

# **A Diary Study of Protective Buffering in Couples Facing Heart Disease**

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## **Abstract**

*In a daily-process study of 58 heart-failure patients and their spouses, protective buffering (avoiding conflict, hiding feelings) was associated with decreased emotional well-being by both the protecting spouse (actor effect) and the protected spouse (partner effect). Interpersonal consequences of PB were greater when the spouse protected the patient than vice versa.*

## **Background**

Protective buffering (PB; Coyne & Smith, 1991) involves trying to protect another person from distress by hiding one's own negative emotions and avoiding potentially upsetting topics. Studies of couples coping with heart disease suggest that PB may be ironically associated with *increased* distress for the person who protects (an actor effect) and perhaps also for the "protected" spouse (a partner effect), though evidence for the latter is mixed (Suls et al., 1997).

Virtually all studies of relationship-focused PB to date have employed between-case designs correlating PB and distress across people or couples, usually at a single point in time. Researchers have yet to examine possible within-case associations between PB and emotional well-being over time. Compared to the between-case approach, within-case daily-process designs offer a different and arguably more dynamic perspective on how psychosocial processes relate to health (Affleck et al., 1999).

The present study examined dynamic links between PB and emotional experience in a sample of couples coping with congestive heart failure (CHF). Specifically, we used longitudinal, daily-diary methodology to investigate whether reported PB by one partner co-varies from day to day with the emotional well-being of either the protecting spouse (actor effect) or the protected spouse (partner effect). We also hypothesized that partner effects of the spouse's PB on the patient's daily affect would be more pronounced than parallel interpersonal effects from patient to spouse.

## **Methods**

Participants were 58 CHF patients (42 men and 16 women) and their spouses. Mean patient age was 64.3 years, and mean CHF severity (NYHA class) was 2.3 on a 1-4 scale. Patients were 85% white and 42% college educated.

On consecutive mornings for an average of 12 days the patient and spouse independently reported by telephone their own protective buffering and their experience of positive and negative emotion the day before. Responses to the following questions were on a 1-9 scale:

In dealing with your partner yesterday:

- *To what extent did you hide your true feelings or avoid talking about things that might be upsetting?*
- *To what extent did you try to protect your partner from feeling badly or distressed yesterday?*
- *To what extent did you experience positive feelings yesterday (e.g., joy, interest, relaxation)?*
- *To what extent did you experience negative feelings yesterday (e.g., anger, anxiety, sadness)?*

The mean of the 2 PB items and the difference between the 2 emotion items (positive-negative) provided a single daily score for each of the two constructs.

## Data Analysis

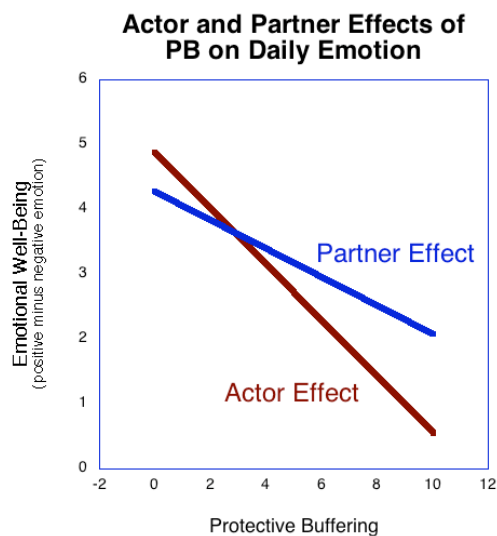
Actor and partner effects were estimated in SAS using multi-level modeling (HLM) combined with Kenny's (1998) Actor-Partner Interdependence Model, which accommodates the nesting of days, within persons, within couples.

- An **actor-effect** is the degree to which a person's daily emotion (positive minus negative affect) co-varies with his or her own PB score, independent of the partner's PB score.
- A **partner-effect** is the degree to which the same dependent variable (emotion) co-varies with the partner's daily PB score, independent of the actor's own PB score.

The actor's role (patient v. spouse) and gender were examined as possible moderators of these within-case associations.

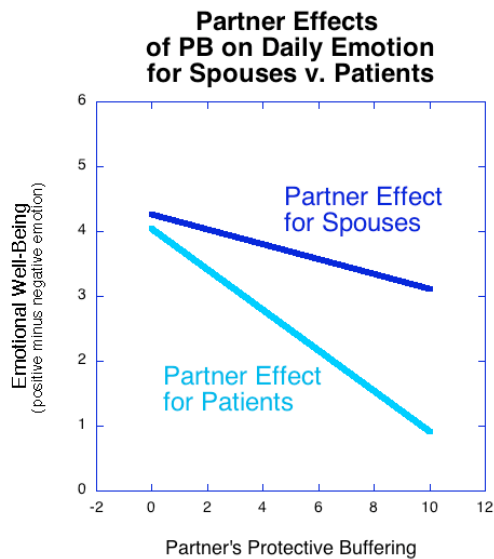
## Results

Reported daily emotion co-varied with both the actor's PB *and* the partner's PB. Actor and partner effects were both significant, and one was not statistically stronger than the other.



Actor effect =  $-.41$  (98),  $t = -5.99$ ,  $p < .0001$   
 Partner effect =  $-.15$  (66),  $t = -2.46$ ,  $p < .017$

Patient v. spouse role moderated partner but not actor effects. As hypothesized, the spouse's PB was more associated with the patient's daily emotional well-being than vice versa.



Patient/Spouse X Partner Protective Buffering  
Interaction =  $-.21$  (56),  $t = -2.37$ ,  $p < .03$

While there was no evidence that actor or partner effects varied by patient (or spouse) gender, our small number of female patients precludes generalizations about gender differences.

## Conclusions

Protective buffering in couples coping with heart failure appears associated with daily reports of decreased emotional well-being by both the protecting spouse (actor effect) and the protected spouse (partner effect).

Interpersonal consequences of PB for daily mood appear greater when the spouse protects the patient than vice versa.

These results are consistent with the idea that attempted protection and/or emotion suppression can have ironic intra- and inter-personal consequences. It is also possible, however, that when people feel worse, or observe their partners feeling worse, they engage in more protective buffering.

The results also highlight the utility of within-case daily-process designs in revealing associations that may not be detected in traditional across-case analyses.

## References

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