

Protecting relationships from stress

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Although partners in close social relationships often enable one another to manage stress, stress can also undermine the many benefits that these relationships provide. We review interventions designed to reduce the effects of stress on relationships, distinguishing (a) *couple-targeted* interventions that aim to build couples' skills in managing stress from (b) *stress-targeted* interventions intended to eliminate stress itself. Recent examples of these approaches are presented and evaluated. Couple-targeted and stress-targeted interventions both hold promise for empowering couples to sustain their relationship and the well-being of their children, and additional empirical work will help clarify the conditions under which different strategies prove most effective.

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Introduction

Given robust links between stress and intimate relationships (e.g., [1,2]), how can we best intervene to reduce the effects of stress and enable couples to have more satisfying, high-quality relationships? Reducing stress is of obvious practical importance to researchers, clinicians, employers, and policymakers who hope to bolster the well-being of couples and families, and addressing this question has the potential to inform theoretical understanding of how stress affects relationship functioning.

Below we discuss two broad strategies for protecting relationships in the face of stress: Firstly, providing couples with new skills intended to combat the adverse effects of stress; and finally, reducing stress directly, with minimal direct involvement of couples themselves. Below we review interventions that adopt these approaches, evaluate their efficacy, and outline directions for future

research to maximize the benefit from these types of interventions.

Couple-targeted stress interventions

Protecting relationships by building couples' skills

The prevailing model of intervention for protecting relationships from stress is couple-focused, and aims at teaching couples new skills. With these interventions the couple's relationship is the target of action. Rather than reduce stress itself, these interventions help prepare couples to better manage stress so that its effects are not as harmful when they confront it. This emphasis on skills emerges from cognitive-behavioral approaches to prevention (e.g., [3]) and intervention (e.g., [4]), and is appealing for its ability to help couples anticipate and combat a wide range of stressors and for its general applicability to other domains of couples' lives.

The Couples Coping Enhancement Training (CCET) program is one of the most comprehensive interventions of this type, focusing on helping members of the couple improve their individual stress management, dyadic coping, marital communication, and problem-solving skills [5]. Through learning new skills in each of these domains, couples learn how to reduce the effects of stress on their relationships, with the ultimate goal of promoting higher levels of relationship satisfaction and lower levels of relationship distress.

Other programs adopting this type of approach target specific populations. For example, couple-focused interventions have been widely implemented during the transition to parenthood, a time of significant stress for many couples that results in declines in marital quality [6]. To better prepare couples for these changes, transition to parenthood interventions emphasize skills such as parenting expectations, couple communication, stress management, and social support (e.g., [7,8]).

Skill-building interventions of this sort have been emphasized in federal programs for low-income couples. The Building Strong Families [9] and Strengthening Healthy Marriage [10] projects, for example, were implemented under the U.S. Administration for Children and Families' Healthy Marriage Initiative, and focused on providing relationship skills education to economically disadvantaged couples with children in order to strengthen their relationships and ultimately provide a more stable environment for their children. Although these programs were more focused on a specific population and specific type of stressor than was CCET, they share

the general emphasis on equipping couples with new strategies to counteract the stress in their lives.

There is some evidence supporting the benefit of these types of approaches, though studies vary widely in the effects they generate. CCET has shown positive effects in decreasing marital distress and improving relationship skills and marital satisfaction over two-year follow-up (see Ref. [5]). Meta-analytic summaries of couple interventions during the transition to parenthood indicate small positive effects on couple communication and psychological well-being, and smaller effects for relationship quality [11]. Low-income couples participating in Building Strong Families did not show improvements in their relationship quality over the three years postintervention [12*], whereas low-income couples participating in Strengthening Healthy Marriage did show small positive effects in relationship happiness and communication [13,14**]. Together, these and other findings suggest that interventions focused on skill-building can indeed serve to buffer couples from stress. At the same time, important questions remain about the robustness of these effects, calling for the development of new approaches to reduce the impact of stress on relationships.

Stress-targeted interventions

Protecting relationships by eliminating stress

Whereas couple-focused interventions are designed to help couples develop relationship skills (e.g., problem-solving, social support, communication), stress-targeted interventions focus solely on eliminating or reducing the stressor itself, with minimal direct involvement of the couple. We argue that eliminating stress at its source may hold unique advantages, in part because direct efforts to intervene with couples might heighten awareness of relationship weaknesses [15]. Efforts to reduce stress with interventions that operate ‘below the radar’ — that is, largely outside of couple awareness — can promote relationship well-being while incurring fewer costs for the couples themselves.

Stress-focused strategies differ from the couple-focused approaches in important ways. As a result, the content of these interventions may vary widely depending on the specific stressor being addressed, and these interventions may not resemble ‘couple interventions’ as they are typically conceptualized. But couples’ relationships can still benefit indirectly: stress-targeted interventions would reduce the amount of stress couples have to contend with, which would allow them to devote more of their time and attention to each other and to other problems in their lives. These interventions would not, however, directly target relationship dynamics. Accordingly, both couple-targeted and stress-targeted interventions have the goal of reducing stress to improve couples’ relationships — and can be implemented using either a primary, secondary, or tertiary prevention framework — but the means by which they accomplish reductions in stress differ in important ways.

Because stress management for couples has generally targeted couples’ relationships, stress-targeted interventions on relationship functioning have been underutilized and understudied. Nonetheless, creative implementations of this type of approach have shown promising effects. As one example, a recent study examined how providing access to safe drinking water in the semi-arid region of Eastern Kenya subsequently improved family relationships [16**]. Participants reported having more time to spend with the family, which allowed for more time for discussion about practical matters (e.g., housing, farming, children’s schooling) and for casual conversation that strengthened their relationship. These findings underscore the influence of broad contextual factors on relationship functioning [17] and suggest that environmental changes can impact the family.

