

RELATIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL SUPPORT AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

Social support is one of most important factors in predicting the physical health and well-being of everyone, ranging from childhood through older adults. The absence of social support shows some disadvantage among the impacted individuals. In most cases, it can predict the deterioration of physical and mental health among the victims. The initial social support given is also a determining factor in successfully overcoming life stress. The presence of social support significantly predicts the individual's ability to cope with stress. Knowing that they are valued by others is an important psychological factor in helping them to forget the negative aspects of their lives, and thinking more positively about their environment. Social support not only helps improve a person's well-being, it affects the immune system as well. Thus, it also a major factor in preventing negative symptoms such as depression and anxiety from developing.

KEYWORDS: Social Support and Physical Health , generalization purpose.

INTRODUCTION:

The social support and physical health are two very important factors help the overall well-being of the individual. A general theory that has

been drawn from many researchers over the past few decades postulation that social support essentially predicts the outcome of physical and mental health for everyone. There are six criteria of social support that researchers use to measure the level of overall social support available for the specific person or situation (Cutrona, Russell, & Rose, 1986). First, they would look at the amount of attachment provided from a lover or spouse. Second, measuring the level of social integration that the individuals involved with, it usually comes from a group of people or friends. Third, the assurance of worth from others such as positive reinforcement that could inspires and boosts the self-esteem.

The fourth criterion is the reliable alliance support that provided from others, which means that the individual knows they can depend on receiving support from family members whenever it was needed. Fifth, the guidance of assurances of support given to the individual from a higher figure of person such as a teacher or parent. The last criterion is the opportunity for nurturance. It means the person would get some social enhancement by having children of their own and providing a nurturing experience.

This paper organizes studies of social support into three age-appropriate categories-adolescents, middle-aged adults, and older adults. For example, an experiment related to social support and physical health that



empathizes cancer is assigned to the older adult category. If the specific area of concern can be applied to everyone, then it is placed into middle-aged adult group for generalization purpose. After reviewing those studies and experiments, it should be clearly shown that social support is very important factor in determining the status of physical health, mental health, and immune system functioning for everyone.

ADOLESCENTS

Adolescents could develop some kinds of sensitive feelings, which may impact on their health if they do not get adequate social attention from others. They may become involved in an unfortunate situation that makes them feel overwhelmed or awkward. The adolescent is still developing, could easily experience some strain to their emotion if no help is immediately available. Anxiety and depression are two main psychological disorders that often can be seen among the adolescents.

FAMILY AND PEER SUPPORT

For adolescents, family support is the most important element in their lives. As part of their growth experience, adolescents usually expect a lot of things from their parents. Inadequate support from the parents will likely increase the chance of getting depression among adolescents who get into unfortunate situation with their parents. This occurs because adolescent usually become confused when they expect to get plenty of help and positive reinforcement from their parents, but it does not happen (Stice, Ragan, & Randall, 2004).

Beside family support, peer support also is very important factor for adolescents. Children can expect a lot from their friends. Peer support can be considered as an alternate method of getting social support if the adolescents receive inadequate attention from their parents. This social support method is not as reliable as family support because young children could easily withdraw from their own friends if they become depressed. Another problem arises in this area, when the depressed students isolate themselves from public gatherings. This would prevent those suffering adolescents from getting any social support at all (Stice et al., 2004). Receiving social support is very essential for adolescents to become successful with themselves and achieve a satisfactory level at school.

GIFTED ADOLESCENTS

Gifted adolescents also can encounter plenty of problems if they do not get adequate social support. In some cases, intelligent students are sent to residential schools that offer special programming for students who are gifted in math and science. Oftentimes, the family support would be severely limited for those adolescents, because the residential school usually lies far away from home. This kind of schooling is a totally new experience for gifted students, because they are living in the dormitory. Normally, students would experience the dormitory living for the first time when they go to college. At those ages, students are looking forward to seeking independence from their parents. This usually leaves a hole for those adolescents with reduced social support, whereas they have to rely on some people from the residential school (Dunn, Putallaz, Sheppard, & Lindstrom, 1987).

Gifted adolescents usually have to rely on counselors and peers at the school. The counselors usually help those students to ease the transition from home to a residential living situation. In contrast to students who attend regular school, there is a better chance for those gifted students to experience emotional well-being, be in a good physical health, and have a good immune system as long as adequate social support can be provided at the school to prevent or lessen the chance for those people from getting depressed (Dunn et al., 1987).

