

New research on emotions and health also links stonewalling to back pain

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Claudia Haase

Those who rage with frustration during a marital spat have an increased risk of cardiovascular problems such as chest pain or high blood pressure later in life, according to new research from Northwestern University and the University of California, Berkeley.

Conversely, shutting down emotionally or "stonewalling" during conflict raises the risk of musculoskeletal ailments such as a bad back or stiff muscles, according to the study, published online in the journal *Emotion*.

It's well known that negative emotions may harm physical health, but it turns out that not all [negative emotions](#) have equal consequences. Using

20 years of data, and controlling for such factors as age, education, exercise, smoking, alcohol use and caffeine consumption, the researchers were able to connect specific emotions to corresponding health problems.

"Conflict happens in every marriage, but people deal with it in different ways," said study lead author Claudia Haase, an assistant professor of human development and social policy in Northwestern's School of Education and Social Policy. "Some of us explode with anger while some of us shut down. Our study shows that these different [emotional](#) behaviors can predict the development of different health problems in the long run."

Overall, the link between emotions and [health outcomes](#) was most pronounced for husbands, but some of the key correlations also were found in wives. The researchers analyzed married couples in the throes of tense conversations for just 15 minutes, but that was long enough to predict the development of health problems over 20 years later.

The findings could spur hotheads to consider such interventions as anger management, while people who withdraw during conflict might benefit from resisting the impulse to bottle up their emotions, the researchers said.

"Our findings reveal a new level of precision in how emotions are linked to health, and how our behaviors over time can predict the development of negative health outcomes," said UC Berkeley psychologist Robert Levenson, senior author of the study.

The study is one of several led by Levenson, who looks at the inner workings of long-term marriages. Participants are part of a cohort of 156 middle-aged and older heterosexual couples in the San Francisco Bay Area whose relationships Levenson and fellow researchers have tracked

since 1989.

The surviving spouses who participated in the study are now in their 60s, 70s, 80s and even 90s.

Every five years, the couples were videotaped in a laboratory setting as they discussed events in their lives and areas of disagreement and enjoyment. Their interactions were rated by expert behavioral coders for a wide range of emotions and behaviors based on facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. In addition, the spouses completed a battery of questionnaires that included a detailed assessment of specific health problems.

In this latest study, the researchers focused on the health consequences of anger and an emotion-suppressing behavior they refer to as "stonewalling." The study also looked at sadness and fear as predictors of these health outcomes, but did not find any significant associations.

"Our findings suggest particular emotions expressed in a relationship predict vulnerability to particular [health problems](#), and those emotions are anger and stonewalling," Levenson said.

To track displays of anger, the researchers monitored the videotaped conversations for such behaviors as lips pressed together, knitted brows, voices raised or lowered beyond their normal tone and tight jaws.

To identify stonewalling behavior, they looked for what researchers refer to as "away" behavior, which includes facial stiffness, rigid neck muscles, and little or no eye contact. That data was then linked to health symptoms, measured every five years over a 20-year span.

The spouses who were observed during their conversations to fly off the handle more easily were at greater risk of developing [chest pain](#), [high](#)

[blood pressure](#) and other [cardiovascular problems](#) over time.

Alternately, those who stonewalled by barely speaking and avoiding eye contact were more likely to develop backaches, stiff necks or joints and general muscle tension.

"This study suggests that if you're worried about your cardiovascular [health](#), pay attention to the amount of anger you show when discussing areas of disagreement with loved ones," said Haase, a faculty associate at Northwestern's Institute for Policy Research.

More information: Claudia M. Haase et al. Interpersonal Emotional Behaviors and Physical Health: A 20-Year Longitudinal Study of Long-Term Married Couples., *Emotion* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/a0040239](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0040239)

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