

Stress and its associations with relationship satisfaction

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Stress is an all too common experience for people around the world. In the past 30 years, researchers have built upon traditional models of stress, which have focused on the individual, to explore stress' systemic effects. As such, the once thought individual experience of stress can now be conceptualized as a dyadic construct that affects both individuals within an interdependent dyad. Reviewing a selection of the literature published after Randall and Bodenmann's [1] seminal review on the impact of stress on close relationships, this review conceptualizes the associations between different types of stressors — particularly those that originate outside (external) and inside (internal) the relationship — and relationship satisfaction within romantic relationships. Implications for future research and clinical interventions are discussed.

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Stress — the physical or psychological reaction to real or imagined demands [2] — is embedded within our social context [3], and can impact the ways in which we interact with others, specifically our romantic partner [1,4]. While some individuals may face increased experiences of stress due to personality traits, such as neuroticism [5–7], or mental health conditions, such as diagnosed anxiety or depression [8–10], the focus of this manuscript is to present a review of associations between stress and romantic partners' relationship satisfaction irrespective of these individual differences.

Stress as a dyadic phenomenon

Romantic partners have a strong mutual influence over each other's experiences [11], which have been documented in the reciprocal influence of partners' behaviors

[12–14] and emotions [15,16]. Acknowledging partners' interdependence, traditional conceptualizations of stress as an individual phenomenon [2,3,17] have been expanded to examine stress as a dyadic phenomenon — one that affects both partners in a romantic relationship [4]. Building upon historical family-stress theories, such as the ABC-X model [18], recent theoretical developments afford greater specificity in understanding stress as a dyadic phenomenon. For example, the *vulnerability-stress-adaptation model* [19] proposes that the effects of stress on adverse relational outcomes are on the basis of: first, *enduring vulnerabilities* (i.e., stable characteristics making individuals vulnerable to stress); second, *stressful events*; and third, *adaptive processes* (e.g., the inability to provide support to one another).

Bodenmann's [20–22] *stress-divorce-model* offers an explanation as to the impact that minor everyday stressors can have on partners' relationship functioning. According to this model, stressors originating outside the relationship (external stressors) can spillover into the relationship causing stress within the relationship (internal stress). This *stress spillover* process has been well documented in the literature, and has consistently shown that the experience of stress in one domain of life can spillover into one's relationship causing stress within the relationship [1,23–25]. This can occur by a number of ways, such as: first, decreasing the time partners spend together, which in turn weakens partners' feelings of mutuality (i.e., feelings of a shared versus an independent identity); second, decreasing effective communication; third, increasing the likelihood that partners' problematic traits (e.g., anxiety, dominance, rigidity and stubbornness) will be expressed; and fourth, increasing the risk of negative health outcomes, such as mood or sleep disorders. As such, partners' inability to effectively cope with their experiences of minor stressors can lead to a deterioration in relationship satisfaction over time, and eventually the demise of the relationship [20–22].

Defining types of stressors

In their seminal article, Randall and Bodenmann [1] presented a typology of stress examined from a relational framework. The authors suggest that to understand the impact of stress on relationship satisfaction one must take into consideration: first, the *locus* of stress (external versus internal stress); second, the *intensity* of stress (major versus minor stress); and third the *duration* of stress (acute versus chronic stress). As noted above, *external* stressors are those that originate outside the relationship, such as stress from school, work, family members (apart from one's romantic partner), or social tensions with others outside

the relationship (e.g., friends and extended family). *Internal* stressors, on the other hand, are stressors that originate within the relationship, such as those from difficult or annoying habits from the partner or differing relational goals (e.g., whether or not to move in together or have children). *Major* stressors are considered critical life events, such as the experience of a severe illness, death of a family member, or adapting to life's changes (e.g., the birth of a child or retirement). Conversely, *minor* stressors are the 'common' everyday stressors one may experience (e.g., waking up late or getting stuck in traffic). Finally, it is important to recognize that the experience of stress can be temporary only lasting a few days (*acute*), or lasting several months (*chronic*). Randall and Bodenmann's [1] review suggests that it is the experience of external, minor, chronic stressors that have the most significant impact on relationship quality, which is in accord with Bodenmann's [20–22] stress-divorce model. Building upon this literature, the purpose of this manuscript is to provide an up-to-date review of the associations between stress and relationship satisfaction.

