Strengthening interpersonal relationships helps medical patients live longer

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Research from BYU professors Timothy Smith and Julianne Holt-Lunstad found that interpersonal relationships are key parts of medical treatment plans and help patients reduce stress and live longer. Credit: BYU

New research from BYU published in *PLOS Medicine* found that providing medical patients with social support leads to an increased chance of survival and elongation of life. Such findings come at a critical time as doctors and healthcare professionals seek new ways to improve care and decrease mortality.

"The premise of the research is that everyone is strongly influenced by their social context," said BYU counseling psychology professor Timothy B. Smith, lead author of the study. "Relationships influence our behavior and our physical health. We now know that it is possible to prolong life by fostering coping and reducing distress."

Julianne Holt-Lunstad, BYU psychology professor and co-author of the study, said the findings support other research published by the National Academy of Science and that there is now ample evidence that social needs should be addressed within medical settings.

"From pediatrics to geriatrics, physicians may encounter patients who are struggling. These data suggest that social interventions integrated within clinical treatments that help patients cope and reduce distress also improve their survival," she said.

The research analyzed data from 106 randomized controlled trials including over 40,000 patients to study the effects of having psychosocial support. Such group meetings or family sessions that promoted healthy behaviors by giving motivation to exercise, encouragement to complete medical treatments, or group support for diet adherence resulted in a 29% increased probability of survival over time.

"Providing medical patients with social support can be just as helpful as providing cardiac rehabilitation for someone recovering from heart disease," said Smith. "It can be just as helpful as a diet or lifestyle program for obese patients or treatment for alcoholism among patients with alcoholism."

The findings hold major implications for hospitals and healthcare administrators striving to improve patient care and survival. The research could be used to implement support programs in hospitals and clinics for patients, particularly those at risk of not completing treatments. It could also influence programs for family members or caregivers.

"We already had robust evidence that social connection and other social factors significantly influence health outcomes including risk for premature mortality, but it was unclear what can be done about it to reduce risk," said Holt-Lunstad. "Is it the role of healthcare, or should this be addressed outside the healthcare system? This research combined with the other consensus reports suggests that it is a role of the healthcare system."

"Ultimately, these data should be used to foster

collaboration between medical professionals and mental health professionals," said Smith. "About half of all patient medical visits are about conditions that entail psychological considerations. Large hospitals now routinely hire psychologists to consult with physicians and to evaluate or work with patients, but more integration is needed in smaller hospitals and clinics."

The findings also hold important implications for medical patients. People respond differently to medical conditions. While some will immediately take action in rehabilitation or preventative measures, others might delay or even avoid engaging in prescribed healthy behaviors. On top of that, depression and anxiety rates can be high among patients, which can limit responsiveness to treatments, making social support efforts even more critical.

"We know that when hospitals implement a social support group, people simply live longer," said Connor Workman, a BYU student who assisted with the research during his undergraduate years. "The data show that relationships have a tangible effect on a person's mortality and health. This will give decision-makers at hospitals the information they need to start pushing out programs and implementing the right social connections for patients."

Workman was one of twenty BYU students who spent years of their undergraduate education at BYU working on this research project alongside Smith and Holt-Lunstad—a mentored learning experience that will shape their future educational endeavors as well as their careers.

"It was pretty special to be part of the research team," said Bonnie Barton, another student who participated in the study. "I feel like I've gained more knowledge than my peers who weren't doing research like this. This has helped me feel more prepared for graduate school. I got way more out of my undergraduate experience because of this."

More information: Smith TB, Workman C, Andrews C, Barton B, Cook M, Layton R, et al. (2021) Effects of psychosocial support interventions on survival in inpatient and outpatient healthcare settings: A meta-analysis of 106 randomized controlled trials. *PLoS Med* 18(5): e1003595. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1003595

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