

Social Support in Times of Crisis: A Review of Evidence on Psychological Well-Being

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This paper reviews and attempts to synthesize the existing literature on the role that social support plays in promoting psychological well-being during times of crisis. The present study adopts a narrative review method. The evidence indicated that social support plays an important role in sometimes promoting as well as maintaining the overall well-being and also reducing the negative states of stress, anxiety etc. The perception of the support being available, reachable, and accountable rather than the actual received support also plays a critical role in determining the actual effectiveness of support. Various factors also play a significant role in determining the experience and effectiveness of the support that is provided and received. This paper also highlights that sometimes, mismatched or negative social interaction can also lead to amplifying the distress. The research gaps that are identified includes methodological challenges and limited longitudinal data. This review further concludes with future directions for future researchers highlighting the need for a culturally sensitive, mechanism-focused, and intervention-driven approach to promote resilience and psychological well-being in crisis contexts.

Keywords: social support, psychological well-being, crisis, stress, mental health, perceived support, received support

The popular maxim that says that human is a social animal reflects the fundamental importance of social support systems in the lives of humans. It is very much evident through vast literature that same amount of stress can be perceived and dealt with by individuals in a very different manner. For example one can deal with it effectively on the other hand, at the same time another can totally get hampered by that. Then there comes the role of social support within the lives of individuals. Healthy and supportive relationships can play a vital role in promoting the psychological health. Theoretical frameworks have long debated whether social support helps in improving the mental health directly, as explained through “the main-effect model” or mainly mitigates the effects of stress, thereby improving the mental

health indirectly, as explained through “the buffering model” (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Thoits, 1995; Thoits, 1982). Both perspectives are well established through strong supporting evidence, suggesting a multifaceted and dynamic relationship between “social support and psychological well-being”. Many psychological theories have also emphasized the role that social interactions and their environment can play in the lives of human beings.

A large body of studies indicates that “individuals who perceive high levels of social support report lower rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.” (Ozbay et al., 2008; Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008; Kaniasty, 2020; Aba et al.,

2019; Kaniasty et al., 2020; Conversano et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020). Few studies have also attempted to establish links for physiological mechanisms that can help explain the relationship. Furthermore, “neurological mechanisms, including the regulation of the HPA axis and oxytocin release also help explain how social connections may shape stress responses. However, various factors play a role in determining the effectiveness of support, for example, the nature of the crisis, type, timing, and cultural contexts, appropriate source, etc”. (Hansford & Jobson, 2021; Matsuno & Israel, 2018; Muldoon et al., 2020).

This review attempts to consolidate the findings across the literature, to provide a holistic understanding of the role that social support plays in mental health during crises, and to identify promising directions for future research.

Objectives:

This review aims to achieve the following research objectives:

- To evaluate the role of theoretical models in understanding “the relationship between social support and psychological well-being”.
- To explore “the effect of social support on psychological well-being”, taking into consideration various factors like culture, etc.
- To assess the literature findings, thereby understanding the role of social support as a “protective factor” in times of negative situations.
- To assess the literature findings, thereby understanding the role of social support as a “promoting factor” of well-being in times of negative situations.
- To explore the impact of negative aspects of social support.

- To provide an overall understanding of “the role that social support plays in promoting and maintaining psychological well-being” during crises.

Method

The present study adopted a narrative review method to synthesize the literature on the topic. Therefore, a comprehensive search was conducted across several databases such as “Semantic Scholar, PubMed, Google Scholar, and others” to gather the research papers, articles, published in various journals, books, conferences, etc. The search strategy included several thematic areas such as “foundational theories of social support, its impact during crises (natural disasters, pandemics), support mechanisms, population”, and “cultural differences”. Out of these, only the most relevant studies were selected based on “inclusion” and “exclusion criteria” made and the selection criteria also included based on “their relevance to theoretical models, crisis-specific contexts, cultural and population differences, and methodological rigor” to be included in this review. There was no strict time framework chosen to be included in this review studies were solely selected based on their significance and as per the expertise of the author.

Results

The two foundational theoretical frameworks for research on social support and psychological well-being are “the main effect model” and “the buffering model”. The “main effect” model suggests a direct positive effect on well-being and the “buffering model” posits that support helps individuals manage better and reduce the negative effects of stress therefore acting as a buffer against negative situations, where support moderates the stress responses. (Cohen et al., 1985; Thoits, 1982; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001;

Pilcher & Bryant, 2016). A large number of studies have confirmed both models, validity, with perceived support- (particularly the belief that support will be available when needed consistently linked with better outcomes. Moreover, integration into social networks appears to provide broad, ongoing, long-term benefits to mental health. (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). The mechanisms that have been proposed to be found underlying these effects include improved emotional regulation, increased self-efficacy, and physiological pathways involving the hypothalamic- pituitary- adrenal (HPA axis) and regulation of oxytocin release. These findings suggest that “social support influences psychological well-being, not only through emotional and cognitive processes but also through neurobiological mechanisms” (Ozbay et al., 2008; Marroquin, 2011; Gaffey et al., 2016).

