

# Strong social support decreases mental health problems in young adults

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A team of McGill University researchers has found that young adults who perceived higher levels of social support reported fewer mental health problems.

In a study published today in *JAMA Network Open*, the team led by Marie-Claude Geoffroy, Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology at McGill, reassessed the impact of the presence and awareness of social support, such as family and friends, as a safeguard against mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. Their results indicate that [young adults](#) who perceived higher levels of social support—the feeling that there is someone who they can depend on for help should they need it—at the age of 19, showed lower levels of depression and anxiety symptoms one year later.

"Our study shows that even in cases where people previously experienced mental health problems, social support was beneficial for mental health later on," says Prof. Geoffroy, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Youth Suicide Prevention. "We discovered potential benefits of promoting and

leveraging social support as a means to protect the mental health of young adults, even in individuals who experienced [mental health problems](#) at an earlier developmental stage in life. That social support is not only beneficial for depression, but for other salient mental health outcomes as well."

## The power of perception

The team used data from the Quebec Longitudinal Study on Child Development, collected by the Institut de la statistique du Québec from over 1,000 participants of a representative birth cohort of individuals born in the province of Quebec. Following participants since their birth in 1997 and 1998, the researchers looked at their levels of perceived social support at the onset of adulthood.

The researchers found that people who experienced greater levels of social support experienced 47% less severe depression and 22% less anxiety than those with less social support. The team also found that those who reported higher levels of perceived social support were at a 40% decreased risk of experiencing suicidal ideation and attempts.

"Our study was conducted before the current COVID-19 pandemic, so we do not know whether our results will apply in the current context," adds Sara Scardera, a master's student in McGill's School/Applied Child Psychology program under the supervision of Prof. Geoffroy and co-author of the study. "However, in a 'normal' context, youth who perceived that they had someone to rely on reported better mental health outcomes. We believe that is beneficial to offer help to those in need, and to make sure your friends know that they can count on you."

The [data collection](#) is ongoing, therefore new mental health data will be available when participants turn 23 years old over the course of the 2021 winter season. The researchers will verify

whether the same patterns of association have been present during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Future lines of research will examine whether certain types of social support—for example, parents vs. friends—is more beneficial to the mental health of young adults.

**More information:** Sara Scardera et al.

Association of Social Support During Adolescence With Depression, Anxiety, and Suicidal Ideation in Young Adults, *JAMA Network Open* (2020). DOI: [10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.27491](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.27491)

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