

# The association between spousal reactions to chronic pain and pain-related outcomes: a systematic review

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## Background

- Chronic pain has a negative impact on a variety of quality-of-life domains, including relationships
- Fordyce (1976) first proposed that solicitousness (expressing excessive concern) and punishing (expressing negative concern) responses from partners can impact on outcomes (see Figure 1)
- Other theories such as those based on intimacy or the Communal Coping Model of Catastrophising have considered reactions such as empathy or spousal catastrophising on pain outcomes
- Research supporting these theories are however inconsistent
- This project aimed to understand how spousal behaviours impact pain outcomes for people experiencing chronic pain

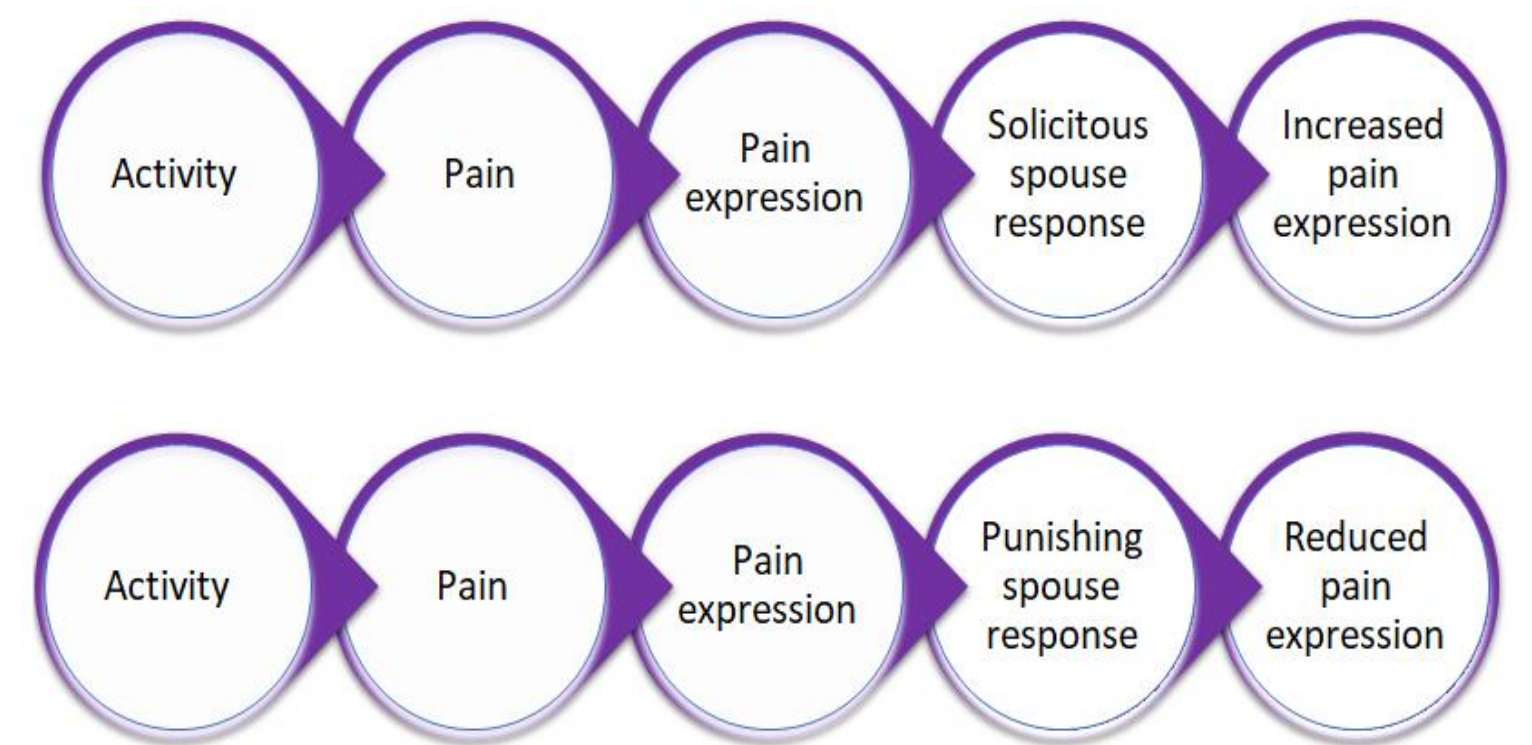


Figure 1: Solicitous and punishing response and their relationship with pain expression and behaviours as per operant theory

## Research Question

**WHAT IS THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SPOUSAL REACTIONS TO THEIR PARTNER'S CHRONIC PAIN BEHAVIOUR AND PAIN-RELATED OUTCOMES?**