There are also various psychological theories present, which have shed light on the role of social support through the social environment, encompassing “sociocultural theory, attachment theory, psychosocial theory, social cognitive theory, systems theory, social support theory, buffering hypothesis, direct effect hypothesis, stress and coping theory, etc”.

It has also been seen “that peer support can significantly help in reducing emergency room and hospital visits, substance use, depression, and increasing hope and self-care.” (Davidson et al. 2012). Across various crises like natural disasters, pandemics, economic instability, etc, social support consistently emerges as a protective factor against psychological distress, depression, anxiety and post- traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008; Conversano et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2018). Mobilization of support is common post-disasters, but perceived support may deteriorate over time (Kaniasty, 2020).

Among frontline and healthcare workers, workplace social support, i.e., support from colleagues and supervisors, has been linked to reduced burnout and greater resilience. (Brooks et al., 2018; Leo et al., 2021; Gabriel & Aguinis, 2021). Among children and adolescents, family and peer support play an important role in reducing the long-term psychological effects of crises (Aba et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2020). Moreover, some studies have also shown that “social support in the form of emotional support is crucial for quality of life and loneliness among older nursing home patients with and without cancer and in home dwelling older adults”. (Drageset et al. 2010; Elovainio et al. 2000; Drageset et al. 2015)

The “ availability” and “effectiveness” of social support are heavily influenced by cultural, social, and individual differences. For instance, emotional and instrumental support from family and community is often valued more in collectivistic cultures, while in individualistic cultures, autonomy and self-initiated support-seeking are more commonly emphasized (Hansford & Jobson, 2021; Matsuno & Israel, 2018). There are differences across various age groups and populations at high risk, such as transgender and poor individuals, who need interventions for dealing with their specific problems and gain community support. (Muldoon et al., 2020; Martin Carrasco et al., 2016). Social support has been seen as “very important for the burden of care among older adults providing care to a partner with dementia.” (Stensletten et al. 2016). “Nurses, doctors, family, and friends serve as vital resources for cancer patients’ disposal when needed”.(Kvale et al. 2013). Furthermore, support that is mismatched (where the support that is offered does not align with the recipient’s actual needs) or perceived as excessive can lead to negative outcomes (Finch et al., 1999; Zee & Bolger, 2019). The studies have often faced methodological

challenges, including “inconsistent definitions of social support, inconsistent measurement tools, differences in study design adopted, such as cross-sectional or longitudinal approaches” (Leavy, 1983; Jolly et al., 2020).

These challenges have led to mixed findings in the literature and emphasize the need for more rigorous, culturally sensitive, and longitudinal research to understand the complex dynamics of social support.

Table 1. Represents an overall view of the supporting key studies

Key study	Author	Year	Conclusion
“Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis”	(Cohen et al.)	(1985)	Social support improves well-being through both the overall beneficial effect and buffering effects, depending on how support is measured.
“Effects of social support in the stressor-strain relationship: A Dutch sample”	(Jacques A. M. Winnubst et al.)	(1982)	Social support helps in reducing the impact of work-related stressors on psychological and behavioural strains.
“Supportive Relationships in Children and Adolescents Facing Political Violence and Mass Disasters”	(GilAba et al.)	(2019)	Social support can protect adolescents from mental and physical health impacts of political violence and natural disasters.
“A scoping review of post-disaster social support investigations conducted after disasters that struck the Australia and Oceania continent.”	(Kaniasty et al.)	(2020)	The direct effects of supportive behaviours on reducing the postdisaster psychological distress were found.
“Social support and resilience to stress across the life span: A neurobiologic framework”	(Ozbay et al.)	(2008)	The study indicated that social support is important in maintaining good physical and psychological health by exploring the neurobiologic factors associated with social support’s contribution to stress resilience.
“Life events, Social support and depression”	(Paykel, E.)	(1994)	Major life events increase social stress and absence of social support appears to be associated with onset and relapse of depression.
“Traumatic stress within disaster-exposed occupations: overview of the literature and suggestions for the management of traumatic stress in the workplace”	(Brooks et al.)	(2018)	Effective social support during and after disaster-appears to enhance psychological resilience.
“Low Social Support and Major Depression: Research, Theory and Methodological Issues”	(Lakey et al.)	(2008)	Low social support is associated with wide range of mental health constructs like psychological distress, post – traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders and clinical depression etc.
“Interpersonal emotion regulation as a mechanism of social support in depression”	(Marroquin)	(2011)	Social support is related to depression, and interpersonal emotion regulation may be a mechanism of social support.

