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Original article

## Daily hassles, marital functioning and psychological distress among community-dwelling older couples



*Tracas quotidiens, fonctionnement conjugal et détresse psychologique chez les couples âgés vivant à domicile*

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives.** – This study attempts to examine the association between stress induced by daily hassles, marital functioning and psychological distress among a sample of older couples living at home without assisted living facilities. Moreover, the study looks to assess the moderator role of marital functioning on the association between stress and psychological distress.

**Methods.** – The study included a representative sample of 508 older couples living at home where at least one spouse was aged 65 years or older. To take into account of the non-independence of the data, dyadic analyses were conducted.

**Results.** – For men, marital functioning and stress induced by daily hassles explained the variance of psychological distress 4.71% and 2.56% respectively. For women, these variables explained 10.96% and 2.43% respectively of this variance. Results found also that marital functioning can play a protective role between the association of stress and psychological distress among men, but not for women. Men with lower marital functioning present a significant higher level of psychological distress when they present stress than those who do not have stress. For those with high marital functioning, no significant differences have been found on psychological distress between those groups.

**Conclusion.** – Stress induced by daily hassles and marital functioning are significantly related to psychological distress among older people, and, for men, marital functioning can play a protective role in the association between those variables.

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### R É S U M É

**Objectifs.** – Cet article a pour but d'examiner les relations entre le stress induit par les tracas quotidiens, le fonctionnement conjugal et la détresse psychologique en plus d'examiner l'effet modérateur du fonctionnement conjugal dans la relation entre le stress et la détresse psychologique auprès d'un échantillon de couples âgés vivant à domicile de façon autonome.

**Méthodologie.** – L'échantillon est composé de 508 couples âgés vivant à domicile dont l'un des conjoints est âgé d'au moins 65 ans. Afin de prendre en compte la non-indépendance des données entre les participants, des analyses dyadiques ont été réalisées.

**Résultats.** – Chez les hommes, le fonctionnement conjugal et le stress induit par les tracas quotidiens expliquent respectivement 4,71 % et 2,56 % de leur détresse psychologique. Chez les femmes, ces variables expliquent 10,96 % et 2,43 % de leur détresse. Les résultats montrent également un effet modérateur du fonctionnement conjugal dans la relation entre le stress et la détresse psychologique chez les hommes âgés seulement. Les hommes qui ont un faible fonctionnement conjugal présentent un niveau significativement plus élevé de détresse psychologique lorsqu'ils rapportent du stress relié à leur tracas

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comparativement à ceux qui ne rapportent pas de tel stress. Chez les hommes présentant un haut niveau de fonctionnement conjugal, aucune différence significative n'a été trouvée quant à leur niveau de stress entre les hommes présentant ou non du stress lié à leurs tracas quotidiens.

*Conclusion.* – Le fonctionnement conjugal et le stress induit par les tracas quotidiens sont significativement reliés à la détresse psychologique des hommes et des femmes âgés vivant en couple. De plus, chez les hommes, le fonctionnement conjugal constitue un facteur de protection dans la relation entre le stress et la détresse psychologique.

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## 1. Introduction

Two main areas were studied in the research on the health effects of stress: The impact of a major life stress (e.g., divorce, loss of a job) and the effect of daily stressors (Almeida, Piazza, Stawski, & Klein, 2011). Daily stressors may refer to daily hassles, and, according to Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, and Lazarus (1981), daily hassles are irritating and frustrating demands that occur every day. For example, a daily stressor could be worries about the occurrence of negative interactions with a relative or about the occurrence of illness, memory problems, etc. Moreover, these stressors have more impact on well-being than major life events (e.g., Pearlin, 1982; Serido, Almeida, & Wethington, 2004). Some researchers have argued that older adults (aged 65 or older) cope better with stress and become less reactive to stressors than younger adults (aged under 65), but other researchers have suggested an inverse relationship (see Almeida et al., 2011). According to Doucet, Ladouceur, Freeston, and Dugas (1998), the most frequent concerns of older people are health (64.4%), relationships with family and friends (28.8%) and finances (26.4%). A longitudinal study conducted over seven years by Jeon, Dunkle, and Roberts (2006), of 193 people aged 85 years or older, living at home, showed that the most frequent hassles in this population are health and memory.

