

Mental health and emotions in couples with an alcoholic member.

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Introduction

>Alcoholic's partners report more *psychological distress* than healthy individual's partners (e.g., Halford, Bouma, Kelly & Young, 1999; Kahler, McCrady & Epstein, 2003). This distress is manifested by depression, anxiety and somatic complaints (Finney, Moos, Cronkite & Gamble, 1983). However, to our knowledge, a descriptive framework of the symptomatology of alcoholic's partner compared to healthy individual's partner is still missing.

>Alcoholic's partners report feeling more *negative emotions* than partners of couple with healthy members (Sferrazza et al., 2002).

>Marital satisfaction is worse in couple with an alcohol dependent person compared to control couple with healthy members. Alcoholic's partners seem to be *less happy in marriage* than members of healthy couple (review in Marshal, 2003). However links between this marital distress and both symptomatology and negative emotions have not been investigated.

Object of the study: to compare specific mental health symptoms and experience of emotions between partners of couples with an alcoholic member to control couple with healthy members and their links to marital satisfaction.

Methods

Participants

40 heterosexual cohabiting couples: 20 french-speaking alcohol-dependent patients according to DSM-IV criteria (**AD**) and their non alcoholic partner (**ADP**) matched to 40 healthy individual from 20 Control Couple (**CC**) for length of couple's cohabitation. AD were hospitalised at the time of the study.

Measures

•Marital satisfaction

A French translation of the *Locke and Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale* (Wright et Sabourin, 1985) that evaluate marital life adaptation and more particularly happiness in marriage, adaptation with budget organization, with hobbies, with sexual functioning, with social relationships, with life philosophy and with endearments.

•Mental health symptomatology

The *SCL-90R* (Derogatis, Lipman & Covi, 1973), a questionnaire that consists of ten subscales (Somatisation, Obsessive-Compulsive, Interpersonal Sensitivity, Depression, Anxiety, Hostility, Phobic Anxiety, Paranoid Ideation, Psychoticism and Diverse Symptomatology) and a Global Severity Index (GSI). The SCL-90R measures symptomatology in the past 7 days.

•Individual emotional experiences

A part of a (non-validated) questionnaire developed by the Clinical and Social Research units from the Catholic University of Louvain (Pr P.Philippot, Mme Tang) and used with alcoholic couples by Sferrazza et al. (2002). The subject had to evaluate on a 9 point Likert scale (from "never" to "frequently") the frequency of which he experiences certain emotions. More specifically, the emotions assessed were shame, joy, fear, culpability, affection, jealousy, sadness, anguish and anger.

	AD	ADP	CC
Sex ratio (M/F)	16/4	4/16	20/20
Age (in years) ^{NS}	48,00 (9,20)	48,70 (9,86)	47,85 (9,66)
Education (in years) ^{NS}	12,30 (3,38)	13,00 (2,70)	12,92 (3,30)
Length of relationship (in years) ^{NS}	24,06 (12,27)	24,06 (12,27)	24,4 (12,81)
Length of cohabitation (in years) ^{NS}	22,02 (11,99)	22,02 (11,99)	22,45 (11,61)
Alcoholism duration (in months, since the first hospitalisation)	43,06 (72,69)		
Number of weaning cure	2,05 (2,31)		
Number of days since last drink	54,35 (39,77)		

Results

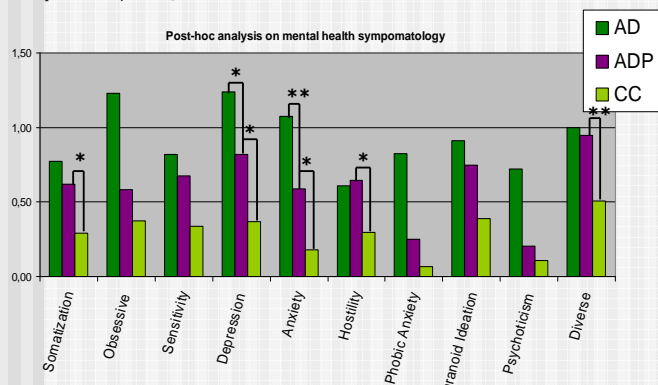
Marital satisfaction score

AD (m=94.30, S.D.=23.54) and AD partner (81.30, S.D.=30.27) showed a significantly worse marital relationship satisfaction than CC (m=119.85, S.D.= 21.95). No significant differences emerged between AD and AD partner.

