Marital Satisfaction in Couples with an Alcoholic Member

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the couples with an alcoholic member have reported low satisfaction about their couple relationship (review in Marshall, 2003). However, mechanisms implicated in these marital problems remained obscure. A good understanding of this phenomenon is crucial: high level of marital satisfaction and partner’s implication on alcoholic treatment are good prognostic of reduction of alcohol consumption (e.g., Vannicelli et al., 1983).

> In Healthy Couples (HC): High marital satisfaction is related to (1) high awareness of the partner’s emotional feeling states (EFS), (2) high self-esteem, (3) low depression and anxiety.

> In Alcoholic Couples (AC): These relations haven’t been investigated yet.

> Alcohols have (1) defects in decoding non-verbal emotional cues → could contribute to problems of awareness (review in Uekermann & Daum, 2008), (2) low self-esteem (review in Corne, 2003), (3) symptoms of depression and anxiety (e.g., Kornsheter et al., 2006).

> Alcoholic partners have reported (4) more psychological distress than healthy individuals, including depression and anxiety (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2006). Self esteem and awareness of the spouse’s EFS have not been investigated yet.

Object of the study: to compare correlates of marital satisfaction in AC and HC.

METHODS

Participants

19 AC (alcoholics according to DSM-IV criteria with alcohol dependency and their non-alcoholic partner)

19 HC (19 healthy individuals matched for age and sex to alcoholics and their healthy partner)

Measures

• Marital satisfaction: Locke and Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959)

  Self-report questionnaire that evaluates marital life adaptation and happiness in marriage.

• Awareness of the spouse’s EFS: Part of a self-report questionnaire developed by the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium, Pr P. Flahippot and Miss Tang).

  Twenty four questions (on a 10-point Likert scale) related to (a) category of experienced emotions, (b) intensity, (c) frequency, and (d) control of these emotions. For each question, the subject has to evaluate (a) his or her own emotions (self-reported items) and (b) the emotions experienced by her/his spouse (attributed to the spouse items) (e.g., “Do you feel shame? Never – Frequently” and “Do you think your spouse feels shame? Never – Frequently”).

• Self-esteem: Adult form of the CooperSmith Self Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967).

  58-items self-report questionnaire that measures attitudes toward the self in four areas: (a) social, (b) familial, (c) personal, and (d) professional.

• Depression and anxiety: Beck Depression Inventory II (Beck, 1996) and State and Trail Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, 1983)

RESULTS

Group comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Alcoholic</th>
<th>Alcoholic Partner</th>
<th>HC</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marital satisfaction</td>
<td>2-158 (higher)</td>
<td>94.31 (42.18)</td>
<td>118.52 (25.89)</td>
<td>16.31</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>0-108 (lower)</td>
<td>33.05 (8.56)</td>
<td>51.63 (9.55)</td>
<td>20.21</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>0-58 (lower)</td>
<td>29.63 (10.62)</td>
<td>40.26 (5.72)</td>
<td>7.60</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>0-63 (higher)</td>
<td>18.21 (11.46)</td>
<td>7.63 (8.21)</td>
<td>11.24</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>40-160 (higher)</td>
<td>95.32 (28.17)</td>
<td>71.39 (20.04)</td>
<td>14.90</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
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Compared to CC members, AC members have reported:

1. a lower marital satisfaction
2. a lower awareness of the spouse’s EFS.
3. a lower self-esteem
4. more depressed and anxious symptoms

Correlational analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject’s Satisfaction</th>
<th>Spouse’s Satisfaction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AC (n = 38)</td>
<td>HC (n = 38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>-.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>-.34*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.05, ** p<.01

In AC, one significant correlations emerged: The more the subject was satisfied about his/her relationship, the more he/she reported low global anxiety.

In CC, three significant correlations emerged:

The more the subject was satisfied about his/her relationship, the more he/she reported (1) high awareness of the spouse’s EFS and, (2) low global anxiety.

The more the spouse was satisfied about his/her relationship, the more the subject reported (3) high awareness of the spouse’s EFS.

CONCLUSIONS

New findings:

> AC showed a more erroneous perception of their spouse’s EFS than HC. The errors could be linked (1) to an impaired decoding of nonverbal behaviours, (2) to impaired verbal communication or (3) to discordance between expressed and felt emotions.

The alcoholic as well as his/her partner report a low self-esteem compared to healthy subjects. The low self-esteem of both AC members could have repercussions on marital satisfaction (e.g., People with low self esteem have difficulty to find evidences of their partner’s acceptance).

> These findings outline the necessity to include the alcoholic partner in the treatment. A couple-based-intervention that teaches couples emotion regulation, communication, and problem-solving skills, and led the partners through an exploration of how strong feelings affect and are affected by their relationship could be effective.