

When couples face the diagnosis of cancer, women carry a larger emotional burden than men

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In a couple where one of the partners is diagnosed with cancer, women are more consistently and severely distressed than men, regardless of whether they are the person with the disease or the healthy partner. The results of a research paper appearing in the *Psychological Bulletin* report that when a couple is faced with coping with a diagnosis of cancer, gender plays a greater role than who the patient is.

For more than twenty-years, researchers have accumulated anecdotal and statistical evidence that has been inconclusive and even contradictory as to who carries the greater psychological burden in a couple struggling with the diagnosis of cancer, the patient or the spouse" The researchers from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and the University Medical Center Groningen, in the Netherlands, conducted the exhaustive study that analyzed the findings of 43 studies from around the world that assessed distress in couples coping with cancer.

“It is the gender that matters,” said James C. Coyne MD, Professor of Psychology in Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, a co-author of the published study. “Past studies focused on who has the cancer, not gender, and that explains the inconsistency in the findings,”

“In practical terms, breast cancer patients are going to be, on average, more distressed than their husbands; but the wives of prostate cancer

patients are going to be, on average, more distressed than their husbands,” said lead study author, Mariët Hagedoorn, Professor of health Psychology at the University Medical Center Groningen.

Surprisingly, when researchers looked at anxiety in the general population or in patients recruited from waiting rooms of primary care practices, they found that the level of distress in couples facing the diagnosis of cancer was only “moderate” in comparison.

Source: University of Pennsylvania

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