

The Role of Social Support in Coping With Stress

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.908000372>

Received: 06 August 2025; Revised: 20 August 2025; Accepted: 22 August 2025; Published: 12 September 2025

ABSTRACT

Stress is a multidimensional response that occurs when external demands exceed an individual's coping capacity, often resulting in negative physical and psychological outcomes. Social support—defined as emotional, instrumental, and informational assistance from one's social network—has been identified as a protective factor that buffers the impact of stress and promotes adaptive coping. This article applies a literature review method by analyzing relevant scholarly works on the relationship between stress and social support. The findings consistently highlight that social support reduces stress levels, fosters resilience, and contributes to improved well-being. Moreover, the type and effectiveness of support vary across populations and contexts, indicating the importance of tailoring interventions to specific needs. These insights underscore the significance of cultivating supportive environments in both personal and organizational settings. Future studies are encouraged to explore cultural variations and to develop practical strategies that strengthen social networks as a means of stress management.

Keywords: Stress, Social Support

INTRODUCTION

Stress is a multidimensional construct that arises when environmental demands exceed an individual's coping resources, leading to psychological and physiological strain. Classic conceptualizations, such as Cannon's (1914) fight-or-flight response, defined stress as a disruption of homeostasis triggered by internal or external stimuli (Bartlett, 1998). Since then, the concept of stress has evolved to encompass not only biological reactions but also cognitive and social dimensions that influence how individuals appraise and respond to challenges (Saputri, 2020). Unmanaged stress has been consistently linked to adverse health outcomes, including heightened risks of anxiety, depression, and cardiovascular disease, underscoring the urgency of understanding factors that can buffer its effects (Maramis, 2009).

One such factor is social support, which has been extensively examined in psychological and health research as a protective resource that mitigates the negative consequences of stress. Social support is generally understood as the perception or experience of being cared for, valued, and assisted within a social network, encompassing family, friends, peers, and communities (Taylor, 2009; Da'awi & Nisa, 2021). Sherbourne and Stewart (1991) further distinguished several forms of social support, including emotional support (expressions of empathy and encouragement), instrumental support (tangible aid such as financial or practical help), informational support (guidance and advice), appraisal support (feedback for self-evaluation), and social companionship (engagement in positive social activities). These forms of support collectively contribute to enhancing coping capacity, reducing psychological distress, and improving well-being.

However, the effectiveness of social support is not uniform. Research has shown that individual differences, such as personality traits, optimism, or hostility, influence both the likelihood of seeking support and the extent to which it is beneficial (Smith, 1992). In addition, contextual factors, including the presence of stigma or chronic illness, can alter the perceived availability and effectiveness of support. For example, individuals experiencing depression or living with conditions such as HIV often interpret and utilize social support differently, which in turn shapes both their own well-being and how others perceive them.

Taken together, these findings highlight the complex and multidimensional role of social support in stress management. While evidence suggests that social support contributes significantly to stress reduction and resilience, the mechanisms, effectiveness, and contextual variations require deeper exploration. Therefore, this article aims to review the existing literature on the relationship between social support and stress, with a focus on its forms, effectiveness, and implications for psychological and physical health.

METHOD

This study employed a literature review methodology to examine the role of social support in overcoming stress. Relevant scholarly articles were collected using electronic databases such as Google Scholar and PubMed, with keywords including “stress” and “social support.” The search focused on publications between 2010 and 2023 to ensure the inclusion of contemporary perspectives. Articles were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) peer-reviewed publications; (2) studies explicitly examining the relationship between social support and stress; and (3) availability of full-text access. Studies that did not directly address the variables of interest or were published outside the defined timeframe were excluded.

From the initial search, six articles met the inclusion criteria. These articles were then analyzed qualitatively by identifying their research objectives, methodologies, populations, and findings. The synthesis focused on examining similarities and differences across the studies, highlighting patterns of evidence, and identifying gaps in the literature..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Social support in family and community contexts

Research on single parents in Samarinda (Aprilia, 2013) demonstrated that resilience and the availability of social support—though limited—enabled participants to adapt to their new roles and manage stress more effectively. Similarly, studies on families of individuals living with HIV/AIDS in Malang (Pooroe, Yuniwati, & Wungubelen, 2022) emphasized that emotional and instrumental support from family members contributed significantly to coping capacity, reinforcing the notion that familial bonds are a critical buffer against stress. These findings highlight the importance of intimate, emotionally grounded relationships in sustaining psychological resilience.

2. Social support in educational settings

In academic contexts, research among medical students at Udayana University found that resilience and social support jointly reduced burnout risk (Radityani & Susilawati, 2021). Social support was shown to enhance confidence, promote adaptive coping, and prevent emotional exhaustion. This aligns with broader evidence that peer and institutional support systems are essential for managing the high-pressure environment of medical education.

3. Social support during crises and pandemics

Studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Afini & Hanifah, 2021) identified both primary stressors (health-related concerns) and secondary stressors (social restrictions). Participants reported that seeking social support, engaging in meaningful activities, and maintaining social connections were among the most effective coping strategies. These findings underscore the critical role of social networks in mitigating stress during times of societal disruption.

4. Social support in healthcare professions

Among nurses, co-worker social support was found to be strongly associated with reduced burnout (Asri, Mauluddy, & Febrina, 2023). Emotional, informational, and companionship support from colleagues significantly buffered the negative effects of workplace stress. This highlights the workplace as a vital context in which social support structures can determine occupational well-being.

