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Review Paper

Social Support, Quality of Life and Psychological Distress among Caregivers of Chronic Patients: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Looking after a person with a chronic illness is often a physically and emotionally taxing task. In this literature review, I have focused on the role of social support in caregiving concerning quality of life and psychological distress. The review is framed by the WHO Quality of Life model and the Stress-Buffering Model of Social Support, which suggests that social relationships have the potential to lift emotional burdens, improve well-being, and reduce feelings of overwhelm among caregivers. It also discusses the relationship between psychological distress and quality of life—the stronger the psychosocial suffering, the lower the quality of life, demonstrating how beneficial social interactions can help mitigate some of these challenges. Most importantly, the review identifies the need for concrete action through community and policy initiatives, along with healthcare strategies, to strengthen the support systems aimed at mental health and social well-being of caregivers.

Keywords: *Caregiving, Chronic Illness, Social Support, Quality of Life, Psychological Distress, Stress-Buffering, Caregiver Burden, WHOQOL, Mental Health, Emotional Well-being*

The ongoing care of patients with chronic diseases poses overwhelming psychological, social, and emotional stressors, and requires relentless physical stamina from the caregivers. This is especially challenging for family caregivers who need to fulfill their loved one's needs while addressing their own life. Whether the care recipient suffers from cancer, Alzheimer’s, or stroke, caregivers continually experience prolonged stress, disruption of routine, social withdrawal, and emotional fatigue (Schulz & Sherwood, 2008). These stressors can greatly impact the caregiver’s life by further decreasing the caregiver’s quality of life due to increased psychological problems in the form of depression, anxiety, or burnout (Pinquart & Sörenson, 2003). The dilemma caregivers experience goes beyond providing care; striking a balance toward maintaining their health amidst constant and escalating demands becomes the real challenge.

Recent studies highlight the vital importance of social support in easing the challenges faced by caregivers, which arise from their demanding roles. Social support encompasses both emotional and practical aspects, promoting feelings of being cared for and valued within a

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community, significantly influencing how caregivers handle stress (Thoits, 2011). Sources of this support can include family, friends, healthcare professionals, and organized groups, all contributing to enhanced emotional resilience, decreased caregiver burden, and increased overall well-being ((Chappell & Reid, 2002; Mausbach et al., 2006).

However, how social support impacts caregivers can vary widely depending on several factors, such as the type of chronic illness being managed, cultural context, individual caregiver characteristics, and the specific nature and source of support received (Yu et al., 2020). Despite growing recognition of this relationship, literature reveals ongoing inconsistencies regarding the most beneficial components of social support and their interplay with other elements like gender, coping mechanisms, and socio-economic status (Given et al., 2004).

This review aims to systematically evaluate existing empirical data related to social support's effects on the psychological well-being and life satisfaction of caregivers to patients with chronic illnesses. By examining significant themes, research approaches, and theoretical models in the current literature, the review strives to elucidate the protective role of social support, while also identifying areas necessitating further research to enhance interventions for caregivers and refine mental health policies

Quality of Life (QoL) is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various aspects of an individual’s life, ranging from physical health and mental well-being to independence and social connections (World Health Organization [WHO], 1995). It is shaped not just by the absence of illness but also by personal perceptions and responses to life circumstances.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has proposed a comprehensive framework, known as the World Health Organization Quality of Life (WHOQOL), which identifies six essential domains that contribute to QoL: physical health, psychological health, independence, social relationships, environment, and spirituality (WHO, 1997). This model takes a biopsychosocial approach, emphasizing the complex interactions between biological, psychological, and social factors influencing Human functioning and overall well-being.

Another valuable perspective comes from Lawton's (1991) Quality of Life Model for the Elderly, important in geriatrics and caregiving research, which consists of behavioral competence, perceived QoL, psychological well-being, and objective environmental quality, highlighting how personal assessments and conditions affect QoL.