MIDDLE-AGED ADULTS

The importance of social support continues well into adulthood for everyone. It would benefit a person's general health and immune systems, regardless of whether or not they have a lot of stress. For example, the cardiovascular system would function much better in those adults who have better social support (Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). The social contact, familial support, and involvement with leisure activities have significantly demonstrated a relationship with lowering of blood pressure. Contact among family members

is the best method of relieving stress. The fellowship among friends is adequate, but not as powerful as family. Strangers have a negative effect on reducing blood pressure. In one study cited in Uchino's article, the individual with many siblings and experiencing low stress was found to be the best possible combination for lowering the blood pressure.

HEALTH

Many studies indicate that anyone who has high social support tends to have less chance of getting depression and anxiety disorders. In contrast, only a handful of studies show that there is no relationship between social support and lowering the blood pressure. The level of social support also has been found to be related to a lower rate of disease and early death. The familial support is a psychological enhancement to help the individual reduce their stress. These findings are somewhat weak and further studies need to be done to gather more specific information about the influence of social support on physical health (Uchino et al., 1996).

There is a significant relation between emotions and health. Anyone who has positive emotion and beliefs is likely to enhance their physical health. As expected, being in a good mood will cause refreshed mind to relieve some of the stresses. Laughing is said to have a good deal of influence on reducing or forgetting about the hassles of daily life. Strong social support is necessary to help succeed in achieving these traits of overall physical well-being (Salovey, Detweiler, Steward, & Rothman, 2000).

PERSONALITY TYPE

There are some aggressive adults living in our society. This would probably mean those adults are diagnosed with Type A personality. Anger, aggressiveness, and hostility are the common characteristics of this type of personality. These are unhealthy personality traits, which could adversely affect the general health of those adults. Eventually, the research finds that there is some direct link between Type A personality and coronary heart diseases (Friedmann & Booth-Kewley, 1987). There is no scientific evidence yet, but researchers have suggested a general hypothesis that low social support may cause Type A personality. The researchers also revealed a strong relationship between social support and the absence of coronary heart diseases. More social support would soothe the individuals with Type A personality, leading to better physical health, thus reducing the risk of developing coronary heart diseases. Environmental stress is likely to increase the chance of getting physical illness (Maddi, Bartone, & Puccett, 1987).

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

One's socioeconomic status also is a major factor in whether or not an individual gets enough social support. The socioeconomic status is the measurement of level of income each person has to determine their level of economic status in our society. For example, if the specified person's income is rather low, compared to nationally average, that person would be considered as a part of the low socioeconomic status. As expected, anyone who comes from a lower socioeconomic class would be more likely to receive less social support. They basically do not have enough resources in their environment available to assist with social support. The individuals with low socioeconomic status also tend to have less self-control. Consequently, they become more sensitive to stressors in their environment and less able to control their reactions. It means those adults would trigger some frustrations when they face any kind of stress. Unfortunately, the social strain, which is common in their daily lives, increases the risk for lower social class individuals to develop some kinds of physical and mental illness or a lower sense of well-being. This should not come to surprise that adults who have higher socioeconomic status tend to receive more social support (Gallo, Bogart, Vranceanu, & Matthews, 2005).

MOTHERS OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Mothers with children who have permanent and chronic diseases usually become overwhelmed with all of the demands. They often feel burdened because it takes too much responsibility to take care of disabled children and meet such social demands as work at same time. Hope and good social support are very important elements to help reinforce those affected mothers. Hope serves as a psychological factor and social support

serves as a comfort factor. As mentioned above, by thinking positively, hope should be able to take away the affected mothers' obsessions and make them think about something else for better. One interesting note from a study shows the stress level for those mothers varies widely. It greatly depends on the independent skills the disabled children have. For example, if the children have a very serious disability such as cerebral palsy, it would indicate their mothers will have to take all of the responsibilities as caregivers. On other hand, those children who have milder symptoms of disease would be able to function more independently. In this case, the affected mothers would be in a much better shape, but they still have to deal with some caregivers' responsibilities along with social demands such as daily hassles. The availability of social support from others, especially family members, helps the affected mothers to adjust to environmental demands (Horton & Wallander, 2001).

STRESSORS AT WORK

Many adults normally deal with a lot of stress at work. The high demands and low social contact/support within the workforce tend to cause the development of depressive symptoms among workers over a period of time. A high level of social support from a supervisor may help prevent depression from developing. This is not a guarantee, especially if the high demands continue to overwhelm the workers. To accomplish a satisfactory stress level in a high demand environment surely would require plenty of support and reinforcement from supervisors. The surprise finding in this specific study shows that the best combination for workers would be low stressors and low social contact. This study, which was taken place in Germany, shows that there is not much correlation of social support and stressors among the co-workers. These findings are still vague. This study included a limited number of workers. The researchers will need to study more workers in a greater variety of work environments over the place before they can generalize this result (Dormann & Zapf, 1999).

