

Associations between Social Support and Well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Bidirectional or Unidirectional?

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Introduction

- Higher social support has been linked to greater well-being among students (King et al., 2020; Kong & You, 2013; Marrero & Carballeria, 2010).
- Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher social support has been associated with reduced risk of depression and increased sleep quality during quarantine (Grey et al., 2020).
- However, less is known about the specific *direction of effects* (i.e., unidirectional or bidirectional) between different sources of social support and various indices of well-being among college students.
- To address this gap, the present study examined whether there are unidirectional or bidirectional associations between **social support** (from friends and family) and **general well-being** (general health, self-control, anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms) among a sample of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants & Measures

N = 619 (65.4% Female), 59.5% Non-Hispanic White, 75.4% Heterosexual, 12.6% First-generation status

- **Family and Friend Support:** The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al, 1988) was used to assess perceived social support from **friends** (e.g., “I can count on my friends when things go wrong”) and **family** (“I get the emotional help and support I need from my family”).
- **General Well-being:** The General Well-being Schedule (GWB; Fazio, 1977) was used to assess well-being, based on 12 items across 4 domains: general health, self-control, anxiety and depression.
- **Demographics:** Questions assessed participants’ sex, race-ethnicity, sexual orientation, and first-generation status.

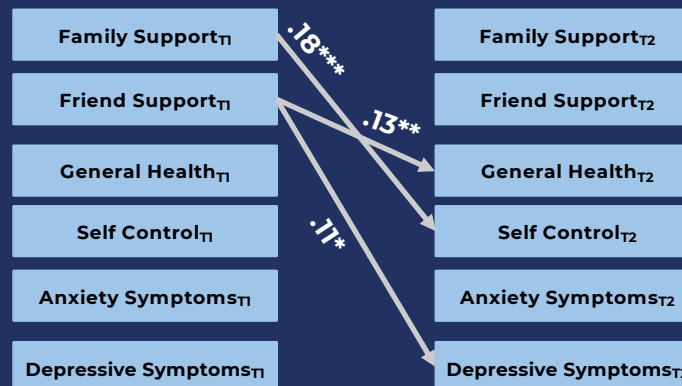
Results

- **Statistical Analysis**
 - An auto-regressive cross-lagged path model, controlling for sex, race-ethnicity, sexual orientation, and first-generation status was conducted in Amos.
 - Time 1 (T 1) = May – June 2020; Time 2 (T 2) = October- November
- **Model fit**
 - $\chi^2(14) = 24.32, p = .042$; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .996; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .035 [.007, .057]
- **Path Results**
 - Higher T1 **family support** predicted greater T2 self-control
 - Higher T1 **friend support** predicted better T2 general health and less depressive symptoms.
 - T1 Well-being did not predict T2 social support.

Discussion

- Many students moved back in with their families when colleges transitioned to online instruction. Families that provide a supportive home environment may include structure/stability and routine, which might contribute to the perception of with greater self-control.
- Friend support could be associated with lower depressive symptoms and better general health due through companionship and reduced loneliness (e.g., during quarantine).
- Overall, our results provide evidence for significant **unidirectional associations**: student’s perceived social support at baseline predicted better subsequent wellbeing, but wellbeing at baseline did not predict subsequent perceived social support.
- University administration could design intervention programs that facilitate close, meaningful friendships, which may function as key support systems.
- Future research should examine the long-term implications of specific types of social support on students’ mental health and overall well-being.

Figure 1: Significant Paths between Social Support and Well-being



References

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