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SOCIAL SUPPORT AND MENTAL HEALTH OF PEOPLE WITH CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASES

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Abstract: *Social support plays a key role in the prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of a person's health. Social support refers to the network of people including family, friends, and community members who we can rely on during challenging times. Humans are social creatures who need to feel a sense of safety and belonging to live a fulfilling life. In fact, social support is strongly linked to our happiness levels and can even increase our life expectancy by 45%. This reflects how powerful it is for our mental health.*

In our work, we analyze the impact of social support on people with cardiovascular diseases. A strong social network, such as family and friends, helps reduce stress levels, which directly lowers blood pressure and protects the heart. Connections with family and friends reduce feelings of loneliness, which are associated with a higher risk of developing coronary artery disease. Lack of social support may be a factor in psychological syndromes, such as atypical chest pain, which is often not associated with objective physical findings of the heart.

In general, the inclusion of the social aspect in the treatment of people with heart disease is essential for improving the quality of life and the prognosis of better health.

Keywords: *social support, mental health, cardiovascular disease*

Introduction

Social support and psychological resilience are two necessary factors for improving a person's mental health, for them to remain psychologically, emotionally, and physically healthy despite facing negative life events.

In modern society a person's mental health is constantly facing challenges: failure, a decline in energy, losing a job or loved ones.

Social ties, social integration and relationships in primary groups are central constructs for analysis. This is in order to highlight the mechanisms underlying the relationship between social support and a person's mental health and the cause-and-effect relationship.

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To this end, a large number of studies have been devoted to clarifying the relationship between social relationships and a person's health and well-being. When there is poor or inadequate social support, a person is most often associated with anxiety, depression, loneliness, and this changes brain function and increases the risk of:

- Alcohol use
- Cardiovascular disease
- Depression
- Suicide

Scientific studies conducted for these purposes confirm that people who had strong social and emotional support were less likely to face the listed health problems. In many countries, telephone lines are also available through which social support can be provided to people facing such problems.

Social Support and Why It is So Important?

Social support [1] is the psychological and practical help that an individual receives from the environment (family, friends, colleagues, society) in order to cope with stress, crisis situations or everyday challenges. It includes emotional, informational, and material help and acts as a protective factor for mental health.

There are three main types of social support: emotional support, instrumental support, and informational support.

Emotional support — For emotional support, the people who are in the immediate vicinity of the person play the biggest role. They are always the first to turn to for a kind word, advice, comfort and a shoulder to cry on when things are not going well. This type of support can be especially important in times of stress or when people feel lonely. Providing emotional support involves: active listening, validating feelings without judgment, offering physical affection, and being present during difficult times. Key approaches include asking what they need, reducing their daily burdens, encouraging individual growth, and managing your own stress to avoid adding to theirs.

Instrumental support — When a person is facing problems and crises, people in their social network can provide instrumental support. They take care of the person's physical needs, and offer assistance when needed. This can include bringing a hot meal when someone is sick or any other necessary assistance. Such support is important when people have urgent needs that must be addressed.

Informational support — This support can include: guidance, giving advice, information, and mentoring. Such support can be crucial when making important life decisions or when a person is facing major life changes: moving, getting divorced, changing jobs or companies, etc. With this form of support, a person can feel less anxious and stressed about the problems they need to solve thanks to the advice of a trusted friend, mentor, or loved one.

Social support can come in many forms and from many different people in a person's life. Coworkers can offer support in the workplace, while friends and family can provide emotional or practical support. Examples of social support can include:

- Listening to a friend talk about a stressful situation
- Supporting someone when they want to talk about their feelings
- Cooking a meal for a neighbor who is feeling sick
- Praising an employee for a job well done
- Giving constructive feedback on someone's work to help them improve
- Helping someone with household chores when they are struggling with feelings of depression

The health benefits of social support are positive when social relationships positively impact both physical and mental health. This means healthy choices and behaviors: healthy eating, exercising, quitting bad habits such as smoking, drinking alcohol, or using illegal substances. Social support plays an important role in coping with stress, as the latter has been shown to have serious health consequences on a person's mental and physical health, ranging from reduced immunity to an increased risk of heart disease. Surrounding oneself with people who care about, encourage and support the person helps that person see themselves as more capable of coping with stressful events.

