

Living with a Partner with Depression: The Role of Dispositional Empathy in Psychological Resilience

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Abstract : Research suggests that high levels of empathy in individuals with partners with mental health difficulties can lead to improved outcomes for their partner while compromising their own mental health. Specifically, it is proposed that the affective dimension of empathy diminishes resilience to the distress of a partner, whereas cognitive empathy (CE) enhances it. The relationship between different empathy dimensions and psychological resilience measures has not been investigated in partners of people with depression. Psychological inflexibility (PI) is a construct that can be understood as distress intolerance and is suggested to be an important feature of psychological resilience. The current study, therefore, aimed to investigate the differential role of dispositional empathy dimensions in PI for people living with a partner with depression. A cross-sectional design was employed in which 148 participants living with a partner with depression and 45 participants for a comparison sample were recruited using online platforms. Participants completed online surveys with measures relating to demographics, empathy, and PI. Scores were compared between the study and comparison samples. The study sample scored significantly lower for CE and affective empathy (AE) and significantly higher for PI than the comparison sample. Exploratory and regression analyses were run to examine associations between variables within the study sample. Analyses revealed that CE predicted the resilience outcome whilst AE did not. These results suggest that interventions for partners of people with depression that bolster the CE dimension alone may improve mental health outcomes for both members of the couple relationship.

Keywords : affective empathy, cognitive empathy, depression, partners, psychological inflexibility

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