

Partner Responses to Emotional Disclosures of Pain-Related Distress: Thinking Outside the Operant Box

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Abstract

Health psychologists have long appreciated the effects of the social environment on health behaviors, coping with illness, and health outcomes. For instance, pain researchers have relied on operant theory to highlight the important role of significant others in reinforcing pain behaviors (i.e., illness behaviors associated with pain). Numerous studies have provided support for the operant model and behavioral treatments have been developed to teach significant others including spouses and parents to ignore pain behaviors and reinforce well behaviors in their loved ones. However, a new line of research has raised the questions about whether all pain behaviors should be extinguished to improve health and well-being.

After providing an overview of the operant model and related research support, Dr. Cano will introduce interpersonal relationships and empathy models as a way to “think outside the operant box” with respect to illness behaviors. In particular, she will consider whether some behaviors such as emotional disclosures about illness should in fact be reinforced. She will also discuss the research and clinical implications of this line of thinking and share her treatment development work based on mindfulness and acceptance strategies for couples facing chronic pain.

Brief profile

Dr. Annmarie Cano is a Professor of Psychology and Associate Dean of Student Services in the Graduate School at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan (USA). Dr. Cano was elected a Fellow of the American Psychological Association in Divisions 38 (Society for Health Psychology) and 43 (Society for Couple and Family Psychology). She has also served as Associate Editor at both Health Psychology and Journal of Family Psychology and currently sits on the editorial boards of American Psychologist and Journal of Pain. Dr. Cano conducts research on emotion regulation and intimacy processes in couples facing health problems with a particular interest in empathic interaction to promote health and well-being. She has over 60 publications and her work has been published in high impact journals including Pain and Psychological Bulletin. Her research has been funded by the National Institutes of Mental Health and her current work is focused on developing and testing mindfulness and acceptance intervention strategies to improve emotion regulation processes in couples with chronic pain. Dr. Cano earned a master’s degree in psychology and a doctoral degree in clinical psychology from Stony Brook University. She has a 6-year old son and resides with her husband in the Detroit, Michigan area.



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