Older Couples’ Emotional and Physiological Responses to Discussing How They First Met: Associations with Psychological and Relational Well-being

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Given that 80% of Americans will be married by age 40 and that marital quality plays a role in determining morbidity and mortality, it is important to understand the interpersonal dynamics of marriage that affect health. Most work on marital quality and health has examined couples conflict discussions. Here we focus on positive interactions, examining whether reminiscing about how the couple first met is related to both partners’ health and well-being. The present study examined 98 married couples (ages 50 year or older) assessing both couple members. Blood pressure was recorded during a baseline period, and participants reported their baseline emotions, closeness, and perceived support. Blood pressure was then continuously monitored during the discussion. After the discussion, participants reported their emotions, closeness, and perceived support. In an earlier questionnaire in the mail, we assessed marital satisfaction and depressive symptoms. The main hypotheses were that greater positive emotions, perceived support, and closeness during the interaction would be associated with (a) greater marital satisfaction and lower depressive symptoms from the surveys and (b) lower blood pressure reactivity during the interaction. We hypothesized the opposite for negative emotions. We ran a series of mixed models in SPSS using the Actor Partner Interdependence Model. In support of hypotheses, participants who reported feeling closer to their partners during the interaction, controlling for baseline, also reported higher levels of marital satisfaction ($B = 3.455; p = .004$), and those whose partners reported feeling more supported during the interaction, controlling for baseline, reported greater marital satisfaction ($B = 21.601; p = .049$), and lower depressive symptoms ($B = -12.378; p = .040$). Unexpectedly, we found a positive relationship between closeness, controlling for baseline, and systolic blood pressure ($B = 1.271; p = .051$). These findings suggest that the quality of older couples’ discussions about how they first met may be diagnostic of their psychological and relational well-being. Associations between relationship factors and cardiovascular reactivity during positive interactions may be more complex. Qualitative analysis is underway to better understand how the content of these conversations relates to indicators of health and well-being.