

With a Little Help from My Friends

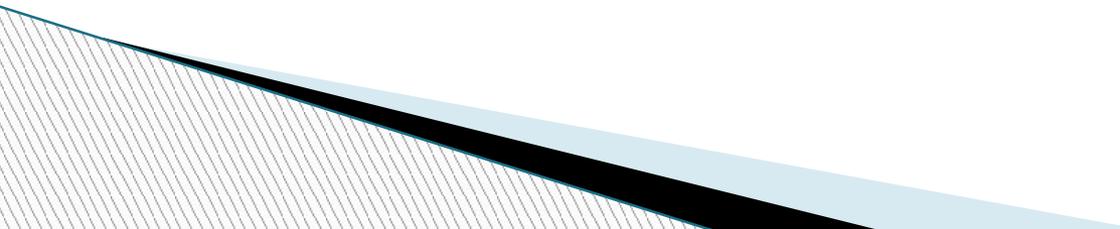
The Nature and Effects of Social Support

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Overview

1. Experimental Evidence: Misery loves (miserable) company
 2. Survey Evidence: Help-seeking hierarchy
 3. Epidemiological Evidence: Social ties are health-protective
 4. Stress Resistance Evidence: Perceived support moderates stress
 5. So What? Applications to daily life & planned social programs
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Experimental Evidence: Why misery loves (miserable) company

- ▶ S. Schachter's induction of fear/threat motivates affiliation
 - ▶ Participants express preference for similar peers, not just any peers
 - ▶ Peers are preferred even when talking is not permitted
 - ▶ SOCIAL COMPARISON is implicated in the process of stress reduction
 - ▶ Feedback lies at the heart of social support
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Survey Evidence: Help-seeking hierarchy

- ▶ Spouse/confidant is the first “lay consultant”
- ▶ Close kith and kin come second
- ▶ Family physician is next in line
- ▶ Community “gatekeepers” come fourth (e.g. clergy, teachers, coaches, & hairdressers)
- ▶ Bibliotherapy & the internet come fifth
- ▶ Mental health professionals, school guidance personnel, life coaches, etc are in last place
- ▶ **IN SHORT, INFORMAL SUPPORT PREVAILS**

Epidemiological Evidence: Social ties are health- protective

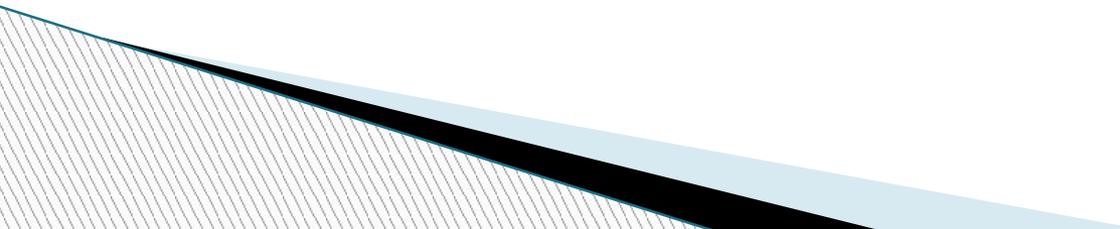
- ▶ In 1897, Emile Durkheim showed the inverse relationship between social participation & suicide
- ▶ International studies employing longitudinal designs converge on evidence that people with abundant social ties have morbidity and mortality rates that are significantly lower than those who are socially isolated.
- ▶ WHY? HOW DOES THE PROCESS WORK?

Stress Resistance Evidence:

Perceived support moderates stress

- ▶ Stressors (acute life events, chronic adversity) engender stress that can lead to disease, illness, accidents, if prolonged
- ▶ People who believe they can draw support from their network experience less arousal & lower levels of stress than those who do not hold this belief
- ▶ In sum, PERCEIVED support cushions the impact of stressors on mental & physical health

So What Is Social Support?

- ▶ The provisions of social ties: companionship, advice, emotional comfort, practical help, esteem–support, validation of identity
 - ▶ The meaning of social ties: psychological sense of support, feelings of belonging, feedback
 - ▶ A process of interaction characterized by mutuality/give–and–take: “Helping You Helps Me”
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So What? Applications to daily

- ▶ If people seek help from GPs and hairdressers, should we try to improve their reach & effectiveness by training them?
- ▶ If people seek the company of similar peers, should we offer them support & self-help groups & create settings for them to interact?
- ▶ If people (especially men) disclose to confidants, can we graft a close tie onto their network? (e.g., mentor, home visitor, Big Brother)

Does the recipient or provider benefit more from support?

- ▶ Giving beats getting in terms of:
 - Longevity: Feeling needed in unique ways

Having a larger purpose in life

Meeting fundamental human needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy

The Dark Side: Limitations & Miscarriage of Support

- ▶ Coping styles may not favour support-seeking
- ▶ Personal or cultural norms may favour self-reliance
- ▶ Offers of support may be refused when:
Strings are attached

Reciprocity/indebtedness is at risk

The provider is implicated in the stress

Fears of burdening the would-be provider

Ulterior motives are suspected

Self-esteem is at risk