Physical Activity as an Emotion Regulator Enhances Emotional Awareness in Romantic Couples

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Abstract
Counseling studies emphasize the importance of emotions, particularly, emotional awareness to better health, well-being, and happiness in romantic relationships (Batool & Khalid, 2009; Coyle & Waltz, 2002). Researchers have found that being able to access awareness of present emotions is helpful to increase problem solving and intimacy (Brackett et al., 2005). Another side of research provides robust evidence for the benefits of physical activity to mood improvement, cognitive performance, family conflict, and decreased symptoms of psychopathologies (Abram & Fedewa, 2010; Brown et al., 2011; O’Halloran et al., 2014; Salmon, 2009). Although physical activity carries physical and psychological benefits, less is known of the social benefits of physical activity as an emotion regulator in romantic context.

Background
In romantic context, both relationship conflict and stress can be productive at creating greater emotional awareness. Similar predictions are made for perceptions of stress. Emotional awareness would depend on whether individuals engage in physical activity as emotion regulator.

Hypothesis: We predict a significant two-way interaction, such that lower emotional awareness would be found when participants perceive high relationship conflict than low, but the effect of lower emotional awareness would depend on whether individuals engage in physical activity as emotion regulator. Similar predictions are made for perceptions of stress.

Methods
Exclusion criteria included being in a romantic relationship with no history of major physical, mental health problems, and within the first year of cohabitation. n = 75 romantic couples with an average of 26 years of age.

Participants:
Physical Activity Emotion Regulator: 3-item scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (more than once a day), α = .78. Example item includes: “I exercise or engage in physical activity in order to make myself feel more calm/relaxed, happy/content, and excited/energized.”
Relationship Conflict: 5-item scale ranging from 0 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much), α = .73. Example item includes: “How often do you argue with your partner?”
Stress: 7-item scale ranging from 0 (Did not apply to me at all) to 3 (Applied to me very much, or most of the time), α = .84. Example item includes: “I found it hard to wind down.”

Data Analysis: A multilevel dyadic model was conducted to account for sources of interdependence established in dyad data in R programming.

Table 1. Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics for All Variables in 75 Heterosexual Romantic Couples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Female Mean (SE)</th>
<th>Male Mean (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>27.3 (1.89)</td>
<td>27.7 (1.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Length (years)</td>
<td>1.08 (1.03)</td>
<td>1.08 (1.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Activity Emotion Regulator</td>
<td>1.23 (0.7)</td>
<td>1.37 (0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Awareness</td>
<td>1.58 (0.09)</td>
<td>1.71 (0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Conflict</td>
<td>2.01 (0.08)</td>
<td>1.91 (0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>.81 (.05)</td>
<td>.72 (.05)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Means in columns with distinctive subscripts indicate significant differences at p < .05, two tailed.

Figure 1. Two-way Interaction of Physical Activity as an Emotion Regulator and Relationship Conflict on Emotional Awareness

Figure 2. Two-way Interaction of Physical Activity as an Emotion Regulator and Stress on Emotional Awareness

Results

Conclusions
Findings:
• Individuals with high physical activity as emotion regulator had similar levels of emotional awareness when relationship conflict was high and low. However, individuals with low physical activity as an emotion regulator had higher emotional awareness when relationship conflict was low but not high.
• Moreover, individuals with high physical activity as emotion regulator had similar levels of emotional awareness when stress was high and low. However, individuals with low physical activity as emotion regulator had higher emotional awareness when stress was low but not high.

Implications:
• Results highlight the important role of physical activity as an emotion regulator to achieve optimal results not only to individual health and wellbeing, but in interpersonal context as a way to promote health and wellbeing of both partners useful for prevention and treatment in couple’s therapy.
• Further research is needed to enhance our understanding of the social benefits of physical activity as emotion regulator to formation of intimacy and long-term satisfaction in close relationships.
• Further research is needed to assess the relationship of how romantic partners feel when partners share physical activity as a positive versus negative emotion regulator and how they manage these differences.
• Further research is needed to examine whether different types of physical activity are more effective at promoting greater emotional awareness than others.

Limitations:
• Future studies should broaden this exploration to include interracial romantic relationships, homosexual couples, and therapy seeking couples.
• Future studies should examine longitudinal data to determine the average levels of physical activity as emotion regulator and disagreement between partners to interpersonal emotional awareness across days.

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