Protective Withholding in Couples Living in Mortal Time

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"Mortal time" is the psychological state one enters when "visibly and psychologically faced with one's own mortality and the prospect of death, for example when one partner in a couple has advanced cancer. Such "mortal time" is often accompanied by ongoing denial and avoidance processes and partners may engage in interactional processes in which they hide or withhold their thoughts and feelings from each other.

The purpose of the "Couples Facing Advanced Cancer" (C-FACT) Project is to understand the dynamics that occur when partners are living in mortal time. Initial analyses of C-FACT couples (Lee & Roberts, 2014) indicated that protective buffering may be the predominant function of what has been termed "protective buffering" (Manne, 2007). Although denial and avoidance strategies seem to be widely used, self-report measures to examine "protective buffering," findings have been inconsistent, suggesting that different types of protective buffering may occur.

Using in-depth descriptions of partners' individual and dyadic coping, the purpose of the present study is to discover, describe and analyze the individual and dyadic processes of "withholding" and "protection" (denial, avoidance, hiding, or covering up information, thoughts or feelings) in couples facing advanced cancer.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How do couples facing a cancer death experience the witholding of information, thoughts, or feelings?

METHODS

Participants: The sample includes 16 (15 different-gender and 1 same-gender) couples in which one partner had a limited life expectancy due to advanced cancer and who were in a marital or cohabiting relationship for at least 1 year. Participants ranged from 28 to 75 years of age. Qualitative data collection: In-depth coping conversations focusing on coping were video recorded, thus providing a rich multi-method qualitative dataset.

RESULTS

Withholding has been defined as a behavior designed to protect the patient, however we found that a majority of individuals were not motivated purely altruistically and often involved self concern. We identified three motivational types: defensive withholding, altruistic withholding, and mixed motive withholding.

DISCUSSION

Protective withholding is common in couples living in mortal time. However, we found that partners were often motivated not only to protect but to protect themselves. For some partners, withholding was limited to specific information or feeling in certain situations. Different types of withholding were associated with different dyadic processes and outcomes for couples. Defensive patterns included:

Meta-withholding: Each knows that the other is engaging in withholding and each accepts it. For example, Mary and Jack know that they are engaging in withholding and each accepts it. They know that they are doing it, they accept it, and they try to read the other partner's mind. Jack suggests, "Oh, why don't you take the afternoon off, just lay in the chair. Not letting him know that he has a headache."

Table 1. Instances of withholding by gender, roles and types

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<th>What is being withheld?</th>
<th>Categories Identified and Examples</th>
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| SEX                     | Does not talk about sex. Does not talk about wanting to have sex. (
|                         | Does not talk about sex being last in their thoughts and feeling bad). |
| PHYSICAL PAIN           | Does not talk about her physical pain. Does not talk to partner about her physical pain. |
| CRITICAL HEALTH INFORMATION | Does not tell partner about a previous heart attack. |
| PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE ILLNESS | (
| IMPENDING LOSS | Does not talk about house and obtain loved one living. |
| DEATH, DYING, AND ILLNESS | Does not talk about partner always in treatment. Does not talk to partner about partner always in treatment. |
| WITHHOLDING BEHAVIOR | Does not tell partner that she knows partner is withholding. |

Holding back particular disclosures:

Separate: Avoids telling partner about partner's illness. Avoids talking about partner's illness.

Mixed: Sometimes tells partner about partner's illness. Avoids talking about partner's illness.

Altruistic: Tells partner about partner's illness. Avoids telling partner about partner's illness.

CONCLUSION

Different types of withholding were associated with different dyadic processes and outcomes for couples. Defensive patterns included:

Meta-withholding: Each knows that the other is engaging in withholding and each accepts it. For example, Mary and Jack know that they are engaging in withholding and each accepts it. They know that they are doing it, they accept it, and they try to read the other partner's mind. Jack suggests, "Oh, why don't you take the afternoon off, just lay in the chair. Not letting him know that he has a headache."

Reciprocal Disengagement: One partner's withholding of their feelings and "presence" leads to a reciprocation of disengagement, specifically a state of mutual withdrawal. Example: Bonnie protects Clif from her "pessimistic" feelings about his situation, by turning off TV and other distractions. However, Cliff is very paid by Bonnie's disengagement from him and feels abandoned being turned, withholds information as well as attention from her.

Successful protective withholding. Each does not know that the other is engaging in withholding, while the behavior does not cause relationship dissolution. Example: Brett, a caregiver, uses protective withholding in a regular basis so that Lisa does not know that she is struggling or feeling bad. She feels in her need to take precaution and that he cannot burden her own. She is unaware that he is holding back his feelings and feelings very supported.

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