

Adaptation to Adult Attachment and Intimacy Following a Spinal Cord Injury: A systematic review

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1. Introduction

Background

Those who have experienced a spinal cord injury (SCI) and their families can face significant changes and challenges which require substantial adjustments. Despite some related systematic reviews (SR) (Earle, O'Dell, Davies and Rixon, 2020), there is very little research considering the adjustments couples make to their relationships following SCI on a relational level.

Questions

This SR considers evidence that adjustments need to be made to adult attachment and intimacy in couple relationships following SCI and what the mechanisms underlying these changes may be.

Aims

Through SR completion to inform rehabilitation and recovery practices in promoting positive adjustment for both partners following a SCI.

2. Methodology

Four databases were searched using keyword, inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify papers focusing on SCI, relationships and couples. The search (in July 2020) returned 641 papers.

Process of paper selection

1. Removal of duplicates

2. Titles and abstract of papers read (n=409)

5. Qualitative studies included in SR (n=15)

3. Full text of most relevant papers read (n=62)

4. Review of reference lists of most suitable papers

The CASP's appraisal tool for qualitative research was used to appraise paper quality. The SR used meta-ethnographic design.

3. Results

Three main themes emerged from the meta-ethnographic synthesis:

Theme 1: Strengthening and maintaining adult attachment

- Reasons for maintenance
- 'We'

'...a lot more things are open for discussion now than they were, so in a lot of ways intimacy has improved. We've gotten a lot closer'
(Freeman et al. 2017, p.440)

'We both tried... We were both thinking that the injury is not going away, so we just have got to deal with it together. That's how we coped with it'
(Kim & Kim, 2020, p. 295)

Theme 2: Changes in roles

- Negotiating new roles
- Caregiving burden

'You lose all your dignity. Toileting, for instance, [you] can't go to toilet by yourself and you have to be fed, washed, teeth cleaned, and that sort of stuff.'
(Kim & Kim, 2020, p. 293)

'I do a little bit of laundry...but she folds the clothes because I really hate folding clothes...So, we trade back and forth that way'
(Jeyathevan et al., 2018, p. 8)

'You go from 100% being a wife and mom...then all of the sudden BOOM! Okay, now I am a nurse too'
(Engblom-Deglmann & Hamilton, 2020, p. 12)

Theme 3: Changing views of intimacy

- Expanding definition of intimacy
- Finding new ways of being intimate

'Meaning of sexuality? I guess how one feels or expresses their intimate feelings...it's not all about sex at all. For me it's more emotional'
(Kathnelson et al., 2020, p. 4)

'I think the key is you have to have really good communication, you have to explain what your needs and wants are and limitations...'
(Parker & Yau, 2012, p. 20)

4. Discussion

Adaptation and adjustment are needed in several domains following SCI.

- For some couples, adapting together can strengthen their attachment
- The need for significant changes in role reciprocity and adapting to new ways of being intimate can pose challenges

Limitations in the evidence base included: a sole focus on heterosexual couples; and the cultural-specific nature of some papers.

5. Implications

Further research looking at SCI impact on relationships

Greater psychological understanding of adaptation process

Professional support for couples to maintain relationships

Long-term support for both partners

Both partners seen as equal members of adjustment process