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## Abstract

**Background:** Mild cognitive impairment (MCI) signifies age-related memory decline that is less severe than with dementia. Most scholarship focuses on the clinical diagnosis and prevalence of MCI; the psychosocial aspects have been studied less often. Thus the purpose of this research was to examine the influence of MCI on interactions among long-term married couples.

**Methods:** Using qualitative methodology, 10 spouses (5 wives, 5 husbands) of community-dwelling persons diagnosed with MCI reported on shared couple activities, amount of time spent together, division of household tasks, and management of everyday life. Transcripts were analyzed through an open coding process and results are represented by case studies.

**Results:** The interviews revealed both stability and change within marital relationships when spouses are faced with MCI. Emergent themes focused on relational interactions (e.g., disclosure, negative and positive emotional outcomes, shared activities), relational dynamics (e.g., power, "couplehood"), socio-emotional intimacy (e.g., companionship, support, concern), and household responsibilities (e.g., external help, equal division of labor, spouse assumes most responsibility, person with MCI has assigned duties).

**Conclusions:** Findings indicate that dealing with a spouse with MCI yields difficult emotional responses including helplessness, frustration, sadness, and worry. Spouses also expressed positive outcomes (e.g., commitment, love, emotional closeness) when discussing their relationship with their partner. Additional research is needed on the most effective coping strategies in the face of an uncertain prognosis and perceived changes in marital interactions. Practitioners should attend to the unique stressors and strains of having a spouse impaired by early memory loss and the potential for changing marital dynamics.

## Relational Interactions &

### Negative Emotional Outcomes

- Seven spouses indicated conflict and tension, worry, stress, frustration, or anger.

*I am more anxious. [my husband] makes a lot of small mistakes and I find myself being a bit uptight about what mistake he is gonna make next...kind of like you are with a child and that's probably not a good thing...*

- MCI accentuated personality characteristics that spouses perceived as previously annoying, making it more difficult for spouses to ignore.

*As far as stubbornness, she's still stubborn...yeah, she's not any different in that. [She] still has the same characteristics that she's had even before I married her.*

### Positive Emotional Outcomes

- Most spouses explicitly expressed positive outcomes.

*...if [our relationship] has changed, it's better.*

- Use of "we" language indicated strong commitment to the marriage and to their partner.

*We had a test trial package [of anti-depressants] which we're running out of, which I have to call the doctor and ask for a prescription so we can continue that.*

- Shared activities (e.g., traveling, socializing, dancing, religious activities) were important for maintaining a strong emotional bond with their partners.

## Household Responsibilities

- Six spouses employed helpers (e.g., maid, housekeeper) daily and three employed helpers weekly or monthly as a way to manage the demands of household tasks.

*It got to the point that he [husband] did not want to do that [household work] and with my working, it was just easier to get somebody than it was to have a hassle about it.*

- Spouses have begun to assume greater household responsibility as a result of their partner's memory difficulties. The level of responsibility assumed by the spouse reflects the partner's level of impairment.

*If it's important to complete the grocery list, I feel like I should go with her or go for her. I have started doing quite a bit of that.*

*Well, of course he did most of the driving when we were together. I'm now the principal driver. I've taken over the yard work [laugh], I always did the budget and most of household, and shopping and cooking. You know, he [only] dresses himself and feeds himself.*

*I don't want to make him feel incompetent on things...I guess that in the last three to six months maybe I leave fewer chores for him to do in the way of making phone calls to get things done. And if I do, I leave a detailed message...It's not been like I am the caregiver and he incompetent and all of that.*

- Spouses initiated activities more than before and encouraged their partners to be active in hobbies.

*I have a feeling that sometimes if I just left him totally alone, he would do nothing except sit here and watch television or play solitaire on the computer...but it had just gotten to the point that he really was sitting here in the chair in the den most of the time and that concerned me quite a lot.*

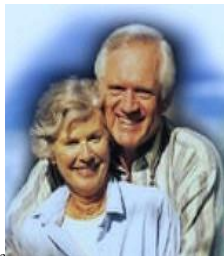
## Sample & Methods

### Couple Characteristics

- Age: 66 - 86 years ( $M = 78.6, SD = 6.64$ )
- Married: 34 - 62 years
- Education: GED completion to graduate degree
- Annual income: \$12,000 - \$120,000

### Methods

- Participants recruited from local memory clinics
- Semi-structured, open-ended interviews focusing on:
  - Range of couple activities
  - Amount of time spent together
  - Division of household responsibilities
  - Ways of showing care or affection toward one another
  - Management of everyday life



## Socio-Emotional Intimacy

- Socio-emotional intimacy included aspects of commitment, affection, companionship, and emotional closeness.

- Support for the person with MCI was a form of commitment to the relationship.

*The main thing that came out of that [her going with her husband to his doctor visits] was that he felt my concern and he got the feeling that I was there to support him in any way that I could.*

- Spouses wished to repay their partner for care that they had received earlier in the marriage.

*He took care of me all the time and he's the one who drove me to appointments or anything...I wish I could take care of him.*

- Spouses displayed deep affection toward their partner with MCI, also indicating a strong sense of commitment to the relationship.

*I try to remind her [to do something], to keep reminding her, of course, she's very indecisive about getting dressed and things like that...perpetually tardy. I fuss about it and then I kiss her and tell her I love her...we just care for each other, she's just such a good person.*

## Conclusions

- The current definition of MCI may be insufficient for capturing the day-to-day changes associated with MCI; rather, there may be a progression of decline within those diagnosed with MCI that involves gradual changes in abilities and social relationships.

- Spouses expressed more negative than positive emotional responses to the changes experienced by the person with MCI, and ultimately, within their marriage. This finding suggests the need for early family intervention programs, rather than waiting for any further progression of memory decline.

- How spouses responded to changes in their partners' memory and resulting unexpected role shifts was related to the level of impairment and the spouses' overall perceptions and beliefs about their relationship.

- Perceptions of reciprocal care positively influenced spouses' ability to develop effective coping strategies in response to their partners' cognitive impairments.