Many studies have examined the impact of hassles on psychological distress. Studies that examine the links between daily hassles and psychological variables showed that the former have a deleterious effect on psychological well-being (Landreville & Vezina, 1992; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Monroe, 1983; Serido et al., 2004).

A literature review by Randall and Bodenmann (2009) have revealed that researchers have recently been more interested in studying the effects of stress induced by daily hassles among couples, but none of these studies involved older couples. However, several studies have reported that retirement leads to various changes that may affect the marital relationships of older people (Kim & Moen, 2001; Trudel, 2005; Trudel, Turgeon, & Piché, 2010). Children leaving the family home, health problems, increased time spent together and a decreased social network are situations that can cause tension between members of a couple and increase marital stressors. Some studies have reported a negative association between marital functioning and stress (Graham & Conoley, 2006; Harper, Schaalje, & Sandberg, 2000; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Moreover, Graham and Conoley (2006) have proposed the hypothesis that couples, with positive marital attributions (the perception of the positive impact of spouse behavior by the other spouse), are more likely to perceive their spouse as a source of support and to use the relationship as a coping strategy in a context of stress. These authors suggested here that positive marital attributions might contribute to preventing the negative impact of stress.

Until the association between marital functioning and psychological distress was well established (e.g., Kane & Kane, 2000; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Tower & Kasl, 1995; Villeneuve et al., 2014; Whisman, 1999; Whisman, Sheldon, & Goering, 2000), very few studies were conducted among older couples to examine the effect of stress and marital functioning on psychological distress.

Being in a relationship may have a protective effect. Indeed, some studies have suggested that marital functioning can protect against psychological distress in an aversive context as physical problems or stress (e.g., Levenson, Cartenson, & Gottman, 1993; Sandberg & Harper, 2000; Whisman et al., 2000). These studies revealed that marital dissatisfaction might exacerbate the effect of stress and physical problems on psychological well-being. On the other hand, marital satisfaction may reduce the aversive effect of stress. This phenomenon may be explained by the marital discord model of depression. This model suggests that marital problems lead to a reduction of adaptive behaviors and a rise in negative behaviors, both of which increase the probability of distress within couples (Beach, Sandeen, & O'Leary, 1990; Gotlib & Beach, 1995).

Nevertheless, none of these studies has examined the effect of marital functioning on the association between stress induced by daily hassles and psychological distress among older couples. In this way, a study by Sharp (2006), conducted among younger couples, focused on the interaction between dyadic adjustment and stress on the one hand and psychological symptoms on the other. The author found a significant interaction, but only in women: better marital functioning reduces the effect of stress on psychological symptoms. A study by Fernandez, Mutran, and Reitz (1998) of 728 full-time workers aged between 58 and 64 years showed that the effect of stress on levels of depressive symptoms was decreased by a satisfying relationship. From a wider perspective, a study by Yorgason, Almeida, Neuper, Spiro III, and Hoffman (2006) underlined the moderator role of marital functioning on the association between variables of well-being and daily health symptoms. Using multivariate multilevel data analysis on 96 dyads (192 individuals), they found that the effect of husbands' average daily health symptoms on their wife's positive mood depends, in part, on their marital satisfaction. Although daily health symptoms cannot be considered as direct measure of stress, we can assume that these difficulties can be associated with more daily stress. Similarly, it would be interesting to conduct research that examined the specific role of marital functioning among older couples associated with stress induced by daily hassles and psychological distress.

Regarding daily hassles, most researchers have not examined the gender differences. However, among those who did, some reported differences in daily hassles between men and women. Indeed, most studies have shown that women have more worries than men (e.g., Dugas, Freeston, & Ladouceur, 1997; Robichaud, Dugas, & Conway, 2003). A review by McLean and Anderson (2009) has shown that women suffer more anxiety disorders and fear than men. Nevertheless, other authors did not find any gender differences in levels of worries (e.g., Borkovec, Robinson, Pruzinsky, & DePree, 1983).

Concerning daily hassles, a study by Matud (2004) found that women suffer more chronic stress and minor daily stressors than men. Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001) have reviewed systematically studies that looked at the association between marital functioning and physiological reactions. Most of them were based on observational methodology such as coding marital interactions of couples. Measurements of physiological data such as the heart rate or the level of hormones as cortisol were also used to assess

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