

# Affective Consequences of Spinal Cord Injury: A Qualitative Interpretation of Relationship Adjustment

M. A. Garret

2980-017 Alcochete, Portugal

Email: [magarret@gmail.com](mailto:magarret@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceived impact of spinal cord injury on intimate and affective relationships among thirty-five Portuguese adults with spinal cord injuries of varying levels. Using a Grounded Theory approach, responses to a single open-ended question were analyzed to identify key themes describing how the injury reshapes relational dynamics. The findings reveal a wide spectrum of experiences, including strengthened communication, increased emotional closeness, diminished self-confidence, reduced partner interest, concerns involving sexual functioning, relational instability and nostalgia for pre-injury relational life. Emotional and behavioral adjustments following the injury were also associated with insecurity and fear of abandonment. The results align with existing research highlighting the profound emotional and relational implications of spinal cord injury and underscore the importance of psychological and relational support for both individuals and their partners.

**Keywords:** spinal cord injury; affective relationships; sexuality; qualitative research; emotional adjustment

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Spinal cord injury produces a wide range of emotional, psychological and relational consequences that profoundly affect the lives of individuals and their partners. Affective relationships particularly those involving intimacy and sexuality are highly sensitive to the physical and psychological changes brought about by injury. Disruptions in these areas often contribute to frustration, insecurity and declines in self-esteem, ultimately undermining relationship stability when partners struggle to adapt to new realities (Madorsky & Dixon, 1983; McInnes, 2003).

Reductions in sexual desire or physical functioning can also decrease willingness to engage with new bodily and emotional conditions, generating further tension between partners (Sharma, Singh, Dogra, & Gupta, 2006). Since intimate relationships greatly influence psychological adjustment and long-term rehabilitation outcomes, understanding how individuals interpret relational change after spinal cord injury is essential. To address this need, the present study explores subjective perceptions of affective and intimate relationship changes following spinal cord injury. Through qualitative analysis, the study identifies key relational, emotional and sexual transformations that arise when individuals and their partners adapt to altered physical and psychosocial conditions. Themes emerging from participants' narratives offer insight into the complex ways injury affects communication, self-esteem, sexual adjustment, emotional bonding and feelings of relational stability or insecurity.

## 2. METHOD

A qualitative design grounded in a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach was used to examine individuals' perceptions of the relational impact of spinal cord injury. The sample consisted of thirty-five Portuguese adults aged between eighteen and fifty-five, recruited through snowball sampling. Participants represented various levels of spinal cord injury and both genders, reflecting a broad range of personal and relational experiences. Data were collected using an open-ended question: "What is the impact of the injury on your affective relationship?" Individual responses were documented and analysed following iterative stages of Grounded Theory, including open coding, constant comparison, and the development of thematic categories. This

method allowed patterns and relational meanings to emerge directly from the participants' narratives without imposing pre-determined assumptions (Beauregard & Noreau, 2010; Ostrander, 2009).

The analytic process produced three overarching themes: (1) relational changes that required reformulation, (2) perceived instability within the relationship and (3) comparisons between pre-injury and post-injury relational life. These themes guided the interpretation of how individuals make sense of emotional, intimate and relational consequences of spinal cord injury.

### 3. RESULTS

A central finding of the analysis was the presence of significant relational changes that required partners to renegotiate expectations, roles and emotional priorities. Some individuals perceived positive developments after injury, including enhanced communication, greater awareness of relational needs and increased emotional closeness. These changes reflect relational resilience, with some couples demonstrating stronger unity and greater mutual support, as documented in studies showing that disability-related adversity may foster deeper commitment (Rohrer, 2001).

However, many participants reported notable negative relational consequences. Loss of self-confidence, reduced feelings of attractiveness and perceived declines in partner desire were common. Physical limitations restricted participation in shared activities, contributing to emotional distance and frustration. Changes in communication patterns, emotional dependency and redefinition of relational roles further strained relationships. Sexual functioning was among the most frequently cited problem areas, with reduced desire, limited physical responsiveness and concerns about partner satisfaction. These challenges are consistent with research documenting how spinal cord injury significantly alters sexual functioning and may produce dissatisfaction and emotional strain in intimate partnerships (Murta & Guimarães, 2007; FÍSICA, 2004).

Studies have also shown that a partner's transition into a caregiver role can disrupt sexual intimacy and change relational dynamics (Kreuter, 2000; Phelps, Albo, Dunn, & Joseph, 2001).

Participants also described emotional and behavioural changes, including irritability, anxiety and instability, which added to relational challenges. These psychological adjustments are consistent with research identifying emotional vulnerability and behavioural modifications following spinal cord injury (Venturini, Decésaro, & Marcon, 2007; Dezarnaulds, 2002).

Concerns involving body image, independence and long-term lifestyle changes further contributed to insecurity. Nevertheless, a minority of participants stated that the injury did not significantly affect their relationships, reflecting emotional cohesion and strong communication—factors known to buffer relational stress (Kreuter, 2000).

Perceived instability emerged as a major relational consequence. Many participants expressed fears of abandonment or doubts about their partners' long-term commitment. Emotional distancing, partner fatigue and uncertainty about shared futures contributed to relational fragility. These experiences reflect broader findings that adapting to disability requires major reorganisation of relational roles and daily routines, which can destabilise emotional bonds (Chan, Lee, & Lieh-Mak, 2000; Kreuter, 2000).

