

# Cancer patients' conversation topics reflect well-being, study finds

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The psychological impacts of cancer can be devastating.

That's the finding of past research. We also know from research that talking about [cancer](#) helps [cancer patients](#) cope.

But what about when cancer patients and their partners talk about something other than cancer? UC Riverside psychologist Megan Robbins found no one has studied how [conversation](#) that's not about the illness impacts well-being.

Her research, published recently in the journal *Psycho-Oncology*, considers the question. Further, Robbins and her co-authors look at what "couples with cancer" should talk about – what helps.

They found that everyday, meaningful dialogue unrelated to cancer may facilitate well-being while coping with cancer. A distinction is drawn between substantive and superficial, or emotional, conversation.

Robbins said a previous study by other

researchers found that substantive conversation is related to better well-being, but superficial conversation is not.

"The idea is that discussing something of substance, rather than just shooting the breeze with someone about nothing in particular, might be a more satisfying interaction and perhaps fosters relationships better," Robbins said. "Emotional conversations have substance, but can be more complicated than a non-emotional substantive conversation. For example, the social context has to be supportive for those to go well."

In fact, in Robbins' study, she found emotional conversations were related to poorer well-being in some cases.

Robbins' study found that about one-third of peoples' conversation is substantive, consistent with past research. Substantive conversations include those about news, political issues, philosophical topics, ideas, or information about a non-emotional topic.

If a participant shared his or her opinions or emotions about a topic – revealing fears, concerns, or aspirations – researchers considered the conversation emotional.

For the study, 52 couples wore an "Electronically Activated Recorder," or EAR, over one weekend and self-reported well-being. The EAR sampled 50 seconds of ambient sound every nine minutes to estimate the frequency of non-cancer conversation and reveal topics and types of dialogue.

Based on 17 hours awake each day, couples were speaking just under half the time. Patients spoke an average of 19,473 words, and partners spoke 14,535 words per day. Analyses revealed non-cancer talk comprised more than 93 percent of conversations. The most common topic discussed was people.

Substantive conversation was associated with greater well-being, while emotional disclosures were associated with worse well-being – though only for patients, not spouses. Put simply, more emotional conversation may sometimes reflect feeling more depressed; substantive conversation can reflect lower levels of depressive symptoms.

This is the same study group used in a Robbins study that garnered attention in 2017. In the journal *Personal Relationships*, the paper "Everyday Emotion Word and Personal Pronoun Use Reflects Dyadic Adjustment Among Couples Coping with Breast Cancer," asserted the use of first-person singular pronouns – I, me, my – by spouses of cancer patients is related to better marital quality for both partners because the focus was not always on the patient.

Beyond the [patients'](#) well-being, Robbins said the current study again demonstrates that words can reflect important differences in romantic relationships. Achieving [marital quality](#) could be as simple as using the right words, and finding balance, the study asserts.

"Our findings suggest it may be fruitful to develop and test interventions that encourage couples to engage in substantive conversations about topics that interest them," Robbins said. "Interventions could circumvent potential negative side effects, such as distress from discussing cancer, and may have the added positive side effect of strengthening couples' relationships as they cope with cancer."

**More information:** Megan L. Robbins et al. Naturalistically observing noncancer conversations among couples coping with breast cancer, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/pon.4797](https://doi.org/10.1002/pon.4797)

Matthias R. Mehl et al. Eavesdropping on Happiness, *Psychological Science* (2010). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797610362675](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610362675)

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