EXPERIENCING PAIN ALONE VS. IN THE PRESENCE OF ANOTHER: A STUDY OF OLDER ADULTS

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INTRODUCTION / AIM

While experimental research has examined the impact of the presence of a support person in the pain experience of young adults, parallel studies involving older persons are lacking. Our goal was to investigate differences between experiencing experimentally-induced pain alone vs. in the presence of either a stranger or a family member.

METHODS

Participants included 90 persons over 60 years of age who arrived to the laboratory with a family member (spouse or adult offspring) and took part in an experimental pain induction task involving a thermal pain stimulator. All participated in the following three conditions in counterbalanced order: alone, in the presence of a stranger, and in the presence of a family member. Measures of pain threshold, pain tolerance, pain intensity, and pain unpleasantness were obtained under each condition.

RESULTS

Analyses of variance showed that participants reported lower levels of pain unpleasantness in the presence of a stranger compared to when they were alone. The nature of family relationship (spouse vs. offspring) did not have an impact on any of our four dependent measures.

DISCUSSION / CONCLUSIONS

Pain unpleasantness was mitigated by the presence of a stranger compared to a condition where the person is alone. This effect has been previously found for pain intensity in studies of younger persons (Brown et al., 2003; Kleck et al., 1976). The implications of these findings and inconsistencies with the previous literature will be discussed. In future research, we plan to examine the effects of the presence of others on non-verbal pain expressions.

OTHER AUTHORS

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