

# Physical Activity as an Emotion Regulator Enhances Emotional Awareness in Romantic Couples

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## Abstract

Counseling studies emphasize the importance of emotions, particularly, emotional awareness to better health, well-being, and happiness in romantic relationships (Batool & Khalid, 2009; Croyle & Waltz, 2002). Researchers have found that being able to access awareness of present emotions is helpful to increase of problem solving and intimacy (Bracket et al., 2005). Another side of research provides robust evidence for the benefits of physical activity to mood improvement, cognitive performance, family conflict, and decreased symptoms of psychopathologies (Ahn & Fedewa, 2010; Brown et al., 2013; O'Halloran et al., 2014; Salmon, 2009). Although physical activity carries physical and psychological benefits, less is known of the social benefits of physical activity as an emotion regulator in romantic context.

## Background

- In romantic context, both relationship conflict and stress can be productive at creating greater feelings of closeness, understanding, commitment, and respect between partners. Similarly, both relationship conflict and stress can be destructive at causing resentment, hostility, dissatisfaction, and separation (Diamond et al., 2011; Kulik et al., 2016; Schudlich et al., 2013).
- At the individual level, relationship conflict and stress have been associated to poor health and self-esteem, negative affect, lower wellbeing, less efficiency in problem solving and rationalization, and greater stress and conflict (Rodriguez & Margolin, 2013; Salvatore et al., 2011).
- Recent counseling studies suggest that lack of emotional awareness in partners is related to poor relationship quality, dissatisfaction, and greater negative affect (Bracket et al., 2005; Coyle & Waltz, 2002).
- Physical activity has been consistently important to our physical and psychological health, yet, less is known of the social benefits of physical activity as an emotion regulator to relationship conflict and stress (Conn, Phillips, Ruppert, & Chase, 2012; O'Halloran et al., 2014; Salmon, 2009).

**Focus:** To understand the link between physical activity as an emotion regulator, relationship conflict, and stress on emotional awareness.

**Hypothesis:** We predict a significant two-way interaction, such that lower emotional awareness would be found when participants perceive high relationship conflict than low, but the effect of lower emotional awareness would depend on whether individuals engage in physical activity as emotion regulation. Similar predictions are made for perceptions of stress.

## Methods

### Procedures:

Exclusion criteria included being in a romantic relationship with no history of major physical, mental health problems, and within the first year of cohabitation. =

### Participants:

*N* = 75 romantic couples with an average of 26 years of age.

### Measures:

- Physical Activity Emotion Regulator:** 3-item scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (more than once a day),  $\alpha = .78$ . Example item includes: "I exercise or engage in physical activity in order to make myself feel more calm/relaxed, happy/content, and excited/energized."
- Relationship Conflict:** 5-item scale ranging from 0 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much),  $\alpha = .73$ . Example item includes: "How often do you argue with your partner?"
- Stress:** 7-item scale ranging from 0 (Did not apply to me at all) to 3 (Applied to me very much, or most of the time),  $\alpha = .84$ . Example item includes: "I found it hard to wind down."
- Length of relationship was included as a control variable.

### Data Analysis:

A multilevel dyadic model was conducted to account for sources of interdependence established in dyad data in R programming.