Empirical findings

EBSCOhost, Google Scholar PsycInfo, PsycARTICLES, and the Web of Science were the search engines used for this review. The following search terms were used in various combinations: *children, chronic stress, daily stress, external stress, daily hassles, infertility, internal stress, life events, major stress, minor stress, minority stress, and stress*, combined with *couple, close relationship, marriage, or relationship satisfaction*. Articles included in this review were restricted to manuscripts published since 2009 in peer-reviewed journals that mentioned addressing stress and relationship satisfaction/quality/distress, and used the adult dyad as the unit of analysis. Notable exceptions include studies conducted by Otis and colleagues [26,27], as minority stressors were not included in Randall and Bodenmann's [1] review. In total, the review yielded 26 empirical articles that examined associations between stress and relationship satisfaction with an average sample size of 276 dyads ($n = 552$ individuals). Samples ranged in age from 18 to 75 years, with a mean relationship length of 7.65 years ($SD = 5.47$). Data on relationship length were not available for a number of studies [24,28–34].

On the basis of Randall and Bodenmann's [1] conceptualization of stress, the focus for this review was to provide an overview of the associations of stress (both external and internal) and relationship satisfaction. External stressors included the experience of work stress [30,34,35], financial stress [36,37], parenting stress [28], minority stress [26,27,38], and immigration stress [39]. Internal stressors included couples' experiences of dealing with negative forms of conflict resolution [41], stress from chronic illness [32,40], and infertility [42–44]. Please see Table 1 for detailed study information.

Discussion

Not surprisingly, empirical evidence suggests there is a negative association between stress and relationship satisfaction, which supports the notion of examining stress as a dyadic construct [4]. As Randall and Bodenmann [1] proposed, it may be useful to distinguish between the source of stress for the couple as external stress, in particular, has important implications for relationship functioning [20–22], above and beyond the expected negative association between internal stress (e.g., stress associated with relationship conflicts or annoying habits from the partner) and relationship satisfaction. Examining internal stress, such as stress related to infertility or a partner's illness (e.g., PTSD or cancer) may be particularly relevant to the understanding of the couples' functioning. Table 1 illustrates that most studies reviewed focused on the associations between external stress (e.g., child-related stress, daily hassles, economic strain, immigration stress, minority stress, etc.) and relationship well-being. The associations between these types of stressors and relationship satisfaction were found to be consistently negative, as expected. While some studies report direct effects, most of the research explored various mediators (e.g., self-regulatory depletion, partner aggression and depressive symptoms) or moderators (e.g., closeness and dyadic coping) within the association between stress and relationship satisfaction.

The experience of stress is inevitable for couples; therefore, it is critical to understand how partners can cope with stress in the context of their relationship [4,45**]. In accord with conceptualizing stress as a dyadic context, the *systemic-transactional model of stress and coping* [4,20,46] posits that partners' experiences of stress have mutual influence on one another due to their shared interdependence. The systemic-transactional model offers an explanation to how stress is communicated and appraised between partners [21,47] to determine how partners may cope with the stressors (dyadic coping). Consider the following scenario in the context of a same-sex couple: Partner A experiences discrimination at work due to his or her sexual minority status, and comes home to discuss what happened with his or her partner (Partner B). Partner B can choose to react in a number of ways, for example: first, be supportive and empathize (emotion-focused supportive dyadic coping); second, help their partner to find solutions to deal with the situation (problem-focused supportive dyadic coping); or third, negate his or her partner's experience by mocking or criticizing them for sharing the situation (negative dyadic coping) [20]. Recent research on the study of women in same-sex relationships has shown that engaging in positive dyadic coping can help mitigate women's stress associated with workplace discrimination [48]. Apart from this specific scenario, engaging in positive dyadic coping to deal with a variety of

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