

Why are depressed spouses at risk?



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 epression and marital distress are commonly co-occurring (Whisman, 1999), and spouses with both presenting issues are among the most difficult to treat in psychotherapy (Whisman, 2001a). Consistent with gender differences in base rates of depression, maritally distressed wives are at more risk of depression than distressed husbands; however, depressed husbands and wives are at equal risk for marital distress (for reviews, see Gotlib & Beach, 1995; Whisman, 2001b). Several theoretical perspectives have been proposed to account for the association between depression and marital distress, and the stress generation model of depression

(Hammen, 1991) has rapidly gained support in the last decade among depression and marital researchers.

Hammen (1991) developed the stress-generation model in response to the observation that people with depression experience more interpersonal stress (e.g., conflict events) and that they are more likely than people without a history of depression to play an active role in the stressors they experience. Although it may be unintentional, these individuals may actively create difficult situations through their choices, actions, and reactions in their relationships with others. Thus, although there is support for the idea that experience of stress can lead to depression, at least for

some people (see Hammen, 2005 for a review), it is clear that the association between stress and depression is not a simple unidirectional link. Research supports the stress-generation model; depressed individuals generate stress in their lives, even when not depressed, perhaps because of enduring problematic interpersonal functioning (e.g., Pettit & Joiner, 2006; Joiner, Wingate, Gencoz, & Gencoz, 2005). Although little is known about who is more likely to engage in stress generation, one emerging risk factor is maladaptive personality traits. For example, individuals with high attachment anxiety or avoidance are more prone to stress generation during a depressive episode (Bottonari et al., 2007). Neuroticism (Lakdawalla & Hankin, 2008) and sociotropy (Shih, 2006) also increase the risk of stress generation in depressed individuals.

Although depressed individuals may play a part in creating difficult circumstances in multiple domains such as in relationships with work colleagues, of particular interest for couples and family therapists is the stress that may occur in intimate relationships. In the marital context, stress generation may take the form of a depressed spouse negatively influencing the course of the marriage through reductions in intimacy, social support, or dependency and increases in hostile behaviors or disruption of routines (Davila, Bradbury, Cohan, & Tochluk, 1997). The negative effects of stress generation may also be indirect through disrupting relationships with other family members (Jones, Beach, & Forehand, 2001), or in other domains (e.g., work, school, friendships) (Shih, 2006) which ultimately can affect individuals' ability to function well in their marriages (e.g., Bahr, 1979; Gimbel & Booth, 1994). For example, a depressed spouse may neglect relationships with other family members, in-laws, or friends, leading to decreases in overall levels of social support, which

results in poorer health and fewer resources to cope with potential marital difficulties. Alternatively, a depressed spouse's deteriorating job performance or poor management of finances may also negatively impact the marriage by increasing the frequency of more negative marital interactions (e.g., Story & Repetti, 2006).

In the Transition to Marriage Study conducted at Simon Fraser University, we examined whether chronic stress from non-marital domains mediated the association between depressive symptoms and marital satisfaction over 18 months in 200 newlywed couples. Non-marital chronic stress fully mediated the association between depressive symptoms and marital satisfaction for husbands and partially for wives (Poyner-Del Vento, 2009). This suggests that, as husbands become depressed, they may be generating more stress in non-marital domains (e.g., strains in relationships with family or in-laws, poorer management of finances), which in turn feeds back into the relationship (e.g., more hostility and blaming, less support and intimacy). For wives, the same pattern occurs, but there remains a direct effect of depressive symptoms on marital satisfaction.

The research on stress generation in marriage has many potential benefits for psychologists and marital therapists, who are often charged with the task of treating depressed and maritally distressed spouses. Although the stress generation model emphasizes that depressed individuals' interpersonal interactions differ from those of non-depressed individuals, it is important to note that depressed individuals may have more difficult lives (e.g., stressors that may be more dependent on circumstance rather than self-generated), and we do not want to imply that depressed individuals are to blame for the difficulties they may experience (cf. Hammen, 2006).

However, it may be useful to consider the extent to which these people actively contribute to problems in their lives and whether they have more control over stressful circumstances than they may believe. Education would also likely be useful for both spouses. Non-depressed spouses may have some awareness about how their partners contribute to their individual and collective stress, and understanding the process of stress generation may help couples to focus on identifying triggers for interpersonal stress, and improving coping skills within and outside the marriage rather than blaming the depressed spouse. ❧

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