Women's Pain Perceived to Be Less Extreme Than Men's

Gender bias affects how people assess women's pain compared with men's, which may lead to disparities in treatment.

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Women suffering from pain are less likely to be prescribed treatment and often wait longer to receive treatment compared with men. Now, new study findings published in the Journal of Pain suggest that a woman's pain is considered to be less intense than a man's, even when both individuals express the same amount of hurt, reports the University of Miami (UM).

For the investigation, UM researchers conducted two inquiries. The first required 50 participants to view videos of male and female patients with shoulder pain performing motion exercises with their injured and uninjured shoulders. Scientists retrieved the videos from a database of footage that showed real shoulder injury patients experiencing different degrees of pain.

Participants rated each patient's pain on a scale of zero (absolutely no pain) to 100 (worst pain possible).

The second experiment duplicated the first experiment but involved 200 participants. However, this time, those making the assessment viewed the videos and then completed a questionnaire that measured gender-related stereotypes about pain sensitivity, endurance and an individual's readiness to report pain.

Additionally, participants stated the amount of medication and psychotherapy they would prescribe to each patient and which treatments they considered to be the most beneficial for treatment.

Results showed that regardless of gender, participants estimated that female patients were in less pain than males even though they reported and exhibited the same amount of pain. Scientists concluded that such perceptions were a result of gender-related stereotypes.

"If the stereotype is to think women are more expressive than men, perhaps 'overly' expressive, then the tendency will be to discount women's pain behaviors," said Elizabeth Losin, PhD, assistant professor of psychology and director of the Social and Cultural Neuroscience Lab at the University of Miami and one of the study's authors.

She added, “The flip side of this stereotype is that men are perceived to be stoic, so when a man makes an intense pain facial expression, you think, Oh my, he must be dying!”

Findings also showed that participants believed psychotherapy would be more effective than medication for female patients than for male patients.

“Critically, our results demonstrate that these gender biases are not necessarily accurate,” Losin said. “Women are not necessarily more expressive than men, and thus their pain expression should not be discounted.”

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