Does sharing a burden help? Examination of couples’ observed communication about cancer.

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For women diagnosed with cancer, perceived partner responses predict adjustment to their cancer experience. However, most studies rely on self-report data, which can be biased by many variables. This study used observational methods to examine the relationship between couples’ communication at the time of diagnosis, and adjustment in both partners. Eighty-four couples completed a 10 minute communication task, discussing coping and mutual support needs. Videotapes were coded using a standardised marital coding system.

The results suggest that a woman’s body image after diagnosis is associated with both the extent she is able to share her cancer experience with her spouse, and the extent to which she can empathise with his reactions. In contrast, psychological adjustment in both partners was predicted by the extent the couple could engage in and maintain discussion about cancer. These results are consistent with findings from the martial literature which suggest that social support in close relationships is bi-directional. However, whether these patterns of communication predict long term psychological and sexual adjustment warrants further investigation.