Additionally, the Wilson and Cleary Model of Health-Related Quality of Life (HRQoL) connects health-related factors to QoL outcomes, providing insight into how chronic illnesses that includes outcomes through five levels: biological and physiological variables, symptom status, functional status, general health perceptions, and overall QOL (Wilson & Cleary, 1995) and their management impact various life areas, which is particularly relevant for those caring for individuals with chronic conditions.

Collectively, these models underscore the importance of individual perception and contextual influences, illustrating how factors like emotional stress, physical fatigue, financial burden, and social support can significantly impact QoL, particularly for caregivers (Chappell & Reid, 2002). By understanding these dynamics, we can develop effective strategies and interventions aimed at enhancing the well-being of both caregivers and those they support.

It is clear that social support is an essential resource that significantly aids in the maintenance of psychosocial wellness, health, and stress management. Social support, as noted by Cobb in 1976, revolves around the basic idea that one is cared for, appreciated, protected by a network that can provide emotional help, and is willing to offer aid when necessary. Since then, many scholars have designed various models to study social support, its corresponding features, and its effects on mental health, especially during times of stress and emotional fatigue.

1. Stress-Buffering Model of Social Support

Cohen and Wills (1985) postulated one of the most widely known frameworks, the **Stress-Buffering Model**, where social support serves as a stress protective buffer, separating individuals from the negative psychological effects of stress. Social support helps people dealing with difficult life situations and when they perceive strong emotional and practical social support coming from their social circle. One tends to be more resilient to pressure which lowers the chances of anxiety, depression, and extreme emotional exhaustion. The absence of assistance does not only make someone feel less well; with the aid of support, the impact of stressors on mental wellbeing is catalyzed.

2. Main Effects Model

Supporting this perspective is the Main Effects Model, which also stems from the research of Cohen and Wills. In contrast to the buffering view, this model posits that social support enhances mental and physical well-being more generally, regardless of whether an individual is undergoing stress. Simply being a part of a socially engaged community, participating in significant interactions, and having reliable relationships can provide individuals with a sense of identity, belonging, and self-esteem. These advantages lay the groundwork for enduring psychological resilience and life satisfaction.

3. Social Convoy Model

Introducing a developmental aspect to our understanding, the Social Convoy Model, developed by Kahn and Antonucci (1980), demonstrates that support networks are not fixed but evolve alongside us through various life stages. This model compares our social connections to a "convoy" traveling with us, composed of close family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues, each offering different types of support. Emotional support (such as empathy and encouragement), instrumental support (like assistance with tasks or finances), informational support (advice and guidance), and appraisal support (constructive criticism) are all essential in aiding individuals to adapt to life’s challenges and foster psychological resilience.

4. Attachment Theory Perspective

From a more individual and developmental perspective, Attachment Theory, as suggested by Bowlby (1988), provides another insightful viewpoint. This theory posits that secure and trusting relationships in adulthood reflect the attachment bonds formed during early childhood. Adults who have secure attachment styles typically view their social support systems as reliable and emotionally accessible. This trust promotes healthy emotional regulation and enables individuals to effectively manage stress, thereby enhancing the impact of their support networks on maintaining mental health.

5. Social Support and Caregiving Context

When examined specifically through the lens of caregiving, the significance of social support becomes even clearer. Caring for someone with a chronic illness often entails prolonged emotional labor, physical exhaustion, and psychological strain. Without adequate support, caregivers can face significant stress and burnout. However, many studies—including those by Zarit, Reever, and Bach-Peterson (1980) and Schulz & Sherwood (2008)—have demonstrated that caregivers who receive ongoing support, whether through emotional backing, shared responsibilities, or professional help, are more equipped to handle the caregiving demands. Support systems not only alleviate feelings of isolation and distress but also empower caregivers to sustain their quality of life while continuing to provide effective care to their loved ones.

