

No damsels in distress: Women report lower pain sensitivity when tested by men

February 16 2021



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Big girls don't cry—especially not in front of men. While stereotypes may suggest that women in pain seek attention and sympathy from men, researchers at Murdoch University, Australia found that women report feeling less pain when tested by men than by other women.

In a new study "'Big Girls Don't Cry': The effect of the experimenter's sex and [pain](#) catastrophising on pain," published in DeGruyter's *Scandinavian Journal of Pain*, Dr. Lechi Vo and Professor Peter Drummond explored how [gender](#) stereotypes affect the reporting of pain.

Male and [female participants](#) rated the pain experienced from heat, pressure, pin pricks and high-frequency electrical stimulation. Either a male or female experimenter team applied the stimuli, then the researchers analyzed how their gender affected pain ratings.

"Traditional [gender stereotypes](#) imply that males underreport pain to show how strong they are, while females tend to overreport pain, especially to male experimenters to seek attention or protection," said Vo. "Our results suggest quite the opposite."

Evidence suggests [women](#) were more likely to be anxious about pain—an attitude called pain catastrophizing—than men, so Vo expected them to report higher pain sensitivity. And indeed, Vo found a link between pain catastrophizing and pain reports in women but not in men. But in front of men, women reported lower pain sensitivity when moderate to intense pain was caused.

Women appeared to underreport their pain responses when the experimenters were males, indicating that gender role biases may sometimes overshadow catastrophic attitudes about pain. One explanation could be that a growing number of women no longer want to appear as the 'weaker sex', thus opposing traditional female norms.

Vo's research may have implications for pain assessment in the healthcare setting. "We already see gender biases as pain is assessed depending on the patient's sex," she said. "We want to further understand how gender biases influence the way female chronic pain patients report

pain and urge healthcare professionals to be aware of these potential biases when assessing their patients' pain."

For pain research, these findings mean that interpreting results will get harder still. "Just focusing on the biological mechanisms of pain is not enough," said Vo. "In the future, we will consider how gender role expectations of pain, past experience, pain catastrophizing and other psychological factors shape people's experience of pain—and we recommend that other researchers do the same."

More information: Lechi Vo et al. "Big girls don't cry": the effect of the experimenter's sex and pain catastrophising on pain, *Scandinavian Journal of Pain* (2021). [DOI: 10.1515/sjpain-2020-0157](https://doi.org/10.1515/sjpain-2020-0157)

Provided by De Gruyter

Citation: No damsels in distress: Women report lower pain sensitivity when tested by men (2021, February 16) retrieved 6 February 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-02-damsels-distress-women-pain-sensitivity.html>

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