

# Stress may drive people to give as well as receive emotional support

February 24 2020

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Stress has a justifiably bad reputation for making people feel crummy. But new research suggests that despite its negative side effects, it may also lead to a surprising social benefit.

In a study, a team of scientists including Penn State researchers found that experiencing stress made people both more likely to give and receive emotional support from another person. This was true on the day they experienced the stressor as well as the following day.

David Almeida, professor of human development and [family studies](#), said the results—recently published in the journal *Stress & Health*—suggest that while stress can certainly lead to negative health outcomes, there are potential benefits, as well.

"Our findings suggest that just because we have a bad day, that doesn't mean it has to be completely unhealthy," Almeida said. "If stress can actually connect us with other people, which I think is absolutely vital to the human experience, I think that's a benefit. Stress could potentially help people deal with negative situations by driving them to be with other people."

Almeida said that while the negative effects of stress—such as [heart disease](#), compromised immune function and [depressive symptoms](#)—are well-documented, he and the other researchers were curious if there were potential benefits to stress, such as emotional support.

"Looking at the current research, I realized that a lot of studies looked at how emotional support is beneficial to other [health outcomes](#), but not many looked at the determinants of social support," said Hye Won Chai, a Penn State graduate student in health and human development. "We thought that stress could be a facilitator in these interpersonal exchanges."

For the study, the researchers interviewed 1,622 participants every night for eight nights. They asked the participants about their stressors and whether they gave or received emotional support on that day. Stressors included arguments, [stressful events](#) at work or school, and stressful

events at home.

The researchers found that on average, participants were more than twice as likely to either give or receive emotional support on days they experienced a stressor. Additionally, they were 26 percent more likely to give or receive support the following day. The researchers said that while this effect, on average, was found across the participants, it differed slightly between men and women.

"Women tended to engage in more giving and receiving emotional support than men," Chai said. "This supports previous findings that women tend to seek more emotional support from other people when they're stressed. In our study, men were also more likely to engage in emotional support on days they were stressed, but to a lesser extent than women."

The researchers said they were surprised that stress was linked to people not just receiving emotional support, but giving it, as well. Almeida said he initially thought that giving emotional support was the stressor itself, but he reconsidered when they discovered the effect lasted through the next day.

"We saw that someone experiencing a stressor today actually predicted them giving [emotional support](#) the next day," Almeida said. "This made me think that it's actually possible that stress helps to drive you to other people and allows it to be ok to talk about problems—your problems, my problems."

Almeida added that the results could help practitioners enhance and design better interventions for targeting [stress](#).

"The findings suggest that an intervention geared toward social interaction rather than individual may be very beneficial," Almeida said.

"If we're naturally being drawn toward other people when we're stressed to get help, then interventions may benefit by incorporating the people around us."

**More information:** Susanna Joo et al, Daily stressors facilitate giving and receiving of emotional support in adulthood, *Stress and Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/smi.2927](https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2927)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Stress may drive people to give as well as receive emotional support (2020, February 24) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-02-stress-people-emotional.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.