Research also confirms that strong social support in times of major crises can help reduce the consequences of trauma-induced disorders, including post-traumatic stress. Social support improves a person's motivation, and talking to people who have gone through the same experience can often be a source of support, empathy, and motivation.

When talking about social support, it is often analyzed and compared with social integration. Social integration is defined [2] as the process of full inclusion of the individual in the social, economic, and cultural life of the community. The goal of social integration is the functional adjustment of the individual to the environment. It includes education, vocational rehabilitation, work, and family. The result of social integration is a sense of belonging ("me-feeling") and acceptance.

Social integration is the actual participation in various social relationships, ranging from romantic partnerships to friendships. This integration includes emotions, intimacy, and a sense of belonging to various social groups (family, partnership, religious community, and others). Experts suggest that integration into the aforementioned social groups provides and receives a protective benefit against maladaptive behaviors and harmful health consequences.

Together, these two concepts, social support and social integration, improve the quality of life and help overcome difficulties in the social environment.

In our work, attention is focused on social support and strengthening the mental health of people with cardiovascular diseases (CVD). We examine how such support affects people's cardiovascular health.

First of all, it affects stress reduction. A strong social network, such as family and friends, helps reduce stress levels, which directly lowers blood pressure and protects the heart. It also fosters better rehabilitation. People with CVD who have adequate social support cope better with acute cardiovascular problems, such as acute myocarditis or conditions after bypass surgery. Proper social support creates compliance with therapy in people with CVD. Support from the environment can positively affect regular medication intake, especially in patients with chronic heart failure, in order to avoid worsening of the condition.

Social support reduces risk as through it people with health problems have greater connection with family and friends, and this reduces the feeling of loneliness. The latter has a negative impact and increases the risk of disease, which is associated with a higher risk of developing coronary artery disease (CAD). Also, lack of social support can be a factor in psychological syndromes, such as atypical chest pain, which is often not associated with an objective physical finding of the heart.

In general, the inclusion of the social aspect in the treatment of heart disease is essential for improving the quality of life and the prognosis for better health of the person.

In 1995, Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary [3] emphasized that people have a fundamental need to belong and that a sufficient amount of stable interpersonal relationships characterized by affective care is essential for optimal levels of well-being in everyday life. The integration of a person into a social network characterized by mutual obligation and the perception that one is loved and cared for can have improving effects on the mental health of the person. The beneficial effects of social integration are described in detail by Sheldon Cohen and Thomas A. Wills, who describe a model of the main effect of social support. In their model, social integration can improve a person's well-being without improving the capacity to cope with stressful events. The authors show that a form of social support protects the person from the effects of stressful events, thereby moderating the relationship between stressors and the development of mental illness.

This model of stress dampening has led to the claim that deficits in social support increase the risk of depression, alcoholism, anxiety, and psychosomatic symptoms and illnesses.

Additionally, we can consider the relationship between CVD and social support. Here are the key aspects of this relationship:

- Patients with strong social support have up to 50% better adherence to therapy and treatment.
- Strong social support creates emotional stability for the person. Open communication with loved ones helps reduce stress, which is a significant risk factor for cardiovascular problems.

• People with CVD who have strong social support have the opportunity for faster rehabilitation. There are structured cardiac rehabilitation programs, which often include a social component. This is especially important in the recovery of people who have had acute myocarditis or bypass surgery.

• It affects the reduction of isolation. Social isolation and conflicts are psychological factors that negatively affect the cardiovascular system, so support from the environment is essential.

• Daily help for people with CVD provides support for easier coping with physical limitations and changes in lifestyle, diet, physical activity, and more.

