

Social Support

What We Know

Human beings are social by nature. We seek out relationships with others in order to survive and thrive. When we are struggling, we often rely on the people that we care most about to help get us through the worst. Social support can be beneficial in all aspects of life by easing our fears, getting the care that we need, improving mental health, decreasing our chances of dying, and living healthy lifestyles.

Social Support and Coping with Chronic Illness

A diagnosis of chronic illness can be very difficult, both physically and emotionally. The uncertainty of how the disease progresses may increase feelings of anxiety or depression. Having support from family and friends throughout a chronic illness can ease anxiety surrounding the disease^{2,6}. Social support reduces stress and anxiety, improves coping skills, and fosters social acceptance². There are some downsides to social support, including perceived loss of control or the desire to protect self-image. The health advantages of having social support, however, seem to outweigh the disadvantages.

Social Support and Mortality

Social support decreases mortality rates from terminal illness⁸. Having a level of social support may also be helpful when surviving natural disasters. When studying the deaths of the 1995 Chicago heat wave, elderly people who lived alone died at higher rates than people who lived with someone¹⁰. In the absence of disaster, people who report higher levels of social support show a decrease in mortality rates¹. Although factors such as social class and education contribute, physical and emotional support clearly increase life expectancy.

Social Support and Mental Health

Mental health and social support go hand-in-hand. Social support can come in different forms. Different types of social support influence levels of depression⁹. For both men and women, this includes family stability and having more married couples in a neighborhood. Both providing and receiving social support is also important for coping with depression^{4,11}. Men have higher levels of depressive symptoms when providing social support to people outside of their family. On the other hand, women had higher levels of symptoms when providing support to family members⁴. Older women report that their mental health benefited most from emotional support compared to financial or informational support¹¹. Living mental illness is physically and emotionally exhausting. Social and emotional support helps decrease symptoms and improve the lives of those suffering from mental illness.

Social Support and Promoting Health

Social support improves coping with chronic diseases and mental illness, and is also associated with supporting healthy behavior. Having higher levels of social support from friends and family increases physical activity and exercise^{5,7}. Social support is useful also for changing unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking. Smokers trying to quit have better success when a spouse, sibling, or friend quits smoking³. Friends and family members make life easier in many ways, especially when it comes to providing social and emotional support.

Implications for Harrisonburg/Rockingham

The Harrisonburg City/ Rockingham County area is a small and relatively tight-knit community, with many recreational activities and volunteer opportunities. Indeed, “activities and amenities” is listed as the number one strength in the Healthy Community Council Survey.¹² Social association is a measure of social support opportunity in a community, measured by the number of membership associations per 10000. Harrisonburg City’s rate is 14.2/ 10,000, higher than Virginia’s rate of 11.3/10,000.¹³ Harrisonburg is ranked 27th out of 134 Virginia communities in the Wellness Disparity Profile, which measures, among other items, community diversity.¹⁴ However, 9% of residents experience inadequate social/emotional support, compared to the Virginia state rate of six percent.¹⁵

Local organizations that work to increase social support are Harrisonburg’s Annual International Festival, Kurds of Harrisonburg on Facebook, and the Islamic Association of the Shenandoah Valley. The Arts Council of the Valley, Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance, and the City of Harrisonburg website list volunteer opportunities and special events for residents. Up to date lists of events can also be found at the Hardesty Higgins House Visitor’s Center and at the Massanutten Regional Library, a strong source of social support. The Jane House Project gathers people together across Harrisonburg in order to build community. There are many religious congregations and memberships in Harrisonburg, as well as a strong Interfaith Association and a Faith in Action chapter, which works actively on social justice issues, such as those involving prisoners.

Promotores de Salud is a lay health promoter organization housed at James Madison University designed to build social support and culturally appropriate health information dissemination. The Harrisonburg-Rockingham Free Clinic and Medical Suitcase Clinic have begun to expand services to include behavioral health. Health providers and local residents can learn more about building stronger community health through the Virginia Atlas of Community Health.

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