

Parents' attitudes about helping their grown children affect their mental health

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Older parents frequently give help to their middle-aged offspring, and their perceptions about giving this help may affect their mental health, according to a team of researchers.

"We usually view the elderly as needy, but our research shows that parents ages 60 and over are giving help to their children, and this support is often associated with lower rates of depression among the older adults," said Lauren Bangerter, Ph.D. student in [human development](#) and family studies, Penn State.

The team—which included researchers at Penn State, the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Michigan—examined the association between the support that aging parents give to their middle-aged offspring, the parents' perception of this support as rewarding or stressful and the parents' levels of [depressive symptoms](#).

Specifically, the researchers evaluated 337 older-parent participants of The Family Exchanges Study. As part of The Family Exchanges Study, the participants rated how frequently they provided different types of support to their adult children.

Bangerter and her colleagues grouped support into two general types—tangible and nontangible. Tangible support included practical support and financial assistance, such as fixing something around the house, running an errand, providing a ride, giving or loaning money and helping to purchase goods, services, insurance or education. Nontangible support included emotional support, companionship, talking about daily events and giving advice.

Next, the team assessed depressive symptoms of parents, using a 53-item self-report scale, which measures depressive symptoms commonly observed in everyday settings. Parents rated to what extent they felt lonely, blue, worthless, hopeless about the future or had no interest in

things.

The results appear in the current issue of *The Gerontologist*.

The researchers found significant interactions between tangible support and feelings of reward, and between nontangible support and feelings of stress in explaining parents' depressive symptoms.

In particular, the team's results suggest that parents who view giving as highly rewarding report higher levels of depressive symptoms when they give low amounts of tangible support, and lower levels of depressive symptoms when they give high amounts of tangible support. In contrast, parents who do not view giving as highly rewarding report higher levels of depressive symptoms when they give high amounts of tangible support, and lower levels of depressive symptoms when they give lower amounts of tangible support.

"Although past research shows that giving support declines with age, our data show that parents frequently provide both tangible and nontangible support to their grown children," said Steven Zarit, Distinguished Professor of Human Development and Family Studies. "In addition, our results suggest that depressive symptoms are more frequent when the level of reward a parent feels regarding giving is inconsistent with the amount of tangible support that he or she actually gives."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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