

Intranasal Oxytocin Increases Positive Communication and Reduces Cortisol Levels During Couple Conflict

Beate Ditzen, Marcel Schaer, Barbara Gabriel, Guy Bodenmann, Ulrike Ehlert, and Markus Heinrichs

Background: In nonhuman mammals, the neuropeptide oxytocin has repeatedly been shown to increase social approach behavior and pair bonding. In particular, central nervous oxytocin reduces behavioral and neuroendocrine responses to social stress and is suggested to mediate the rewarding aspects of attachment in highly social species. However, to date there have been no studies investigating the effects of central oxytocin mechanisms on behavior and physiology in human couple interaction.

Methods: In a double-blind placebo-controlled design, 47 heterosexual couples (total $n = 94$) received oxytocin or placebo intranasally before a standard instructed couple conflict discussion in the laboratory. The conflict session was videotaped and coded for verbal and nonverbal interaction behavior (e.g., eye contact, nonverbal positive behavior, and self-disclosure). Salivary cortisol was repeatedly measured during the experiment.

Results: Oxytocin significantly increased positive communication behavior in relation to negative behavior during the couple conflict discussion ($F = 4.18, p = .047$) and significantly reduced salivary cortisol levels after the conflict compared with placebo ($F = 7.14, p = .011$).

Conclusions: These results are in line with animal studies indicating that central oxytocin facilitates approach and pair bonding behavior. Our findings imply an involvement of oxytocin in couple interaction and close relationships in humans.

Key Words: Couple conflict, intranasal oxytocin, salivary cortisol, social interaction, stress

Close social relationships play a key role for wellbeing and longevity in humans (1–3). It has been suggested that this beneficial effect of social relationships and particularly of positive couple interaction is mediated through a reduced reactivity of physiological stress systems, namely the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and the autonomous nervous system (ANS) (4–6). Conversely, marital discord and specifically hostile behavior during couple conflict in unhappy relationships have been shown to substantially impair psychological and physiological well-being (7–9). To date, it is unclear which neurophysiological mechanisms mediate both the beneficial effects of happy close social relationships on psychobiological stress systems as well as the negative effects of repeated and intense couple conflict.

A large body of evidence links the central activity of the neuropeptide oxytocin with affiliative behavior as well as with stress reduction in nonhuman mammals (10,11). In line with this research, initial studies suggest similar social and stress-reducing effects of oxytocin in humans. Notably, recent neuropharmacological research has shown that neuropeptides gain access to the human brain after intranasal administration (12), providing a useful method for studying the central nervous effects of oxytocin in humans (13). Intranasal oxytocin was found to reduce

endocrine and psychological responses to social stress (14), to modulate social memory (15,16), and to increase trust and eye-gazing (17,18) and the ability to infer the mental state of another person (“mind-reading”) (19). In line with this, the hormone was shown to attenuate amygdala responses to emotional faces (20,21) and during prosocial behavior (22).

The effects of intranasal oxytocin in human couple interaction have not been investigated so far. Given that oxytocin seems to promote pair bonding behavior in nonhuman mammals and social approach behavior in humans, we hypothesized that oxytocin might affect communication and stress responsiveness in human couples.

In this study, we investigated the effects of a single dose of intranasal oxytocin in comparison with placebo on interaction behavior and HPA axis activity during a laboratory couple conflict discussion.

Methods and Materials

Forty-seven heterosexual couples ($n = 94$ subjects), aged 20–50 years, who were married or had been cohabiting for at least 1 year participated in the study. Exclusion criteria for participation were smoking, chronic mental or physical illness, medication intake and, for women, the intake of hormonal contraceptives, current pregnancy, and breastfeeding. All women were investigated during the luteal phase of their menstrual cycle. Subjects were informed that we were interested in hormonal influences on couple communication and that they would receive either oxytocin or placebo before a conflict conversation in the laboratory. All couples gave written informed consent and were offered 100 Swiss Francs for participation. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Zurich and the Canton of Zurich.