Therefore, we can conclude that social support is not only emotional comfort, but also a direct factor that affects physical recovery and the prevention of further cardiac complications. However, support can be most effective when the response to it from a person is subtle and the recipient is not aware of the explicit effect of the support network. Therefore, less visible emotional support from others may reduce stress associated with major life changes or threatening situations without a sense of obligation on the part of the person receiving the support.

Materials and Methods

The primary aim of this study was to systematically examine the relationship between providing social support to others and people with cardiovascular disease. The study further found that providing social support is associated with lower levels of stress, higher self-esteem, happiness, higher satisfaction, higher self-efficacy, and improved mental and physical health.

For the purposes of our work, we conducted a study on the impact of social support on people with cardiovascular diseases. We prepared a questionnaire, consisting of 3 questions, and each question has three possible answers: a, b and c. Respondents were required to circle one of the proposed answers. The study included 30 respondents N=30, (15 men and 15 women) aged 20 to 60+, with different marital status (single, married, and widowed). Common to all respondents is that they had some type of cardiovascular disease (hypertension, arrhythmia, tachycardia, etc.)

Hypothesis: Social support positively affects the mental health of people who have had cardiovascular diseases.

Aim of the study: To assess the impact of social support on mental health in people with cardiovascular diseases.

Research questions: Is there a relation between better mental health and better social support among people with cardiac diseases?

Table 1 below presents the questionnaire with the proposed questions and answers.

Table 1. Questionnaire for respondents

	Questions
1.	Do you have a trusted person you can rely on — confide in when things are difficult?
	a) No b) Yes c) Yes, I have a few
2.	Who do you get the most support from?
	a) Family b) Friends c) Other significant support
3.	Do you feel less stressed after sharing your thoughts with your support about the problems you are facing?
	a) No b) Yes, I feel better c) Yes, it's much better

Table 2 presents the socio-demographic data of the respondents. They are grouped according to age, gender, and social status.

Table 2. Socio-demographic data of respondents

Socio-demographic data	Total
	N=30
Age (years):	
20-39 years	9
40-59	11
60 ≥	10
Gender:	
Male	15
Female	15
Social status:	
Single	9
Married	11
Widow	10

The following chart shows the answers to question number 1.

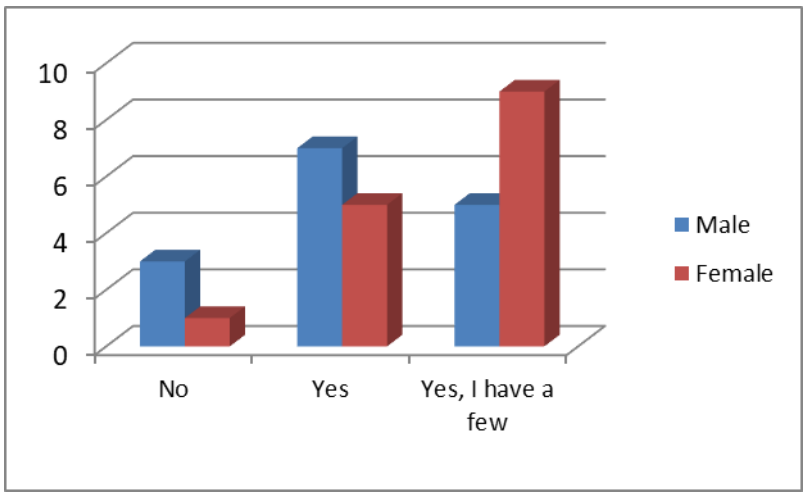


Chart 1. Do you have a trusted person you can rely on – confide in when things are difficult?

According to the respondents' answers, 3 of the men answered that they did not have such a person. Of the women, only 1 person answered "No." In the answer to whether they have more trusted people, 5 of the men answered affirmatively, while among women that number is higher, namely 9.

The following chart gives the answers to the second question.

