

'Trading Places' most common pattern for couples dealing with male depression: study

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(Medical Xpress) -- University of British Columbia researchers have identified three major patterns that emerge among couples dealing with male depression. These can be described as “trading places,” “business as usual” and “edgy tensions.”

Published in the *Social Science & Medicine* journal and led by UBC researcher John Oliffe, the paper details how heterosexual couples' gender roles undergo radical shifts and strain when the male partner is depressed and the female partner seeks to help. [Depression](#), a disorder often thought of as a women's health issue, is underreported in [men](#), and little is known about how heterosexual couples respond when the male partner is depressed.

“Overall, our study underscores how women play a key role in helping their male partners manage their depression,” says Oliffe, an associate professor in the School of Nursing whose work investigates masculinities and men's health with a focus on men's depression.

“Our findings suggest that gender relations are pivotal in how health decisions are made in families and for that reason, it's important to understand couple dynamics if we want to have effective interventions.”

Oliffe and his UBC colleagues found that “trading places” is the most common pattern. In these relationships, the partners took on atypical masculine and feminine roles to cope with challenges caused by the men's depression. For instance, men assumed the role of homemaker

while the women became the family breadwinner.

Oliffe says, “Here, women partners also broke with feminine ideals in how they provided partner support by employing tough love strategies for self-protection and a means of prompting the men’s self-management of their depression.”

The second most common pattern is “business as usual,” when couples sought to downplay or mask any problems caused by the men’s depression. Holding firm to idealized heterosexual gender roles, the women continued to support and nurture their partners. Despite their ongoing struggles with depression, the men continued to work hard to maintain their careers in typically masculine arenas, which in the study included engineering, science, law enforcement, forestry and coaching.

The third pattern, “edgy tensions,” describes men and women caught in dysfunctional relationships. Each holding ideas of gender roles that differed from those of their partner, these couples grappled with resentment. The men resisted medical treatment. Instead, they used alcohol and illicit drugs, at least in part, to self-manage their depression. The women expressed ambivalence about conforming to the feminine ideal of being a “selfless nurturer,” especially for men who were volatile and unpredictable. The men in turn espoused a view of themselves as head of the household.

The study conducted qualitative analysis through in-depth interviews with 26 men, diagnosed or self identified as depressed, and their 26 partners, from Prince George, Kelowna and Vancouver. The study participants ranged in age from 20 to 53 years old. The duration of the couples’ relationships ranged from two months to 18 years; seven couples had children living at home.

The men self-identified as Anglo-Canadian, First Nations, European,

Asian and Middle Eastern. Seven [couples](#) were in mixed ethnicity relationships. The men had varying levels of education ranging from some high school to graduate degrees; 14 of the 26 men were unemployed at the time of interview, and self-identified as being of low socio-economic status as a consequence.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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