Participants frequently compared their present relational experiences with those before the injury, expressing nostalgia for spontaneity, emotional ease and sexual confidence. Such reflections highlight the emotional grieving associated with the loss of former relational identities and lifestyles. These patterns support research describing grief and identity reconstruction as central components of post-injury adjustment (Chen & Boore, 2009).

### 4. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that spinal cord injury affects affective relationships through interconnected emotional, psychological and relational pathways. Positive relational adaptations—such as enhanced emotional communication and increased closeness—align with research suggesting that some couples successfully mobilise coping strategies to maintain relational resilience despite adversity (Beauregard & Noreau, 2010; Rohrer, 2001).

However, the negative effects reported by many participants reflect well-documented patterns of relational stress following injury, particularly when partners must adjust to new caregiving roles or altered sexual capabilities (Phelps et al., 2001; Kreuter, 2000). Sexual functioning emerged as a key determinant of relational satisfaction. Research consistently shows that disruptions in sexual responsiveness and fear of partner dissatisfaction can diminish intimacy and increase emotional distress (Murta & Guimarães, 2007; Sharma et al., 2006). Emotional vulnerability, reduced self-esteem and concerns about physical desirability further complicated relational adjustment. These psychological and sexual dimensions are inseparable and mutually reinforcing, making them essential targets for intervention.

Feelings of instability, fear of abandonment and nostalgia for pre-injury relational life highlight the emotional complexity of adapting to disability. These themes align with studies emphasising that injury forces individuals to negotiate new relational identities, reconsider expectations and navigate the emotional consequences of loss (Chen & Boore, 2009; Venturini et al., 2007). When relational communication is weak or emotional support is limited, these challenges may intensify and jeopardise long-term relational stability.

Spinal cord injury generates significant relational, emotional and sexual consequences that reshape intimate and affective relationships in complex ways. While some individuals experience strengthened emotional connection and improved communication, many face diminished self-esteem, sexual difficulties, relational instability and fear of abandonment. Because intimate relationships play a central role in psychological adaptation and rehabilitation, comprehensive clinical interventions should incorporate emotional counselling, sexual guidance and partner-focused support. Strengthening communication, clarifying expectations and promoting shared coping strategies may substantially improve relational wellbeing for couples adapting to spinal cord injury.

## 5. REFERENCES

- Beauregard, L., & Noreau, L. (2010). Spouses of persons with spinal cord injury: Impact and coping. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(6), 1945–1959.
- Chan, R., Lee, P., & Lieh-Mak, F. (2000). Coping with spinal cord injury: Personal and marital adjustment in the Hong Kong Chinese setting. *Spinal Cord*, 38(11), 687–696.
- Chen, H. Y., & Boore, J. R. P. (2009). Living with a relative who has a spinal cord injury: A grounded theory approach. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 18(2), 174–182.
- Dezarnaulds, A. (2002). *Psychological adjustment after spinal cord injury*. Motor Accidents Authority of NSW. 1–12.
- Física, D. (2004). Sexualidade na doença crónica e na deficiência física. *Revista Portuguesa de Clínica Geral*, 20, 385–394.
- Karana-Zebari, D., de Leon, M., & Kalpakjian, C. (2010). Predictors of marital longevity after new spinal cord injury. *Spinal Cord*, 49(1), 120–124.
- Kreuter, M. (2000). Spinal cord injury and partner relationships. *Spinal Cord*, 38(1), 2–6.
- Madorsky, J. G. B., & Dixon, T. P. (1983). Rehabilitation aspects of human sexuality. *Western Journal of Medicine*, 139(2), 174.
- Martins Pereira, M. E. M. S., & Cavalcanti, T. C. C. F. A. (2006). Enfrentamento e reabilitação de portadores de lesão medular e seus cuidadores. *Psico*, 37(1).
- McInnes, R. A. (2003). Chronic illness and sexuality. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 179(5), 263–266.
- Murta, S. G., & Guimarães, S. S. (2007). Enfrentamento à lesão medular traumática. *Estudos de Psicologia*, 12(1), 57–63.
- Oliveira, R. A. (2004). O sujeito e o corpo perante a incapacidade física. *Revista Portuguesa de Psicossomática*, 6, 63–67.
- Ostrander, N. (2009). Sexual pursuits of pleasure among men and women with spinal cord injuries. *Sexuality and Disability*, 27(1), 11–19.
- Phelps, J., Albo, M., Dunn, K., & Joseph, A. (2001). Spinal cord injury and sexuality in married or partnered men: Activities, function, needs, and predictors of sexual adjustment. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 30(6), 591–602.
- Rohrer, J. R. (2001). Factors in the marital adjustment of couples after the spinal cord injury of one of the partners.
- Sharma, S. C., Singh, R., Dogra, R., & Gupta, S. S. (2006). Assessment of sexual functions after spinal cord injury in Indian patients. *International Journal of Rehabilitation Research*, 29(1), 17.
- Venturini, D. A., Decésaro, M. N., & Marcon, S. S. (2007). Alterações e expectativas vivenciadas pelos indivíduos com lesão raquimedular e suas famílias. *Revista da Escola de Enfermagem da USP*, 41(4), 589–596.