"The impact of Social support After a disaster"	(Phillips, J.R.)	(2020)	Social support after disasters positively impacts psychological health.
"Social bonds and posttraumatic stress disorder"	(Charuvastra & Cloitre et al.)	(2008)	Social support is an important factor in reducing the risk of developing PTSD, with a social ecology of PTSD framework highlighting the importance of social factors in PTSD risk and recovery.
"Social Support Negative Social Interactions and Psychological Well-Being"	(Lincoln)	(2000)	Study examined the negative aspect of social interactions. Therefore implying social support has some effect on well-being.
"On the Benefits of Giving Social Support"	(Inagaki et al.)	(2017)	Giving social support is not only beneficial for the support receiver but also to the support provider, highlighting the need for considering both the support receiver and support provider to gain a deeper understanding of the association between social ties and well-being.
"Social ties and mental health"	(Kawachi et al.)	(2001)	Social ties play an important role in maintaining psychological well-being, but protective effects may vary across groups.
"A Review of First- Year Student Stress and Social Support"	(Maymon et al.)	(2021)	The study identified antecedents and correlates of stress and provided evidence that social support can function as a valuable coping mechanism for first-year students.
"Affective touch and regulation of stress responses"	(Kidd et al.)	(2022)	The study emphasized the role of affective touch, reflecting how it is vital for attachment bonds development of stress systems and social relationships, contributing to overall well-being.
"Beyond the HPA Axis: Progesterone-Derived Neuroactive Steroids in Human Stress and Emotion"	(Wirth)	(2011)	Progesterone and allopregnanolone increase during the face of stress and also helps in promoting social contact to reduce the anxiety levels.
"Social Support and Mental Health"	(Uchino et al.)	(2016)	This study showed "perceived support improves mental health and received support can sometime harm this."
"Social support and child protection: Lessons learned and learning"	(Thompson)	(2015)	Social support programs can help in preventing child maltreatment by addressing diverse family needs and promoting positive parenting practices, combining formal and informal sources, and considering complex recipient reactions.

Discussion

The crucial role that “social support has in promoting the psychological well-being, particularly, during times of crisis is evident across the literature”.(Cohen & Wills, 1985; Ozbay et al., 2008; Kaniasty, 2020; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). This is particularly evident in high pressure work- environments, and in vulnerable populations such as healthcare settings, during pandemics, where social support serves as an important resource (Brooks et al., 2018; Leo et al., 2021). Both the “main-effect” model and “stress-buffering” models have strong empirical support, suggesting that social support can directly improve well-being and also reduce the psychological impact of stress, depending on the type, timing, and context of the support given (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Thoits,1982). Even the salutogenic model, as proposed by Antonovsky, identifies social support as a form of general resistance resource. (GRR) (Drageset 2021). One study on older adults showed “that having four to six close relationships is linked with an increased mortality risk for widowed older adults”. (Manvelian & Sbarra 2020). “A systematic review study on people with diabetes showed that social support was a vital factor for establishing and maintaining healthy habits”. (Mohebi et al. 2013)

While it has been seen across the literature that “social support significantly influences psychological distress, quality of life, loneliness, burden of care, anxiety, depression, hope, meaning, and mortality risk”. (Drageset. 2021). But on the other hand, the literature consistently highlights that not all forms of support are helpful. “It has also been evident that inappropriate and negative social interactions can even result in increasing the psychological stress and hamper the well-being”. (Finch et al., 1999).

Further, cultural context is also important in determining the effectiveness of support. The present challenges that have been seen include methods adopted, inconsistent definition and measurement of social support, which makes it difficult to synthesize and interpret findings from studies to get a clear picture. Therefore, there is a clear need for more rigorous research designs, including longitudinal studies and culturally sensitive approaches, to better understand the dynamics of support in different contexts.

Though there are many limitations but it can be said that there is strong support from the literature of the relationship between social support and psychological health. Social support is a key determinant of psychological resilience and recovery during stressful events has been supported by a large number of high-quality reviews, as well as empirical research. Therefore next step in this area of research aims to better understand the mechanisms that work behind these effects, creating intervention strategies, and addressing gaps related to cultural differences, negative effects of support, and long-term mental health outcomes.

Identified Research Gaps:

- There is strong evidence supporting the role of social support, though key research gaps have been found in the existing literature.
- Though ample studies are present that explore the positive aspects of social support, there is a dearth of significant literature identifying the role that negative support can play in worsening psychological distress.
- Many studies have focused on Western or individualistic societies, overlooking how collectivist cultures conceptualize and seek support differently.

- There is a limited literature present in the form of longitudinal and intervention studies. Most research is cross-sectional, therefore making it difficult to assess the long-term effects or causality. There is scarce literature present on intervention-based research evaluating the effectiveness of support-enhancing programs.

Future Directions

Therefore, much focus should be given on the identified research gaps through this review, thus trying to understand the dynamics of social support, the causal mechanisms working behind the social support and well-being relationship, sometimes being effective and sometimes ineffective, understanding the role of digital and community-based support, cross-cultural differences, and the long-term effects of interventions.

Conclusion

In summary, it can be concluded that there is ample amount of literature present that supports the fact that social support does have an important role in the psychological well-being of individuals, either through “the main effect model” or “the buffering hypothesis”, as mentioned beforehand. The sources of support can vary depending on the context.

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