

Social Support Networks: Family, Friends & Community

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Social support is crucial to elderly well-being. As a web of social relationships that surround the elderly individual, social networks play an important role in elderly health from physical to mental to spiritual health and well-being. Social support is one of the most important functions of social relationships.^[4] Social support is defined, by the American Psychological Association, as “the provision of assistance or comfort to others ... to help them cope with a variety of biological, psychological, and social stressors”.^[10] Social support can come in many forms, coming from many types of people and from a variety of relationships.

Family

The longest lasting relationships people have are with family members. Spouse, children, siblings, parents, and other relatives form familial foundations that serve as both the foreground and background in which a person traverses life into old age. Within the context of these social bonds, preferences and patterns of behavior are forged into the person’s way-of-being or lifestyle.

Although aging itself does not automatically confer debility, the likelihood of illness or disability increases as the body systems gradually deteriorate to various degrees. The elderly person is likely to need help with a variety of activities of daily living. Family is the most readily available source of social support. Social support is expressed not only as physical help but also emotional support and the sharing of time, companionship, and activities that make a person feel valued and loved as a family member.

Depressive symptoms can be common in late life. Experiencing the onset of age-related health problems that result in a decline in well-being, experiencing repeat grief, and bereavement from the loss of older loved ones and friends, social isolation, and decline in socioeconomic status are all problems representative of difficulties that tend to cause elderly anxiety, depression, loneliness, and other life complications.^[1]

It is not uncommon for some elderly to have no one available to assist them in situations where support would be a vital asset. There are also those elderly who

prefer to handle their personal, difficult situations alone for a variety of reasons such as not wanting to be a burden to family members. A myriad of problems can beset the aged person's support network. Family disorganization induced by disagreements and divisiveness, lack of available kin for co-residence, lack of knowledge and understanding on how to best support the person in their given disability, and even socially adapted changes in ideology that erode intergenerational solidarity can render the family support system, unsupportive.^[9]

Friends

Humans are social beings. We thrive best in mutually supportive relationships. Social support, received from friends and conveyed to friends, is widely accepted as a protective factor for the emotional well-being of older adults.^[6] Positive affect is enhanced through friendship support networks. The effects of social activities with friends may become more important to the elderly person rather than the stilted interactions with children or relatives and may act as a buffer against the negative effects of aging.^[5]

Friends confer the most benefit to elderly survival in late-life.^[2] Friendships are an integral component of social networks, having a major positive impact in overall health. One of the fundamental differences between elderly family support and elderly friend support is that the former is perceived as obligatory and the latter is perceived as voluntary. Friendships are selectable (as evidenced by socioemotional selectivity theory) and based upon personal and mutual interests. Kinship is a not selectable and bound by blood ties.

Humans are social beings. Strong social networks are those that are most diverse (inclusive of spouse, children, siblings, other relatives, neighbors, friends, confidants, church, and other community organizations). They also provide the most overall social integration. Being around others who are like us is fun, reassuring, and makes us feel part of the group.

Community

The provision for home and community-based services for seniors varies greatly across states and availability across communities. The formal support offered by home and community based services help the aged person remain in their own

home. Formal support services temperate the conditions associated with high levels of stressors caused by elderly functional decline and disability. Living in a state supportive of home and community based services is associated with lower depression among seniors experiencing low levels of function or functional declines.^[8] For those elderly who want to remain in their own home, but are without the informal support of family, it is best to reside in a state supportive of home and community based services such as those offered by local Area Agencies on Aging and Meals on Wheels.

We live in a highly mobile society, where neighborhoods change over time. Close neighbors move or die and another family takes their place. Previous, long-established contacts are lost. Losing contact with neighbors or having low levels of contact with neighbors over a 10-year period is associated with declining levels of well-being.^[3] The results of several studies highlight the importance of social policies that strengthen and enhance the quality of community life, help the aging population overcome challenges and sustain the health and well-being of seniors.⁷ Personal help provided by home and community-based services and adult day services, help people with functional disabilities continue to live at home in their community.

For a comprehensive social support approach, an informal network of family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, religious institutions, support groups, and a formal social network of healthcare professionals and community institutions, working together are better able to effectively meet the variety of needs particular to the elder community-dweller.

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