

Can social support be a bad thing for older adults?

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A recent study conducted by Duke-NUS Medical School (Duke-NUS) researchers suggests that social support from family and friends does not have an entirely positive effect on mental health but is instead a 'mixed blessing'. This is the first study that demonstrates the simultaneous negative and positive effects of social support among Singaporean older adults and has implications for policy makers.

While some studies have shown that receiving [social support](#) can help to improve the [mental health](#) of a person, others have found that the receipt of social support may have no effect or even a negative effect on one's mental health. Past research has not clearly demonstrated the reasons for this ambiguity - until now.

A study recently published in the journal *Social Science and Medicine*, by Assistant Professor Rahul Malhotra and Shannon Ang from the Centre for Ageing Research and Education (CARE) at Duke-NUS, analysed data collected from surveys administered to 2766 older adults aged 62 to 97 who are a part of the Panel of Health and Aging in Singaporean Elderly (PHASE). It found that receipt of social support, such as receiving money, food, clothing and housework help, reduced depressive symptoms among older individuals but at the same time made them feel like they had lost their control over their lives. This loss of control in turn increased their [depressive symptoms](#), counteracting the positive effect of receiving social support. The study also found that the reduction in one's sense of control over their life was larger for women than in men.

These novel findings are contrary to the common notion that more social support is always good. They also suggest that in order for social support to improve the overall mental health of older adults, both caregivers and policy-makers have to be aware of both its negative and positive effects.

"While receiving social support may help older people feel a sense of belonging or enhance their relationship closeness with the provider, it can also impact them negatively because it reduces their sense of control over their own lives," explained first author Mr Ang, Research Assistant at Duke-NUS.

"Our findings have implications for policy-makers because it points toward the importance of crafting policies and encouraging ways to provide support to older persons that can help them maintain their sense of control over their own lives," emphasised senior author Asst Prof Malhotra, Head of Research at CARE. "We need to think of ways in which we can help older adults without increasing their sense of dependence."

Apart from being the first to explain why social support may have negative effects and how social support should be rethought to gain optimal benefit for older adults, this study calls for more research to be done in this area. The authors believe it would be beneficial to investigate if what they have found holds true in other populations and for other health outcomes.

Provided by Duke-NUS Medical School

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