be included, studies needed to consider:

- Adults
- Experiencing persistent pain according to IASP definition of persistent pain (of non-cancer origin)
- In a relationship (i.e., in an intimate relationship - married/cohabitating/dating/stable partner)
- With a measure of spousal reaction to pain (e.g., West-Haven Yale Multidimensional Pain Inventory) completed by the spouse or the person experiencing pain (i.e., perceived spousal reaction)
- And a measure of a pain-related outcome

Databases and Study Selection

Databases searched: Medline, Pubmed, PsychINFO, Cinahl and Embase

Pubmed (n= 359), Embase (n= 169), Medline (n=537), Cinahl (n=319), PsychINFO (n=63). Total (n= 1,447)

Articles screened on basis of title and abstract. Included (n=116)

Full text review completed by two reviewers

- Included (n=64)
- Excluded (n=52)

Results

Main Findings

Punishing and distracting spousal behaviour was consistently associated with **worse pain outcomes**, suggesting that it does not reduce pain behaviour (contraindicating theoretical expectations)

A small number of studies have found a relationship between **empathic and validating spousal responses** and better pain outcomes. **More research is needed** to draw definitive conclusions

In line with theory, **solicitous spousal behaviour** is consistently associated with **worse pain outcomes**

Emerging areas of research include the impact of spousal responses that are **hostile, critical, or encourage autonomy**. More research is needed to draw conclusions.

Pelvic Pain

Studies specifically focused on pelvic pain was another emerging area of research (n=10)

- In 4 studies, solicitous responses were associated with higher pain intensity levels
- Negative partner responses were associated with higher levels of depression
- Facilitative responses were associated with lower pain levels in 1 study

Take Away Messages

- Previously held thoughts about spousal responses extinguishing pain behaviour through punishment are not supported by the literature
- Most spousal responses that have been studied have been associated with worse pain outcomes including increased disability, pain, catastrophizing
- A small amount of research has considered helpful spousal responses (including empathy, validation, compassion, spousal autonomy support). Further research into helpful spousal responses to persistent pain behaviours is required