To assess equivalence among oxytocin and placebo groups, the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) (23), the Relationship Questionnaire (PFB) (24), and the Short Chronic Stress Scale (SSCS) (25) were analyzed in all subjects before participation in the study. Experiments took place in the laboratories of the Department of Psychology at the University of Zurich between 5:00 PM and 7:30 PM to control for diurnal variation in salivary

From the Department of Psychology (BD, UE), Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy; Department of Psychology, Clinical Psychology and Psychobiology (MH), University of Zurich, Zurich; Department of Psychology (MS, BG, GB), Institute for Family Research and Counseling, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland; and the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences (BD), Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, Georgia.

Address reprint requests to Beate Ditzen, Ph.D., University of Zurich, Department of Psychology, Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, Binzmühlestr. 14/Box 26, CH-8050 Zurich, Switzerland; E-mail: b.ditzen@psychologie.uzh.ch.

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cortisol. Salivary free cortisol was repeatedly assessed with Salivette collection devices (Sarstedt, Sevelen, Switzerland) at baseline (–50 min relative to the onset of the conflict discussion), immediately before conflict (–1 min), and after conflict (+15, +25, +35, +50 min). Saliva samples were stored at –20°C until required for analysis with a commercially available chemiluminescence immunoassay (CLIA; IBL Hamburg, Germany) with inter- and intra-assay coefficients of variation below 10%.

After the baseline saliva assessment and a pregnancy test in women, subjects rated the intensity of 23 pre-determined areas of couple conflict (24) with regard to their own relationship. Couples chose two topics (e.g., finances, educational issues, leisure time) of continuing disagreement for the later discussion (26–28). After this procedure, in a double-blind design based on the randomization table prepared by the study pharmacy, couples self-administered either 40 IU (5 puffs in each nostril) of oxytocin (Syntocinon Spray, Novartis, Basel, Switzerland) or placebo intranasally under the supervision of the study coordinator.

Forty-five minutes after drug administration, couples were asked to discuss the conflict issue that they had chosen previously during the following 10 min (29). Couples were alone in the room and were videotaped during this conflict discussion. After the conflict discussion, all subjects were asked to evaluate the discussion with a standard evaluation questionnaire (30) on self-perceived aspects of the conflict (e.g., validity of the task, stressfulness of the task).

During the following 60 min, saliva samples were taken repeatedly and couples watched a documentary (31) to prevent them from talking or ruminating about the conflict any further. Finally, participants received the financial incentive and left the laboratory at 7:30 PM.

Conflict behavior was coded with an adapted version of the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF) (26,32) and the Coding System for Marital and Family Interaction (KPI) (33) with a computer-aided system of analysis (Computer Aided Observation System [CAOS]) (34). Two trained raters who were blind with regard to the subjects' group assignment coded nonverbal (e.g., eye contact, nonverbal positive behavior, nonverbal negative behavior) and verbal behavior (e.g., curiosity/care, emotional self-disclosure, agreement, contempt, belligerence, defensiveness). Inter-rater reliability (Cohen's kappa) was .66 for nonverbal categories and .80–1.0 for verbal categories. The total score was calculated as the relative duration of positive behavior (e.g., eye contact, emotional self-disclosure, nonverbal positive behavior) as a ratio of the relative duration of negative behavior (e.g., contempt, defensiveness, belligerence, nonverbal negative behavior). Before calculating the sum score, all behavior categories were z-transformed.

Baseline differences between groups were analyzed with *t* tests. Univariate analyses of variance with the group factor oxytocin versus placebo and the covariates chronic stress level (25) and scores of pre-determined areas of couple conflict (24) were calculated in order to analyze cortisol and behavior. For nonparametric self-rating data, Mann-Whitney *U* tests were calculated. Cortisol values were log-transformed by $\ln\text{Cort} = \ln(x + 1)$ to yield unskewed response variables. Salivary cortisol levels were interpreted on the basis of the area under the curve with respect to the increase (AUC_i), which allows a sensitive measure of physiological changes over time (35). Data were analyzed with SPSS 14 (SPSS, Chicago, Illinois).

