Couples’ adaptation to chronic Illness: The importance of effective communication

Laura Porter, Ph.D., Duke University Medical Center

Chronic illness poses formidable challenges for the individual diagnosed with the illness (the “patient”) as well as his/her spouse or intimate partner and their relationship. Having a supportive partner is associated with better adjustment, however even couples in healthy relationship often struggle to cope with negative emotions, changes in roles and responsibilities, limitations to activities, and fears about the future.

Research suggests that couples’ ability to adapt successfully is closely linked to their ability to communicate openly and effectively with each other about illness-related concerns. In particular, couples’ abilities to (a) share thoughts and feelings with each other in an emotionally supportive manner, and (b) problem-solve effectively together as a couple are critical to their adjustment.

However, many couples report difficulties communicating about illness-related concerns, even in the context of overall satisfying relationships. This can lead to deficits in emotional support, decreases in intimacy and relationship quality, and increased psychological distress.

To address these problems, we have been developing and testing couple-based interventions for chronic illness, with a particular focus on couples facing cancer. The interventions adapt well-validated cognitive-behavioral skills for teaching couples communication and problem-solving skills, enhancing their understanding of relationship interactions, addressing emotions in an adaptive manner, and increasing positive interactions. Findings from several recent studies suggest that these interventions can lead to beneficial results for patients, partners, and the quality of their relationships.

Key questions that remain to be addressed are (a) the impact of communication interventions on outcomes such as treatment adherence and health outcomes; (b) identifying couples who are most likely to benefit; and (c) how to integrate such interventions into the health care system.

Suggestions for health care providers to help enhance patient-partner communication include (a) assessing patient-partner communication by asking them about their ability to talk to each other about their illness-related concerns; (b) encouraging and modeling open communication and validation of patient and partner concerns; (c) acknowledging partner burden/distress and encouraging self-care; and (d) providing appropriate referrals for patients and partners with clinically significant distress or a history of mental illness.

References


