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AVOIDING OR ENDURING PAINFUL SEX?

– a longitudinal study of coping patterns and sexual function in women with vulvovaginal pain

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BACKGROUND

Recurring pain in the vulvar- or vaginal region induced by touch or pressure is common, affecting between 10-28% of women in reproductive age. In addition to evident negative effects on sexual aspects such as frequency of sexual activity, sexual satisfaction and sexual function vulvovaginal pain has an impact on women's overall quality of life and psychological well-being. Despite these extensive consequences little is known about how women with vulvovaginal pain actually cope with sexual activities and the subsequent pain. More specifically, knowledge is lacking on how their coping may affect the pain experience and sexual function over time.

While avoidance of pain associated activities seem to be a commonly used strategy amongst women with vulvovaginal pain, there is also evidence of endurance of painful sexual activity as a common strategy. However, we do not know whether these strategies are used separately or in combination and if they are used consequently by the same individual over time.

AIMS

- × To investigate the role of avoidance and endurance coping in relation to pain and sexual function over time
- × To examine patterns of avoidance and endurance coping in women with vulvovaginal pain – are they being used separately or in combination?
- × To investigate if patterns of avoidance and endurance coping are used consequently over time

METHOD

The study used questionnaire data from female university students, 18-35 years old, with two measurement points of five months apart. Women who reported recurrent vulvovaginal pain during the last six months, and responded at both measurement points constitute the sample of the study ($N=117$).

First, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was executed to test if avoidance and endurance coping had a predictive value of sexual function beyond the pain experience in itself. Secondly, cluster analyses based on the women's answers to the avoidance and endurance subscales of the CHAMP Sexual Pain Coping Scale (CSPCS) were performed at both time points. Finally, common pathways over time were investigated to explore whether the same pattern of coping was used at baseline and follow-up.

RESULTS

The hierarchical multiple regression model exploring if pain, avoidance and endurance at baseline predicted sexual function at follow-up was significant, explaining 25% of the variance ($F(2, 90) = 10.22, p < .001$). Avoidance at baseline was the only significant predictor in the model, explaining unique variance of sexual function over time.

The two separate cluster analyses at baseline and follow-up resulted in four distinct clusters respectively; *Low scores*, *Avoidance*, *Endurance* and *High scores*. The common pathways analyses, exploring typical pathways of change, revealed high stability within the clusters over time meaning that it was common for individuals in all clusters to use the same pattern of coping at both measurement points.

Model	R^2	b	SE	β	p
Step 1					
Intercept		26.01	1.08		
Pain (FSFI-P)		-1.33	0.32	-.40	< .001
	.15				
Step 2					
Intercept		27.91	1.21		
Pain (FSFI-P)		-0.55	0.39	-.16	.155, NS
Avoidance (CSPCS-A)		-0.31	0.11	-.31	.007
Endurance (CSPCS-E)		-0.09	0.08	-.12	.276, NS
	.25				

Notes. FSFI-P, pain subscale from Female Sexual Function Index; CSPCS-A and CSPCS-E, CHAMP Sexual Pain Coping Scale; Sexual function, Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI).

RESULTS

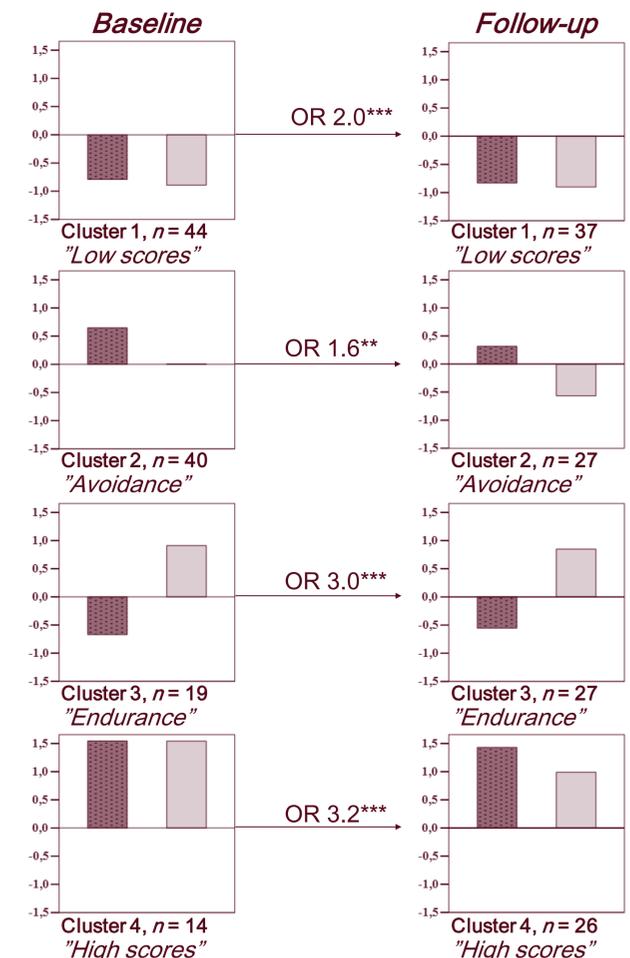


Figure. Typical pathways of change over time between cluster solutions at baseline and follow up. Graphs show z scores of the CSPCS-A and CSPCS-E subscales. Arrows denote typical pathways over time in addition to the odds ratio (OR), ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

- × Avoidance at baseline significantly predicted sexual function at follow-up when controlling for the influence of pain
- × Patterns of coping emerged where avoidance and endurance were used separately and in combination
- × The patterns were stable over time, meaning that the women in the study used the same patterns of coping over time