Results

The two groups did not significantly differ in any demographic or baseline characteristics (age, body mass index, years of education, duration of relationship, relationship quality, chronic stress, and general health symptoms), in baseline cortisol levels (–50 min relative to the onset of the conflict), or cortisol levels immediately before conflict (–1 min) (Supplement 1).

Oxytocin significantly increased the duration of positive behavior in relation to negative behavior during the couple conflict [$F(1,43) = 4.18, p = .047$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$; Figure 1A], with no differences between women and men. Oxytocin did not affect the total duration of positive or negative behavior during the conflict discussion.

Participants rated their behavior as “very much like at home” (median = 5.0, range: 2–6) and the topics as “very representative

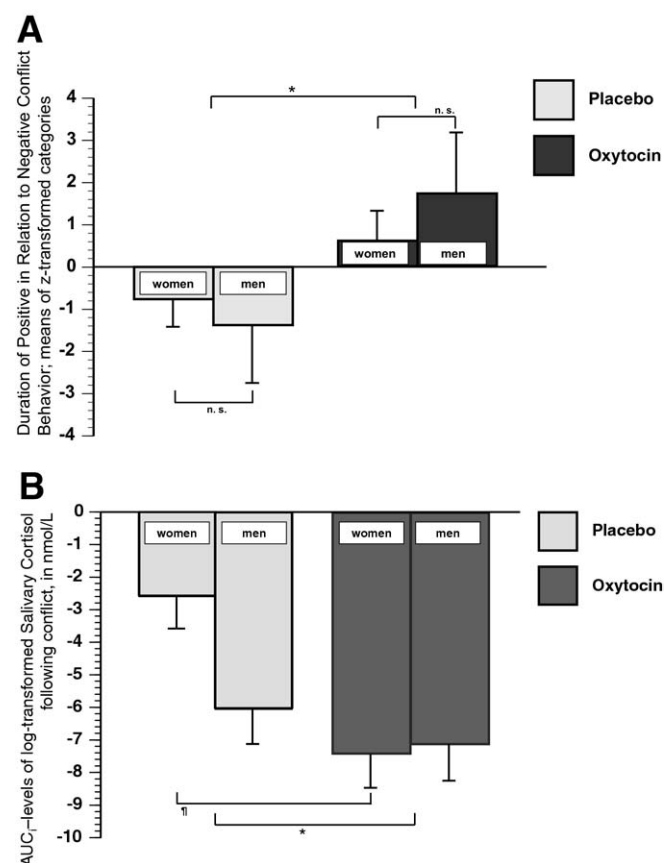


Figure 1. (A) Duration of positive conflict behavior in relation to duration of negative conflict behavior during couple conflict in the laboratory, categorized on the basis of the Specific Affect Coding System. The levels represent the means of z-transformed duration in positive behavior (eye contact, interest, emotional self-disclosure, validation, caring, nonverbal positive behavior) in relation to the z-transformed duration of negative behavior (criticism, contempt, defense, domineering, belligerence, stonewalling, nonverbal negative behavior, interruption) in women ($n = 23$) and men ($n = 23$) with intranasal oxytocin or women ($n = 24$) and men ($n = 24$) with placebo during the 10-min conflict discussion. **(B)** Areas under the individual response curves with respect to increase (AUC_i) of log-transformed salivary cortisol after couple conflict in the laboratory. The AUC_i includes the four measures of saliva hormone levels after the 10-min conflict in women ($n = 23$) and men ($n = 23$) with oxytocin or women ($n = 24$) and men ($n = 24$) with placebo (intranasal administration). Error bars are SEM. To convert cortisol from nmol/L to mg/dL, divide by 27.59. *5% level of significance; ¶10% level of significance.

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