

Study suggests some women feel more physical pain when their romantic partner is present

January 21 2015, by Bob Yirka



Baby on mother's belly right after birth. Credit: Tom Adriaenssen/Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 2.0

(Medical Xpress)—A team of researchers affiliated with several medical institutions in the U.K. has found that some women who avoid closeness in relationships tended to feel more pain during an experiment, than did women who did not avoid such closeness. In their paper published in the

journal *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, the team describes their experiments with female volunteers and what it might mean for women experiencing childbirth.

In the modern era, there is the presumption that women experience less [pain](#) during labor if their significant other is present to offer loving support. In this new effort, the researchers have found that such ideals may not be the true case for all women.

To better understand painful experiences with women, the researchers enlisted the assistance of 39 [heterosexual women](#) who were first given a psychology test to determine their level of comfort with intimacy or closeness in romantic relationships. Next, they allowed themselves to be hooked up to a brain scanner and another device that shot a laser at one of their fingers causing a "tolerable" amount of pain to be administered. The women were asked to report the degree of pain they felt when their [romantic partner](#) was present, and again when he was not.

In studying the data, the researchers found that those women who reported preferring less closeness with their partner tended to report feeling more pain during the experiment when their partner was present. The team also found that the brain scans backed up the women's claims—they really were feeling more pain. The other women reported no difference in pain levels.

The [researchers](#) suggest their findings could have implications for women experiencing childbirth, a notoriously painful experience. Though, they note, it is still not clear if labor pain is experienced in the same way as finger burning pain, it appears likely that women with closeness issues might actually find labor pains more painful if their partner is there to support them. But, they add, it is also not clear if other psychological factors perhaps override the increased pain, which would explain why many such [women](#) still want their [partner](#) present during

childbirth.

More information: Attachment style moderates partner presence effects on pain: A laser-evoked potentials study, *Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci* (2015) scan.oxfordjournals.org/content/15/01/19/scan.nsu156

Abstract

Social support is crucial for psychological and physical well-being. Yet, in experimental and clinical pain research, the presence of others has been found to both attenuate and intensify pain. To investigate the factors underlying these mixed effects, we administered noxious laser stimuli to 39 healthy women while their romantic partner was present or absent, and measured pain ratings and laser-evoked potentials (LEPs) to assess the effects of partner presence on subjective pain experience and underlying neural processes. Further, we examined whether individual differences in adult attachment style (AAS), alone or in interaction with the partner's level of attentional focus (manipulated to be either on or away from the participant) might modulate these effects. We found that the effects of partner presence vs absence on pain-related measures depended on AAS but not partner attentional focus. The higher participants' attachment avoidance, the higher pain ratings and N2 and P2 local peak amplitudes were in the presence compared with the absence of the romantic partner. As LEPs are thought to reflect activity relating to the salience of events, our data suggest that partner presence may influence the perceived salience of events threatening the body, particularly in individuals who tend to mistrust others.

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