

Gender Differences In Stress Reactions To Relationship Conflict

Men and women who are expectant parents have different stress reactions to relationship conflict, according to researchers at Penn State, who studied couples expecting their first child. In addition, recovery from the initial reaction to conflict also can be different for men and women, depending on individual difficulties, such as anxiety, or relationship difficulties, such as chronic relationship conflict.

The researchers found that men's increased stress levels -- measured by the amount of the stress hormone cortisol -- during a conflict discussion depended on the level of hostility the couple expressed. More hostility led to a larger stress reaction for men, but the stress levels of pregnant women during the discussion were not linked to the amount of hostility expressed.

The team also found that recovery from the conflict discussion -- measured by assessing cortisol levels 20 minutes later -- did not differ for men and women with low levels of anxiety. However, men with a high level of anxiety recovered less, whereas women with high anxiety recovered more if the couple had expressed a high level of hostility during the discussion. The same pattern was found for men and women who reported low versus high levels of chronic, unresolved relationship conflict.

"Hostility and negativity in a relationship has been shown to have a major impact on mental health and the future wellbeing of the couple," said Mark Feinberg, research professor in the Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development at Penn State. "It is especially important to understand how relationship conflict may affect stress during pregnancy, as maternal stress has been linked to health problems for both the mother and child. And men who have difficulty dealing with stress could end up reacting angrily to future disagreements, which could affect the quality of the relationship, parent-child relations and children's adjustment."

The researchers recruited 138 heterosexual couples expecting their first child (82 percent were married) to participate in the study. In their own homes, the expectant parents separately completed questionnaires regarding their relationship experiences and individual qualities, attitudes and well-being. Interviewers videotaped two six-minute interactions of each couple discussing something not related to the relationship. Next, the couples were asked to discuss three problems in their relationship, such as money and housework.

During the home interviews, the researchers collected three saliva samples from each of the participants in order to measure the amount of cortisol contained within the saliva. They collected the first baseline sample prior to videotaping the interactions among the participants. They collected the second sample after the conflict discussion to examine the participants' reactivity to the conflict. They collected the third sample 20 minutes after the second sample to assess whether cortisol levels had gone back down as they typically do after a brief stressor, indicating recovery from the stress of the conflict.

As expected, the researchers found that greater hostility in a conflict discussion led to increased levels of cortisol, indicating greater physiological stress, for men. The same pattern was not found for women. However, the researchers noted this may be due to the fact that women's cortisol levels are already high during pregnancy.

In examining the participants' recovery to conflict, men with a high level of anxiety recovered less, whereas women with high anxiety recovered more. The same pattern was found for men and women who reported low versus high levels of chronic, unresolved relationship conflict.

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"We found that all men appeared to find hostility stressful," said Feinberg. "For generally anxious men, more expressed hostility was also linked to more persistence of this elevated stress. On the other hand, generally anxious women experienced relatively more prolonged stress when there were lower levels of negativity and hostility expressed during the discussion. We speculate that these anxious women, as well as women in relationships in which chronic arguing is a feature, find the airing of differences, even when the tone turns negative, to be reassuring that the couple is engaged with each other. This may be particularly important for women during the vulnerable period of their first pregnancy. It would be useful for couples to understand that they need to carefully balance the apparently beneficial effects that discussing difficult relationship topics had for some women with the apparently negative effects it has on some men."