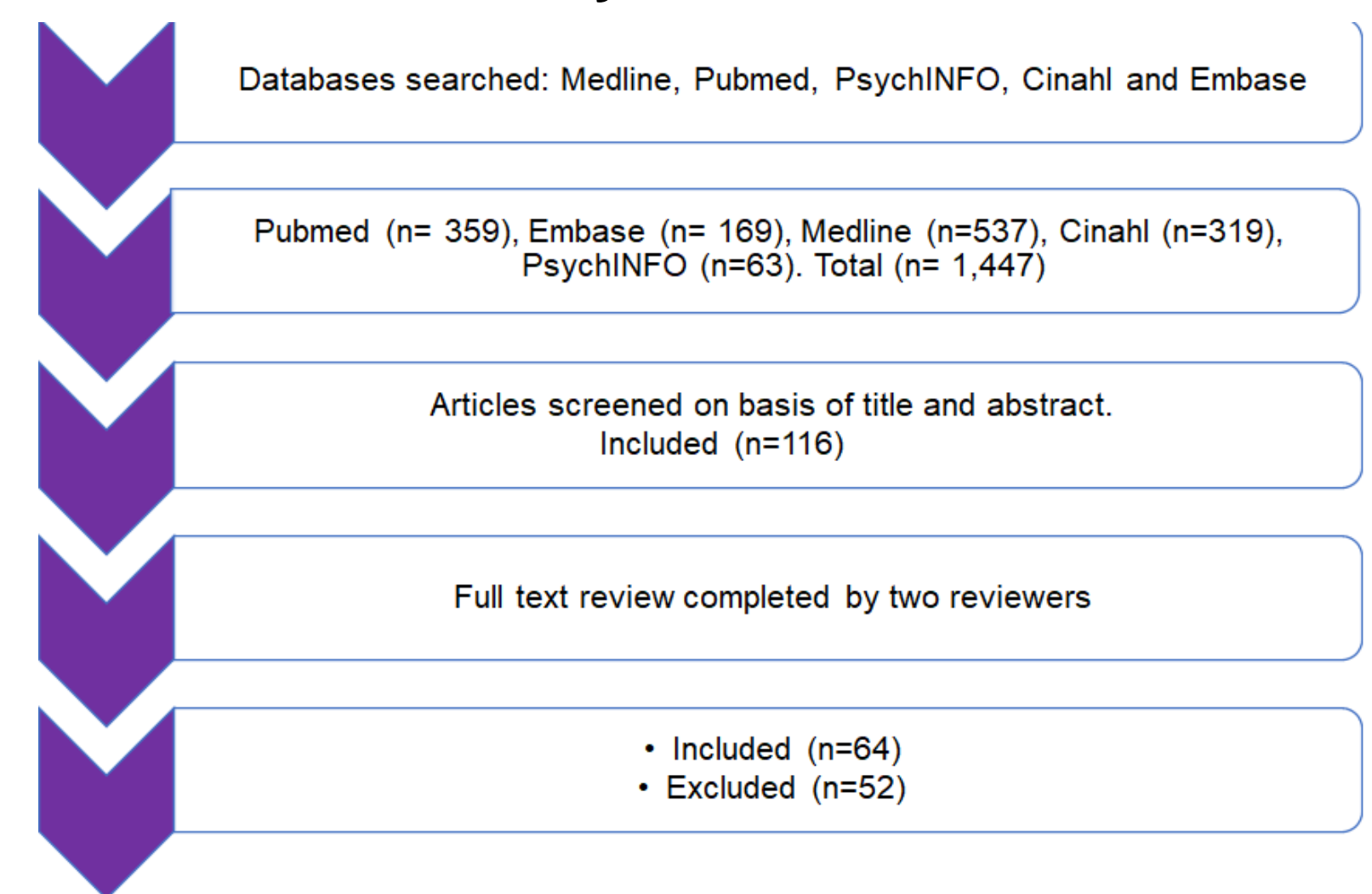
## Methodology

### Inclusion Criteria

To be included, studies needed to consider:

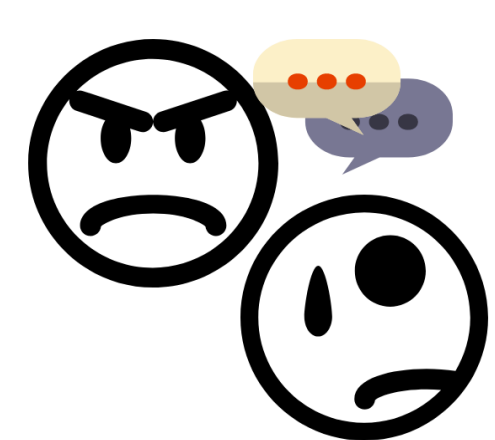
- 1) Adults
- 2) Experiencing persistent pain according to IASP definition of persistent pain (of non-cancer origin)
- 3) In a relationship (i.e., in an intimate relationship - married/cohabitating/dating/stable partner)
- 4) With a measure of spousal reaction to pain (e.g., West-Haven Yale Multidimensional Pain Inventory) completed by the spouse or the person experiencing pain (i.e., perceived spousal reaction)
- 5) And a measure of a pain-related outcome