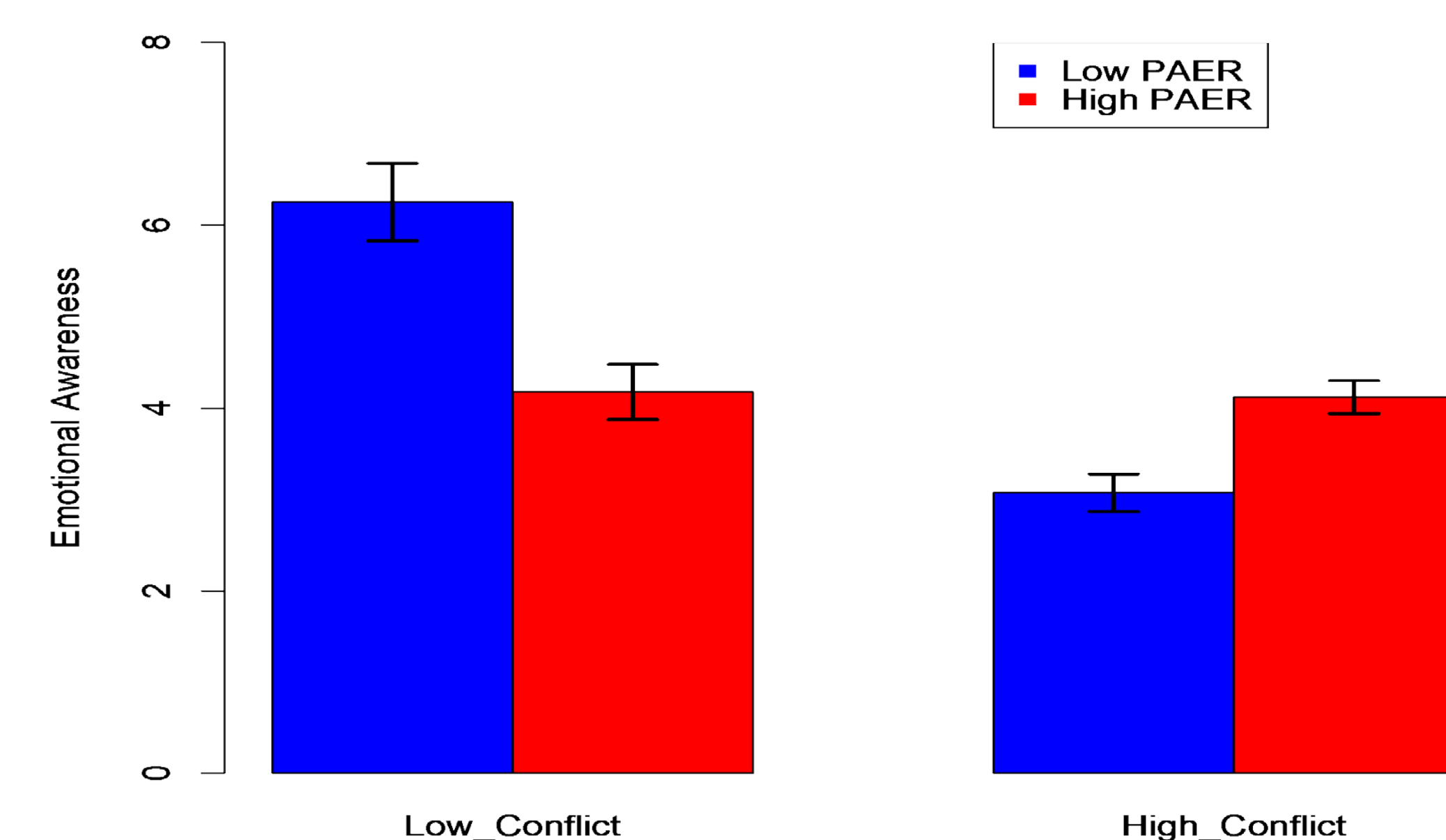
## Results

Table 1. *Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics for All Variables in 75 Heterosexual Romantic Couples*

Variables	Female	Male
	Mean (SE)	Mean (SE)
Age (years)	27.3 (.89)	25.7 (.88)
Relationship Length (years)	1.08 (1.03)	1.08 (1.03)
Physical Activity Emotion Regulator	1.23 (.07)	1.37 (.07)
Emotional Awareness	1.58 (.09)	1.71 (.09)
Relationship Conflict	2.01 <sup>a</sup> (.09)	1.91 <sup>b</sup> (.09)
Stress	.81 (.05)	.72 (.05)

