

Symposium S-A11

The Next Frontier in Social Support and Health Research: Clarifying the Micro-Level Mechanisms

Friday, February 14, 2014, 9:45 AM - 11:00 AM, Room 6

Chair: Elizabeth Keneski, The University of Texas at Austin

Co-Chair: Timothy Loving, The University of Texas at Austin

Speakers explore the roles of self-regulation and stress buffering in the social support-health link and address relevant micro-level psychological and physiological mechanisms. The talks address how providing, receiving, and perceiving support affect physiological responses (e.g. diurnal cortisol slopes), neurological regulation (i.e., threat-related hypothalamic function), and health behaviors.

Social Network Support Moderates Physiological & Physical Health Outcomes of Marital Stress

Elizabeth Keneski, Timothy J. Loving, Lisa A. Neff

The University of Texas at Austin

Although social network support has been linked to a variety of positive health outcomes, the mechanisms underlying this association have yet to be fully elucidated. The present study tested whether network support buffers individuals from the negative physiological and physical health consequences of marital stress. Newlywed couples reported their perceptions of network support before completing a daily diary. As part of this diary, spouses reported daily marital stressors and provided daily waking and evening saliva samples for cortisol assessment. Self-reported physical health was assessed in a series of follow-up surveys over three years. Analyses revealed that spouses who reported more (versus less) satisfying social network support experienced healthier (steeper) diurnal cortisol slopes on days in which they experienced greater marital stress, and network support positively influenced long-term physical health trajectories. Thus, network support improves individuals' daily physiological responses to marital stressors and guards against long-term detriments in physical health.

How Providing Support May Impact Self-Regulatory Health and Interpersonal Outcomes

Courtney L. Gosnell, Shelly L. Gable

University of California, Santa Barbara

We hypothesized that providing support in response to others' negative events (which may involve greater concerns regarding providing effective support) would deplete self-regulatory resources, whereas support in response to positive events would boost resources. In a 14-day diary study participants with greater effectiveness concerns reported greater feelings of depletion and poorly-regulated health and interpersonal behaviors (e.g., overeating, snapping at friends). Additionally, negative support provision days were associated with greater effectiveness concerns and poorer health and interpersonal behavior regulation whereas positive provision days were associated with greater strivings towards health and personal goals. In a second laboratory study, we manipulated individuals' concerns about providing effective support to their romantic partner for a speech (negative event). Individuals with greater effectiveness concerns showed greater handgrip depletion. These studies suggest concerns over providing effective support (often seen in response to negative events) are associated with poorer health and interpersonal outcomes due to self-regulatory failures.

The Influence of Sleep Quality on the Stress Buffering Effects of Social Connectedness

Kathi L. Heffner

University of Rochester

Social connectedness enhances self-regulation, including regulation of sleep, emotion and stress physiology. Poor sleep quality itself can substantially impinge on self-regulation domains. Poor sleep is also associated with altered socio-emotional processing, which may weaken an individual's ability to benefit from available social resources. To test the influence of sleep in self-regulation pathways, we examine whether sleep quality alters the extent to which social support and feelings of connectedness buffer psychophysiological effects of stress. In a laboratory stressor study of healthy older adults, affect measures and saliva were collected at baseline and across a recovery period following cognitive testing. The stress hormone cortisol and alpha amylase, a marker of sympathetic arousal, were assessed from saliva. Poor sleepers, although reporting similar levels of social support availability, do not appear to benefit from social resources and connectedness in the same way as good sleepers. Implications for the social modulation of self-regulation are discussed.

Marriage as a Moderator of Threat-Related Hypothalamic Regulation in Straight- and Same-Sex Couples

James Coan

University of Virginia

Relationships enhance health and wellbeing. Marriage in particular has been cited as a buffer against poor health. Questions have arisen concerning the difference between marriage and romantic cohabitation. Some have argued that marriage confers advantages that cohabitating relationships do not. This question will implicate same-sex couples as they acquire the right to marry. We report that the regulation of threat-related hypothalamic functioning (a neural substrate linking stress to compromised health) during supportive handholding occurs in married but not cohabiting couples matched for relationship quality and length. Moreover, we report the same difference between self-identified married and cohabiting same-sex couples. Thus, regardless of sexual orientation, marriage is associated with the social regulation of threat-related hypothalamic functioning, but cohabitation is not. Possible reasons for these observations include, but are probably not limited to, differences in the meaning of marriage and cohabitation.