Some unfortunate adults experience the impact of job losses due to firings or layoffs. The unexpected layoffs usually are huge stressors among those workers who were impacted. Those displaced workers are likely to develop some problems that could influence their physical or mental health. For example, those affected workers normally report the loss of self-esteem and locus of control. This spikes the chance of those workers becoming depressed. The depression itself could signal the beginning of deterioration in health and well-being among those displaced workers (Mallinckrodt & Bennett, 1992).

The layoffs also make a big impact on the workers' life. Now, they have to worry about the financial support of their family. Worrying about the financial ability only add, more problem, for those who are unemployed. The social supports from family members benefit those individuals. By providing adequate social support, the displaced workers' physical and mental health is enhanced. This also prevents deterioration in physical/mental functioning down the road. Social support also would reinforce the displaced workers to make some adjustments into a new life (Mallinckrodt et al., 1992).

OLDER ADULTS

The physical functioning of older adults usually weakens as they become older. It is the key factor in predicting the health outcome of older adults is their status at the time they retire. The body and immune system of older adults usually become fragile as they become older. The resource of social support also tends to decrease somewhat. These several factors combined are the key to predict and control the health of older adults.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Older adults usually face significant changes when they reach their retirement ages. As they are basically done with their career, this stage of the life establishes a new focus for older adults. The retired workers have several choices to make; fully retire from the workforce, continue working part-time and collect some money, or focus primarily on non-paying jobs or volunteer activities. Volunteering is a big factor relating to social support for older adults. This element will help build companionship and interact with more people in the community. This step may become necessary as older adults lose some social support from their family members. This group of people needs to keep themselves busy by connecting with other people as often as needed. This method leads to better overall mental and physical health and better well-being. The amount of social support is the key to

determine life satisfaction among the older adults. As expected, older adults who elect not to do any working during their retirement experience a lower level of life satisfaction. Their body function would deteriorate more quickly compared to other older adults who keep themselves busy (Aquino, Russell, Cutrona, & Altmaier, 1996).
Health

The initial level of social support essentially predicts the outcome of older adults' general health in the following years. Inadequate initial social support at the beginning of retirement would predict that older adults will develop depressive symptoms over time. Older adults would be able to ignore the negative effects in their lives with help and reinforcement from others. This is considered a psychological effect. Not enough social support would likely make the individuals notice their daily hassles and life stressors much more clearly. This step could accelerate the deteriorating effect of their physical and mental health. Unfortunately, there is no relationship found between social support and major life events. Whatever happens to older adult as they nearing to their death, it will happen, regardless the amount of social support available in the environment (Russell & Cutrona, 1991).

STRESS

Initial mental health is a very important predictor for all older adults at the time they enter their retirement ages. Good mental health would predict a healthy social support and fairly good physical health for the years to come (Cutrona et al., 1986). Once an individual's mental health declines at any point during their retirement ages, it would increase the likelihood for negative elements to persist with the impacted individuals. It has been found that it will be very difficult for those older adults to get out of the slump and have a positive perspective in their life once again. Knowing that they are valued by others makes a big difference in predicting the outcome of mental health for those older adults. If the impacted individuals demonstrate negative life events such as divorces, or any other kinds of daily stress, it becomes obvious to outsiders that inadequate social support is available for those people.

CONCLUSION

There is evidence that social experience is very essential in predicting the well-being for everyone, ranging from childhood through older adults (Cohen & Willis, 1985). After a few decades of studying, the researchers have finally gained some understanding about the relationship between social support and physical health. Nonetheless, some areas of research still face some problems because they sometimes focus too specific on one population, ignoring the generalization rules for using the random samples to generalize the result to a whole population.

The continuity of research on the relation between social support and physical health will enable us to understand better about the effect of good social support toward physical and mental health, along with a general well-being. Many studies have been shown that if a high level of social support becomes available to everyone, it will benefit their overall health in a long run. The importance of social support implies to everyone in our society, ranging from young childhood through older adulthood. The providers of social support can be anyone in society who brings the positive environment and reinforcement to the individuals, especially from their family members. The amount of social support available in the environment for the individual can be determined by looking at the six criteria of social support, and set up observational scores from each category then find the average score from all six categories. The higher average score it gets means the better social support the person has in their life, thus reducing their chance of developing any negative outcome in their health.

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