### Databases and Study Selection



## Results

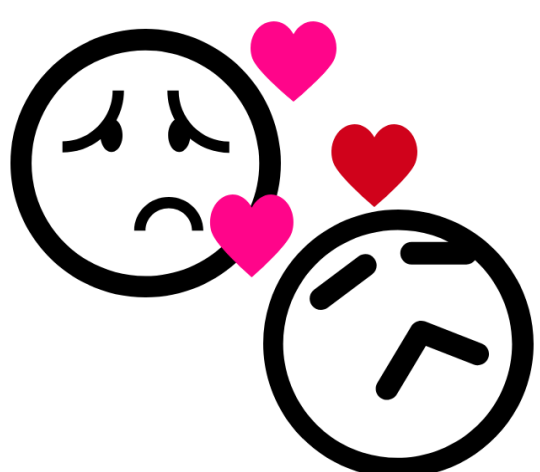
### Main Findings



Punishing and distracting spousal behaviour was consistently associated with **worse pain outcomes**, suggesting that it does not reduce pain behaviour (contraindicating theoretical expectations)



A small number of studies have found a relationship between **empathic and validating spousal responses** and better pain outcomes. **More research is needed** to draw definitive conclusions

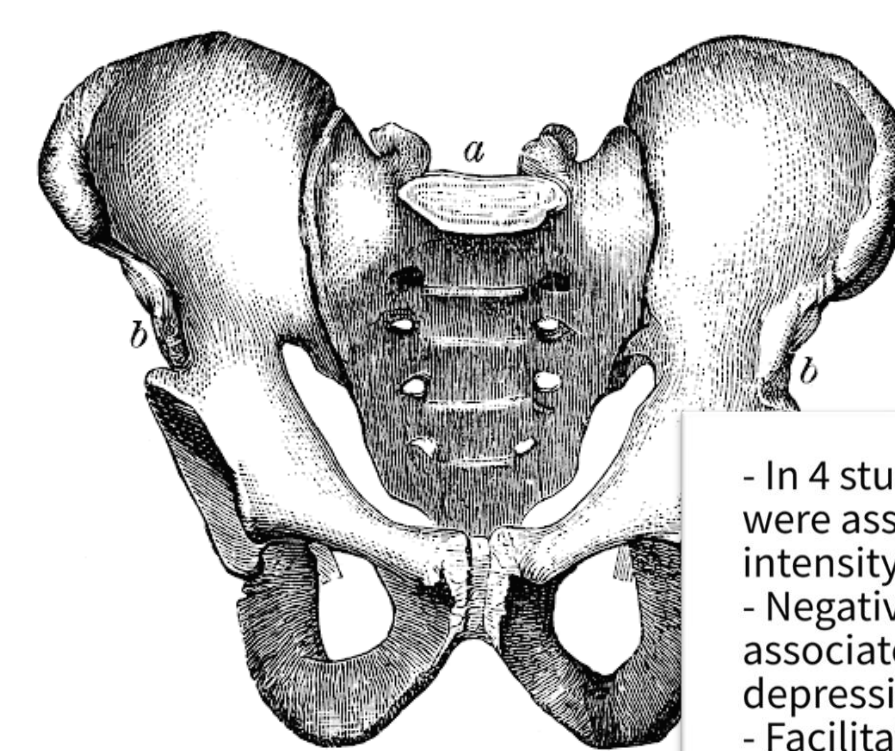


In line with theory, **solicitous spousal behaviour** is consistently associated with **worse pain outcomes**



**Emerging areas** of research include the impact of spousal responses that are **hostile, critical, or encourage autonomy**. More research is needed to draw conclusions.

### Pelvic Pain



**Studies specifically focused on pelvic pain was another emerging area of research (n=10)**

- In 4 studies, solicitous responses were associated with higher pain intensity levels
- Negative partner responses were associated with higher levels of depression
- Facilitative responses were associated with lower pain levels in 1 study

## Take Away Messages

- **Previously held thoughts about spousal responses extinguishing pain behaviour through punishment are not supported by the literature**
- Most spousal responses that have been studied have been associated with worse pain outcomes including increased disability, pain, catastrophising
- A small amount of research has considered helpful spousal responses (including empathy, validation, compassion, spousal autonomy support). Further research into helpful spousal responses to persistent pain behaviours is required

### Affiliation: