

I Know I'm Stressed, But What Are You?:

Effects of acute stress on empathic accuracy and support transactions between cohabiting couples

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INTRO

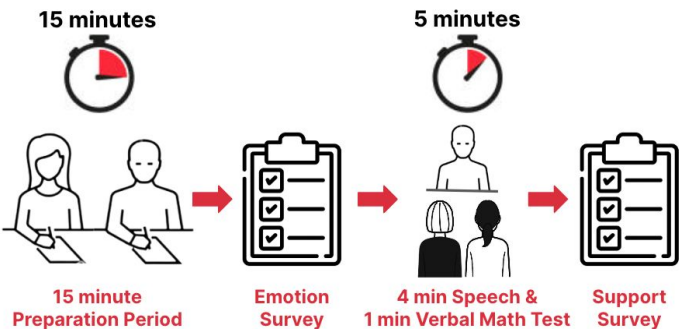
- Stress-inducing experiences grant romantic couples opportunities to provide and receive support and, if done successfully, can result in less distress and a greater sense of closeness¹
- The stress-buffering effects of support are well-researched², but a seeming paradox exists between the positive effects of perceived support availability³ and the negative—or sometimes null—effects of receiving support⁴
- It is posited that when partners can *skillfully* support their partner in times of need, it allows for optimal support receipt and relationship strengthening⁵
- Whether or not a partner is skillful in providing support may depend on how well they can accurately infer their partner's emotions
- Empathic accuracy (EA) is a measure of how precisely one can tell what another person is feeling, but it is a vulnerable process⁶
- Support is most needed in times of stress, but when both partners are stressed it is unknown how empathic accuracy is affected and whether or not support transactions between couples are actually perceived as effective

OBJECTIVE

- To examine whether stress impacts people's ability to (1) provide support to their partner and (2) accurately infer their partner's emotions
- To understand whether people with high EA provide more satisfactory support to their partners versus those with low EA

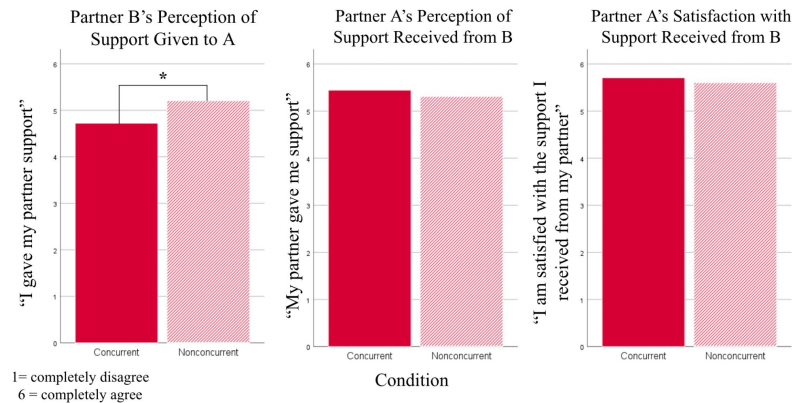
METHOD

- Results based on analyses of 123 cohabiting couples (51% women, $M_{rel} = 9$ yrs, $M_{age} = 35$ yrs)
- 2 conditions in which either one (Nonconcurrent) or both (Concurrent) partners undergo a version of the Trier Social Stress Test



Experiencing a stressor **decreases** people's **perception** of the **amount of support** they provide their romantic partner, but it **does not** impact the way **their partner perceives** both the **amount & quality of support** their partner gave them

Figure 1
Mean Self-Reported Support Transactions by Condition



When individuals are experiencing a stressor, their romantic partner is **more accurate** at inferring their **negative feelings** if they, too, are experiencing a stressor

Figure 2
Empathic Inaccuracy (Mean Absolute Differences) by Condition

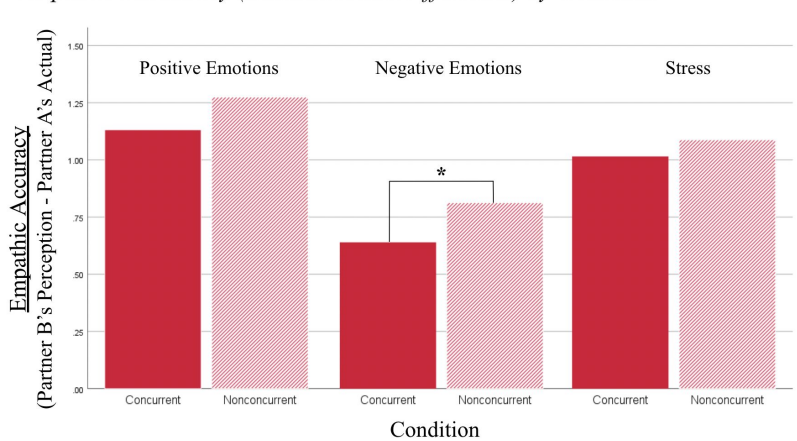


Table 1

Regression results of support satisfaction as predicted by partner's empathic inaccuracy

Predictor Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Partner B's Empathic Inaccuracy for A's Positive Emotions	-.238	.120	-.185	-1.980	.050
Partner B's Empathic Inaccuracy for A's Negative Emotions	.005	.156	.003	.032	.975
Partner B's Empathic Inaccuracy for A's Stress	-.035	.077	-.046	-.461	.645

Dependent Variable: Partner A's Self-Reported Satisfaction of Support Received from Partner B

RESULTS

- Stress & Support Provision, Figure 1**
 - In the concurrent condition, partner B's perception of support given to partner A ($M=4.72$, $SD=1.26$) was significantly less than partner B's perception of support given ($M=5.21$, $SD=.77$) in the nonconcurrent condition ($p \leq .02$)
 - There were no significant differences between concurrent ($M=5.45$, $SD=.79$; $M=5.71$, $SD=.66$) and nonconcurrent ($M=5.31$, $SD=.88$; $M=5.60$, $SD=.90$) conditions in terms of partner A's perception of the amount and the quality of the support they received from partner B respectively
- Empathic Accuracy & Stress, Figure 2**
 - In the concurrent condition, partner B's empathic accuracy was significantly better ($M=.64$, $SD=.53$) than in the nonconcurrent condition ($M=.81$, $SD=.61$) only in the context of partner A's negative emotions ($p \leq .05$)
 - Empathic accuracy levels in terms of positive emotions and stress levels did not differ significantly between concurrent ($M=1.13$, $SD=.58$; $M=1.02$, $SD=1.08$) and nonconcurrent ($M=1.27$, $SD=.62$; $M=1.09$, $SD=0.91$) conditions respectively
- Empathic Accuracy & Support Receipt, Table 1**
 - Better empathic accuracy in Partner B was a marginally significant predictor of greater satisfaction with the support Partner A said they received ($p \leq .05$)

DISCUSSION

- People who experienced a stressor alongside their partner said they provided less support to their partner than those who weren't experiencing a stressor, yet their partner's perception of the quality and amount of support they received did not differ regardless of whether or not they experienced a stressor
- Experiencing a stressor affected people's ability to accurately tell what their partner was feeling only in terms of negative emotions, and people who experienced a stressor alongside their partner were actually more accurate than those who weren't experiencing a stressor but their partner was
- People with romantic partners who are accurate at inferring their positive emotions report receiving slightly more satisfactory support than those with partners who are less accurate

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