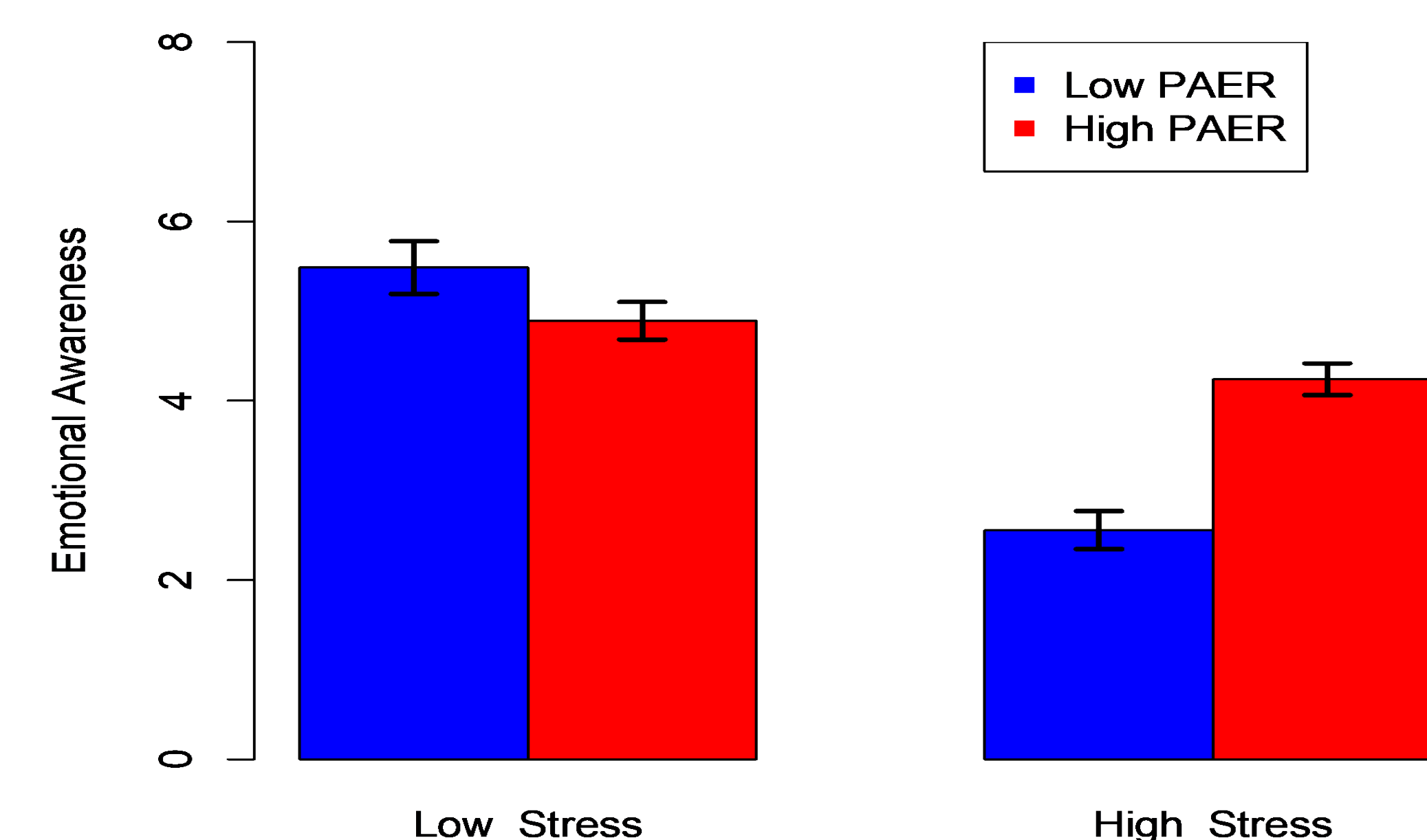
Note. Means in columns with distinctive subscripts indicate significant differences at  $p < .01$ , two tailed.

Figure 1. *Two-way Interaction of Physical Activity as an Emotion Regulator and Relationship Conflict on Emotional Awareness*



Note. Standard deviation error bars that do not overlap are significantly different,  $p < .05$ .

Figure 2. *Two-way Interaction of Physical Activity as an Emotion Regulator and Stress on Emotional Awareness*



Note. Standard deviation error bars that do not overlap are significantly different,  $p < .05$ .

## Conclusions

### Findings:

- Individuals with high physical activity as emotion regulator had similar levels of emotional awareness when relationship conflict was high and low. However, individuals with low physical activity as an emotion regulator had higher emotional awareness when relationship conflict was low but not high.
- Moreover, individuals with high physical activity as emotion regulator had similar levels of emotional awareness when stress was high and low. However, individuals with low physical activity as emotion regulator had higher emotional awareness when stress was low but not high.

### Implications:

- Results highlight the important role of physical activity as an emotion regulator to achieve optimal results not only to individual health and wellbeing, but in interpersonal context as a way to promote health and wellbeing of both partners useful for prevention and treatment in couple's therapy.
- Further research is needed to enhance our understanding of the social benefits of physical activity as emotion regulator to formation of intimacy and long-term satisfaction in close relationships.
- Further research is needed to assess the relationship of how romantic partners feel when partners share physical activity as a positive versus negative emotion regulator and how they manage these differences.
- Further research is needed to examine if whether different types of physical activity are more effective at promoting greater emotional awareness than others.

### Limitations:

- Future studies should broaden this exploration to include interracial romantic relationships, homosexual couples, and therapy seeking couples.
- Future studies should examine longitudinal data to determine the average levels of physical activity as emotion regulator and disagreement between partners to interpersonal emotional awareness across days.

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- A PDF version of this academic poster is available at: <http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/posters>