Psychological distress refers to a wide range of challenging emotional states, including feelings of anxiety, sadness, overwhelm, and tension. Although it is not categorized as a specific mental health disorder, it represents a spectrum of emotional discomfort that can greatly affect an individual's daily functioning and overall quality of life. These feelings often arise in response to life's challenges—whether from external factors such as work pressures or caregiving duties, or from internal battles like unresolved personal conflicts or self-critical thinking (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003).

A crucial framework for understanding the development of psychological distress is the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, put forth by Lazarus and Folkman in 1984. This model highlights that it is not solely the stressor that drives distress, but rather how an individual perceives and interprets it. When people view a situation as threatening or overwhelming—and feel they lack the resources to cope effectively—psychological distress is more prone to develop. In this perspective, our individual evaluations of events, whether we see them as threats, losses, or challenges, directly impact the emotional and psychological effects we experience.

An additional useful perspective is given by the Biopsychosocial Model, created by Engel in 1977. This integrated approach posits that psychological distress arises not from a single origin, but from the interaction of multiple biological, psychological, and social factors. For instance, one might be biologically inclined to mood disorders, while also harboring negative thought patterns and lacking social or emotional support—all of which together increase susceptibility to distress. This comprehensive approach is especially valuable for analyzing complex scenarios like caregiving, where the emotional burden is influenced by both personal and situational factors.

Cognitive theories, such as those introduced by Aaron Beck (1976), offer further insight by concentrating on how thought patterns shape emotional responses. This perspective suggests that individuals who often engage in distorted thinking—such as anticipating the worst outcomes (catastrophizing) or maintaining deep-seated negative beliefs about themselves—are more likely to undergo chronic emotional pain. These detrimental thoughts not only exacerbate feelings of stress and sadness but also affect how a person manages adversity, frequently resulting in a cycle of negative emotions and unhelpful behaviors.

Rationale for the Study

Providing care for someone with a chronic illness can be exceedingly challenging, placing a considerable burden on a caregiver's physical health, emotional stability, and mental fortitude. Many informal caregivers—typically family members or close friends—find themselves navigating a complicated and exhausting role, yet their personal needs and well-being are often overlooked or neglected. As the population of caregivers continues to increase, so does the necessity of recognizing and addressing the difficulties they encounter. One aspect that has consistently shown potential in alleviating this burden is social support. Having a dependable network of individuals who can provide emotional encouragement, practical assistance, or simply a sympathetic ear can significantly enhance a caregiver's experience. Social support has been associated with lower stress levels, improved mood, and an overall enhanced quality of life. This research aims to explore how various types of support impact both the psychological distress and life satisfaction of caregivers. Achieving a clearer insight into this relationship is essential—not only for research purposes but also for creating more effective programs, policies, and resources that genuinely assist caregivers and improve their well-being.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Relationship between Quality of Life and Social Support-

Social support is crucial in influencing the overall quality of life for caregivers, particularly those who provide informal care to family members or friends with chronic health conditions. Caregivers are more likely to enjoy improved mental and physical health when they receive emotional support, practical help, and useful information from their network—be it from relatives, friends, or community groups. This type of support serves as a buffer, alleviating the daily stresses associated with caregiving and enabling individuals to feel more centered, valued, and fulfilled in their responsibilities (Chappell & Reid, 2002). Indeed, caregivers who have strong and dependable support systems often find it easier to prioritize their own health, maintain meaningful social connections, and engage in activities that bring them happiness—all factors that greatly enhance their overall quality of life (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1995).

Relationship between Social Support and Psychological Distress-

Caregivers frequently encounter significant emotional difficulties, such as anxiety, sadness, and feelings of tiredness—and one crucial factor that can impact the extent of these struggles is the level of support they perceive they have. As noted by Cohen and Wills (1985), social support can function as a protective barrier, mitigating the effects of stress and aiding caregivers in maintaining their mental health. When caregivers do not have this type of support, they become more susceptible to persistent stress and emotional exhaustion. Conversely, those who feel genuinely supported—whether it be emotionally, practically, or socially—tend to be more resilient and are better equipped to handle the challenges of caregiving. This feeling of support frequently results in decreased psychological distress and a more manageable overall caregiving experience (Taylor, 2011).