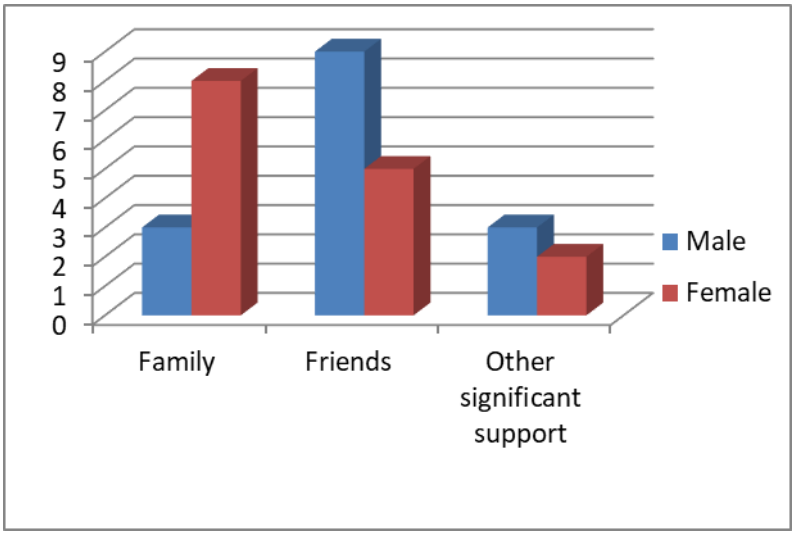


Chart 2. Who do you get the most support from?

In the answers, 9 of the male respondents answered that they find the most trusted person among their friends. Women, on the other hand, have the most trusted person among their family, with 8 respondents answering in the affirmative.

The following chart number 3 shows the answers to the third question.

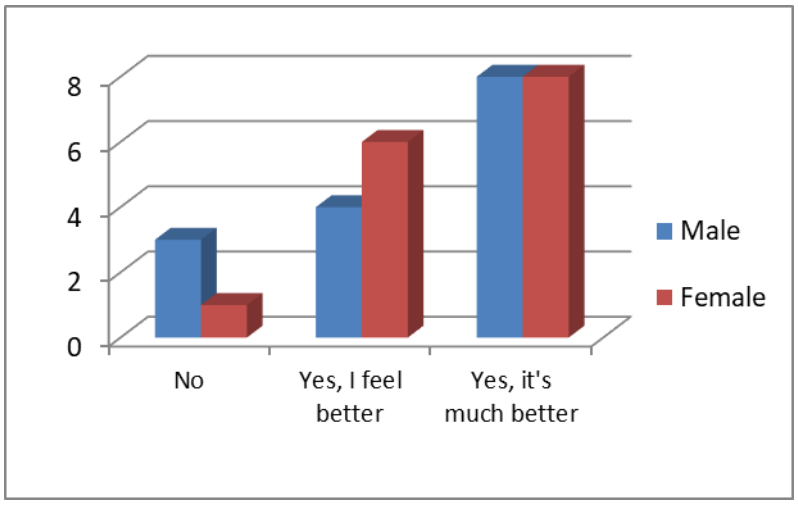


Chart 3. Do you feel less stressed after sharing your thoughts with your support about the problems you are facing?

In the answers to this question, both men and women answered with c) much better, 8 respondents from each group. A negative answer indicating that they do not feel less stressed after talking to a trusted person was given by 3 of the men and by only 1 woman.

Results

The research confirmed the following thesis: Social support positively affects the mental health of people who have had cardiovascular diseases.

The connection between the perceived level of social support and the behavior of the respondents confirms that women see greater trust in family members—53%, and men in friends—60%. Social and emotional support positively affects the mental health of the respondents. Participants who always received social support have better emotional stability and feel less stressed. Both men and women (53% of both sexes) responded that they feel much better when they receive support from other people.

Discussion and Conclusion

Social support and its relationship with a person's mental health have been the subject of several studies. All research documents identify the link between social support and health as a significant relationship. Our research confirms that membership in a social network is healthy, and the benefits of receiving social support are multiple. This means better stress management, adherence to therapy, emotional stability of the person and faster rehabilitation. Open communication with loved ones helps reduce stress, which is a significant risk factor for cardiovascular problems.

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