Romantic Relationships and Health: A Qualitative and Quantitative Examination of Emerging Adult Couples

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Abstract

This study examined links between emerging adults’ romantic relationships and health. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods were employed to query 210 participants’ (105 females, mean age = 23.93 years; 105 males, mean age = 25.93 years) perceptions of their partners’ influence on their health, their relationship quality, and their health behaviors. Results indicated that participants perceived their romantic partners to be primarily positive health influences; health domains believed to be most affected by romantic partners included eating behaviors, physical activity behaviors, substance use, and self-esteem. Perceptions of partners’ health influences were associated with participants’ relationship experiences and actual health behaviors.

Method

Participants

Two-hundred and ten adults (105 females, mean age = 23.93 years; 105 males, mean age = 25.93 years) participated in the present study as part of a larger study examining couples’ health.

In order to be eligible for this study, participants were required to be involved with their romantic partner for at least one year. The mean length of couples’ relationships was 3.82 years.

Measures

Romantic Partner Influences on Health

- An open-ended questionnaire, created for the purposes of this study, asked participants to specify how they felt their partners influenced their health.
- Sample responses included: “She exercises, which motivates me to exercise as well,” “He makes me go to the doctor,” and “She makes me eat healthier.”
- A coding scheme was devised to code all participants’ responses into the category of health issue described. Ten categories that encompassed all of participants’ responses were used: Eating, Physical Activity, Medical Help/Treatment, Sexual Activity, Substance Use, Sleep, Self-Esteem, Characteristics/traits that contribute to health, Stress, and “Other.”

Relationship Measures

- Marital Interaction Scale (Braiker & Kelley, 1979)
- Marital Experiences Questionnaire (Slets, 1993)

Health Measures

- Weight status (body mass index)
- Physical activity (revised from Tucker et al., 1997)
- Symptom Checklist (Sherbourne et al., 1992)
- Alcohol consumption and smoking behaviors
- Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen & Williamson, 1987)

Results

Coding and analyses of the 1,143 health influence statements provided by individuals indicated that participants perceived their romantic partners to be primarily positive health influences; emerging adult women believed their partners played a more influential role in their health than did men, and health domains believed to be most affected by romantic partners included eating behaviors, physical activity behaviors, substance use, and self-esteem (see Figure 1).

Discussion

The present study extends past research linking romantic relationships and health by examining a sample of emerging adult couples and by focusing on the role of individuals’ perceptions of their partners’ influence on their health.

Our findings indicate that emerging adults view their romantic partners as integral to their health; for example, they report helping each other to quit smoking and encouraging each other to eat healthily and exercise regularly.

Understanding perceptions of romantic partners’ role in emerging adults’ health has implications for intervention and prevention efforts; it may be effective to consider significant others as agents of health behavior change.