Another study examined the effects of a parenting program focusing on increasing knowledge, skill, and confidence of parents, in comparison to the CCET program focused on the couple’s relationship and stress management [18]. For women, participating in the parenting program led to greater improvements in marital satisfaction than did CCET, and for men there was no difference between the two interventions. These findings suggest that targeting the source of stress for some couples (parenting and child behavior) can indirectly improve the relationship at least as much as, if not more than, interventions that target the couple directly. In this same domain, interventions might be devised that are even further removed from the couple themselves, including the provision of higher-quality, less expensive, or more convenient daycare facilities.

We see great value in considering other applications of these types of stress-targeted approaches in various contexts. For example, interventions targeting infant sleep and soothing during the transition to parenthood may benefit couples’ relationship quality, given empirical findings that infants’ crying and parents’ insomnia are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction [19], and theoretical arguments that sleep deprivation may be the driver of the commonly observed decline in satisfaction during the transition to parenthood [20]. Interventions aimed at improving work conditions and reducing work stress could examine their effect on couple relationships, given well-documented findings showing that work life spills over to affect relationship functioning (e.g., [21]). In short, expanding the range of outcomes beyond the target problem (e.g., infant sleep, work stress) to the relationship and family context would provide a more rigorous test of these models and their potential benefits.

Stress-targeted approaches might prove especially valuable for supporting couples living with low incomes, a population in which families have (a) high levels of exposure to various forms of stress and elevated risk

for unstable relationships [22] and, simultaneously (b) limited ‘bandwidth’ for incorporating even well-intentioned interventions into their daily lives. Low-income couples describe notable difficulties with finances [23] and money management [24**], suggesting that policies focusing on increasing family income through a range of strategies (e.g., childcare and health care subsidies, job training, income supplements, and insurance) may more directly target the problems that are most salient to low-income couples.

Whether stress-oriented programs can benefit the quality and stability of low-income couples’ relationships remains an open question [25*]. Data from Norway indicate that subsidizing parents for staying home with their young children (age 1–3 years) increased family income and lowered divorce rates [26], providing preliminary evidence for the idea that generally supporting family financial well-being can also yield benefits for relationships.

Future directions

Strengthening relationships and increasing their capacity to promote real benefits — for example, improved health, better child outcomes, and greater financial stability — is likely to require direct and indirect strategies that protect couples from stress. There are several opportunities for research going forward to clarify the best methods for doing so.

First, much more research is needed on the effect of stress-targeted interventions on relationship functioning. Research examining the effects of policies that improve couples’ economic circumstances would be especially valuable, as would research comparing these policies with interventions targeting more specific aspects of couples’ lives. For example, everything else being equal, is it better to provide couples with an additional \$500 in cash per month, or to provide them with \$500 monthly vouchers for childcare or healthcare? These types of studies have clear policy implications and can also help us understand the extent to which stress is economic versus due to a lack of specific services.

Second, greater effectiveness is likely to come from studies that articulate the circumstances under which certain couples benefit from couple-targeted and stress-targeted interventions. Much of the research to date has focused on the main effect of program effectiveness, rather than considering moderators that may strengthen or weaken these effects. This type of research is necessary to identify who may stand to benefit more or less from a given intervention. It would be useful to know, for example, whether couples who are experiencing high levels of a broad set of stressors stand to benefit more or less from a couple skills-based intervention compared to couples who are experiencing high levels of a focal stressor or to couples who are experiencing low levels of a

broad set of stressors. This research can also help us understand what types of couples might benefit more from couple-focused versus stress-focused interventions, as well as couples who would benefit from programs that combine the two types of strategies. For example, recent initiatives have included a focus on examining the effectiveness of programs combining employment and relationship services (e.g., [27]), providing an opportunity to examine how stress-targeted (employment) and couple-focused interventions (relationship skills) might prove mutually beneficial.

Third, contextualizing couples and families within their broader social settings is likely to prove valuable [28]. Families in general, and lower-income families in particular, routinely turn to others outside their household for financial, practical, and emotional support, and greater understanding of how people recruit (and provide) resources would advance understanding of how stress management and stress reduction are naturally accomplished. Understanding these influences — and how interventions can capitalize on couples’ social networks — would be valuable.

Conclusions

Many people enter in relationships in the hope that they will find a ‘shelter from the storm,’ a safe haven where they can connect, gain distance and perspective from outside stress, plan for the future, and ultimately experience some degree of emotional equilibrium. Some couples achieve this but many couples do not, struggling either in the short term as they are buffeted by acute stressors or in the long term as they work to weather chronic demands, in either case hindering rather than facilitating the formation of warm and stable bonds within the family.

Intervention efforts intended to promote healthy relationships in the face of such stress have evolved dramatically in the past decade, away from the simple view that improving basic skills in couple communication affords the surest route to fulfilling and stable partnerships. Instead there is growing recognition that dyadic concerns and processes arise from sources outside the relationship itself, suggesting in turn that focusing explicitly on these external sources of stress provides us with a potentially powerful alternative approach to improving couples and families. While future work remains to be done on the conditions under which couple-targeted versus stress-targeted approaches yield greater benefits, both hold promise for empowering couples to create and sustain the social bonds that will enhance the well-being of all family members.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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