Relationship between Quality of Life and Psychological Distress-

Within the caregiver community, a distinct and often profoundly experienced link exists between psychological distress and overall quality of life—when one increases, the other typically decreases. Caregivers faced with significant emotional strain frequently find their quality of life considerably reduced. The persistent stress, emotional weight, and limited personal time can result in chronic exhaustion, interrupted sleep, and an overall reduction in life satisfaction (Vitaliano et al., 2003). These emotional difficulties do not simply linger in the background; they visibly impact daily functioning and personal well-being. Conversely, caregivers who succeed in keeping their distress levels low often exhibit stronger coping strategies, enhanced emotional resilience, and a more optimistic perspective on life (Schulz & Sherwood, 2008). Consequently, supporting the mental health of caregivers and assisting them in managing stress is not just advantageous—it is crucial for enhancing their overall quality of life.

Implications and Future Research

Implications:

The current review highlights key considerations for psychologists, health policy makers, and support organizations involved in caregiving. Central to these insights is the clear importance of embedding social support mechanisms into both public health initiatives and clinical frameworks. The presence of emotional affirmation, tangible assistance, and opportunities for meaningful social interaction has been shown to lessen psychological strain and improve caregivers' perceived life quality. Within healthcare environments, evaluating caregivers' access to support systems can enhance treatment planning and caregiver inclusion. Mental health professionals can introduce targeted interventions—such as therapy sessions, group discussions, or stress-relief training—to help caregivers manage the emotional toll associated with long-term care responsibilities.

On a broader level, policy reform is needed to develop caregiver-focused services and community-level resources. These should emphasize emotional, social, and practical support, thereby equipping caregivers with tools to preserve their own health while continuing in their role. Furthermore, as cultural values heavily influence caregiving experiences, strategies must be sensitive to cultural contexts to ensure relevance and effectiveness across diverse caregiver populations.

Future Research:

Although current literature demonstrates strong links between social support, mental health, and life satisfaction in caregivers, further research is needed to bridge existing gaps and advance this field. A major shortfall in the literature is the limited number of long-term studies. Most research provides a snapshot rather than a full picture of how caregiver health changes over time. Longitudinal research could uncover patterns and lasting effects of caregiving and sustained social support.

Additionally, there is a need for experimental and applied research that tests structured interventions—such as mobile applications, virtual support forums, or professional training modules—to determine their effectiveness in reducing caregiver distress and improving daily life.

Another valuable line of inquiry would be comparing the caregiver experiences across different chronic conditions. Emotional challenges can vary depending on the illness being managed, so tailored support based on disease type could enhance intervention precision.

It is also vital to address underrepresented caregiver groups, including men, adolescents, and caregivers from underserved communities. Their perspectives are often neglected, limiting the applicability of generalized support models.

Finally, combining psychological outcomes with biological or behavioral indicators—like stress hormone levels or sleep data—could provide a more holistic view of caregiver health and reveal how different forms of support influence both mind and body.

CONCLUSION

Caring for someone with a chronic illness can place a heavy emotional and physical toll on informal caregivers, often leading to increased psychological distress and a decline in their overall quality of life. However, having strong, meaningful social support can make a world of difference. This review highlights that when caregivers receive emotional comfort, practical help, and helpful advice from family members, friends, peers, or professional services, they are more likely to feel emotionally stable and satisfied with their lives. These positive effects underscore the importance of building caregiver support systems that go beyond basic assistance, placing a strong emphasis on mental health and overall well-being through easily accessible community and social resources. Going forward, it's essential for research to dig deeper into culturally sensitive and context-specific ways of offering support, so that policies and care practices can better reflect the diverse realities caregivers face every day.

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Conflict of Interest

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