Mental health symptomatology score

An analysis of variance was conducted on SCL-90R using a mixed design with subscale as within-subject factors and group as between-subjects factors.

A main effect of *group* [$F(2,77)=11.73, p>0.001, \eta^2=0.23$], of *subscales* [$F(9,693)=16.26, p>0.001, \eta^2=0.17$], and an *interaction* effect [$F(9,693)=3.65, p>0.001, \eta^2=0.09$], were found.

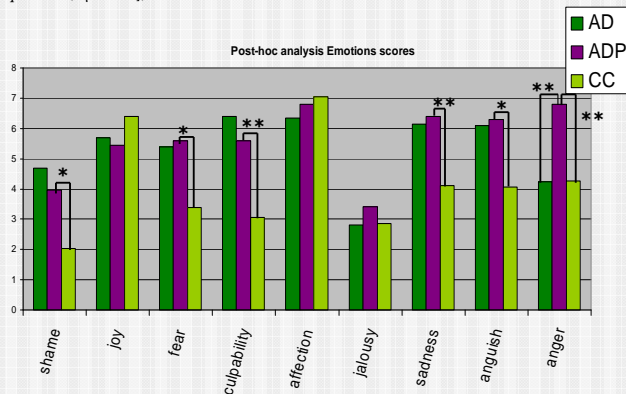


* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$. Differences between AD and C were all significant.

Emotions scores

An analysis of variance was conducted on the individual emotional experience scales using a mixed design with emotion as within-subject factors and group as between-subjects factors.

A main effect of *group* [$F(2,77)=11.73, p>0.001, \eta^2=0.23$], of *emotion* [$F(9,693)=22.76, p>0.001, \eta^2=0.23$], and an *interaction* effect [$F(9,693)=5.64, p>0.001, \eta^2=0.13$], were found.



* $p<.01$, ** $p<.001$. Except for anger, no significant differences emerged between AD and ADP.

Correlational analysis

Correlational analysis were conducted between (1) marital satisfaction and mental health symptomatology (GSI) and (2) marital satisfaction and felt emotions. In ADP, a significant correlation emerged between the experience of anger and marital satisfaction ($r(20)=-.59, p<.01$) while this correlation does not emerge in CC and in AD. In CC, a significant correlation emerged between global symptomatology and marital satisfaction ($r(40)=-.44, p<.01$) while this correlation is not significant in AD and ADP.

Discussion

>ADP as well as their partner report more mental health symptoms than CC partners. More specifically, ADP manifest more symptoms of somatisation, hostility, depression, anxiety and diverse symptoms than CC. Two (not mutually exclusive) hypotheses had been commonly proposed to explain this psychological distress in alcoholic's partner: (1) personality traits of ADP, (2) the stress of living with an alcoholic (financial problems, jobs problems, embarrassing incidents, verbal and physical abuse, poor sexual functioning,...).

>ADP as well as their partner report more mental health symptoms than CC partners. Globally, both partner of an alcoholic couple don't differ with the emotions felt.

>The experience of anger seems particularly present in alcoholic's partner and is strongly correlated with ADP marital satisfaction. Link between drinking problem, marital distress and anger felt by ADP is certainly a reciprocal one.

•Alcohol abuse contribute to marital conflict through the many stresses it creates. Such stressors, along with repeated broken promise to change, lead to high level of anger and mistrust by the alcoholic's partner (O'Farrell & Bayog, 1986).

•Couple's relationship often contributes to the maintenance of problem drinking: marital problems stimulate excessive drinking, precipitate relapse by abstinent alcoholics, and are predictive of poor prognosis in alcohol treatment programs (review in Halford et al., 1999).