The reviewed articles collectively highlight the significant role of social support in reducing stress across diverse populations, although the mechanisms and contexts of its influence vary. In the study on single mothers, family support was found to buffer the psychological strain of bereavement and role adjustment. Rather than simply alleviating sadness, such support enabled mothers to reconstruct their self-concept and maintain hope for the future, consistent with Cohen's (1988) stress-buffering hypothesis, which emphasizes that supportive relationships shape both appraisal of stressors and coping responses (Wijaya, Sari, & Sandiasih, 2024). This suggests that the functional value of support lies not only in its availability but in its capacity to transform perceptions of overwhelming circumstances into manageable challenges.

Among students, social support emerged as a protective factor against academic burnout, where unrealistic expectations and performance pressures often heighten stress levels (Boyoung Kim et al., 2017; Reditanyi & Susilawati, 2021). Supportive relationships fostered greater problem-solving flexibility and resilience (Wang et al., 2014), reinforcing Rueger et al.'s (2016) argument that social support enhances self-worth and reduces emotional exhaustion. Compared with single mothers, students' reliance on social support reflects a shift from familial encouragement toward peer and institutional resources, underscoring the contextual variability in how support is mobilized and perceived.

The COVID-19 pandemic further illustrates how social support mitigates both primary stressors (health-related threats) and secondary stressors (disruptions in daily life). Afini and Hanifah (2021) report that social support reduced exposure to compounding stressors by offering coping strategies such as health information management and collective reassurance. Sarafino's (1994) typology of support mechanisms is particularly relevant here, as informational and emotional support were crucial in shaping adaptive responses. Unlike the student and single mother contexts, pandemic-related stress highlighted the structural importance of broad social networks, extending beyond family or close peers.

In high-pressure occupational settings such as nursing, collegial support proved central in preventing burnout, depression, and anxiety (Chang & Cho, 2021; Asri, Mauluddy, & Febrina, 2023). Emotional solidarity among co-workers not only buffered stress but also sustained professional functioning under conditions of chronic strain. This contrasts with family-centered support in the single mother and PLWHA studies, highlighting how workplace environments necessitate institutional and peer-based forms of support.

For individuals living with HIV/AIDS, social support—particularly from family—was experienced as a vital resource for preserving dignity, acceptance, and quality of life (Pooroe, Yuniwati, & Wungubelen, 2022). Unlike the instrumental forms of support highlighted in other studies, this case emphasizes the existential and identity-affirming dimensions of support. The feeling of being accepted was perceived as more significant than medical treatment, resonating with Johnson's (in Wihartati, 2004) notion of support as an exchange of resources that affirms well-being and belonging.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that while the core function of social support is stress reduction, its form and impact depend on the population and context. Across cases, perceived support plays a critical role. As Ibda (2023) argues, positive perceptions of support enhance well-being and self-confidence, whereas negative perceptions foster isolation and psychological distress (Schlecker, 2013). However, none of the reviewed studies explicitly differentiated between perceived and received support, leaving a gap in understanding how subjective appraisal mediates the effectiveness of support systems.

The findings also affirm that stress can manifest in both detrimental (distress, anxiety) and constructive (eustress) forms (Gaol, 2016). Yet the transition from distress to eustress is strongly shaped by the presence and quality of social support (Sheridan, 1992). This underscores the theoretical alignment between stress-buffering models and empirical observations: support networks influence not only coping strategies but also whether stressors are reframed as threats or challenges.

In summary, the synthesis indicates that social support consistently mitigates stress across diverse life domains—family, education, healthcare, and chronic illness. Nevertheless, variations in its sources, functions, and subjective interpretations highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of support processes. Future research should explicitly examine perceived versus received support, contextual moderators, and the

mechanisms by which support transforms stress into resilience. Such insights would strengthen theoretical integration and inform targeted interventions for stress management in both personal and institutional contexts.

CLOSING

Conclusion

This review highlights that social support consistently plays a pivotal role in mitigating stress across diverse contexts, including family life, education, healthcare professions, chronic illness, and crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. While the forms of support vary—emotional, instrumental, informational, appraisal, and companionship—the underlying function remains the same: to buffer the negative effects of stress and enhance resilience. The reviewed studies demonstrate that family support sustains adaptation in single parents and individuals living with HIV/AIDS, peer and institutional support protect students from academic burnout, collegial support prevents professional exhaustion in healthcare workers, and broad social networks provide stability during societal crises. These findings affirm Cohen's (1988) stress-buffering hypothesis, showing that the effectiveness of social support lies not merely in its availability but also in its capacity to reshape stress appraisal and coping strategies. Furthermore, the evidence underscores that the subjective perception of support is as critical as the actual support received in determining its protective value.

Suggestion

Future research should address several gaps identified in the reviewed literature. First, more empirical work is needed to distinguish between perceived and received support and to examine how these differentially influence coping outcomes. Second, comparative studies across demographic variables such as age, gender, and cultural background would enrich understanding of how social support functions in diverse populations. Third, further investigation into the mechanisms by which support transforms distress into eustress could advance theoretical development and intervention design. From a practical standpoint, educators, healthcare institutions, and policymakers should actively cultivate supportive environments—whether through peer mentoring, workplace well-being programs, or community-based networks—to strengthen resilience against stress in everyday life and during crises. By integrating these perspectives, future scholarship and practice can better harness the protective power of social support to promote psychological well-being.

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