



2020 DART Virtual Summer Research Day

The Relationship Between Oxytocin and Coping Skills on Conflict Resolution in Couples

Aileen Kangavary, Elizabeth Santa Ana, PhD, Jeffrey Korte PhD, & Julianne C. Flanagan, PhD

Background: Oxytocin is a neuropeptide known for its anxiolytic, prosocial, and pair-bonding effects. However, the literature is mixed regarding how oxytocin affects human behavior depending on contextual and individual characteristics (i.e. sex, coping skills). While oxytocin might increase positive communication among normative couples, other literature reports that oxytocin might enhance detrimental behaviors such as competitiveness, aggression, and anxiety. The present study sought to address whether coping skills moderate the effect of oxytocin on a couples' laboratory-based conflict resolution behaviors compared to placebo. **Methods:** Participants were 30 different-sex couples ($n=60$) consisting of at least one partner with recent substance misuse. Participants were randomly assigned in a double-blind manner to 40 IU intranasal oxytocin or placebo. Couples completed the Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) and a 10-minute conflict resolution task. Conflict behaviors were observationally coded by independent rater's blind to drug condition. We hypothesized that: a) adaptive coping skills would increase the effects of oxytocin on frequency of Relationship Enhancing Attributions, and reduce the frequency of Distress Maintaining Attributions; and b) maladaptive coping skills would reduce the effects of oxytocin on frequency of Relationship Enhancing Attributions, and increase Distress Maintaining Attributions. **Results:** Among men, coping skills had no significant main effect on Relationship Enhancing or Distress Maintaining Attributions. However, oxytocin was more strongly associated with a decrease in Distress Maintaining Attributions among men with higher, compared to lower, maladaptive coping ($p = .006$). For women, Distress Maintaining Attributions were reduced during the couples' task regardless of their coping behaviors. Additionally, oxytocin was more strongly associated with reduced Relationship Enhancing Attributions ($p = .03$) among women with higher, as compared to lower, adaptive coping. **Conclusion:** Findings suggest that in this sample, women and men had differential responses to oxytocin administration which were influenced by their coping skills.