

## Perceived Social Support, Affect and Psychological Well-Being in Married and Widowed Older Adults

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of the present study is to observe whether there is a relationship between perceived social support, positive and negative affect and psychological well-being among married and widowed older adults. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to select a sample of 120 older adults, aged above 60 years, out of whom 60 were men (30 married and 30 widowed) and 60 women (30 married and 30 widowed). The Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL-12) (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983), Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988b) and Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1989) were administered to measure perceived social support, positive and negative affect and psychological well-being respectively. Significant differences were found between married and widowed older adults with respect to positive and negative affect and psychological well-being ( $p < 0.05$ ). There were no significant gender differences with respect to perceived social support, affect and psychological well-being. The study also showed significant correlations between the dimensions of perceived social support, positive and negative affect and psychological well-being ( $p < 0.05$ ). Details are discussed in the paper. The study brings to light that affect plays a significant role in the psychological well-being of older adults and encouraging of social networks can help sustain successful aging.

**Keywords:** *Perceived Social Support, Affect, Psychological Well-Being, Older Adults.*

Perceived social support is defined as one's overall impressions on whether social network is supportive enough or not (Sorias, 1988). Freud (1930) asserted the need for interpersonal contact in several ways, although he intended to see the motive as derived from the sex drive and from the filial bond. The notion that people need relationships characterized by both regular contact and an ongoing bond has been anticipated to some degree (Weiss, 1973; Shaver & Buhrmester,

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1983), suggested that feelings of loneliness can be precipitated either by an insufficient amount of social contact or by a lack of meaningful, intimate relatedness.

The anthropologist, Coon (1946) asserted that natural groups are characteristic of all human beings. Societies differ in the type, number, and permanence of the groups that people join, but people of all cultures quite naturally form groups. Weiss (1973) observed that loneliness may not simply be a desire for company; rather it yields only to very specific forms of relationship. Wheeler et al. (1983) showed that loneliness is largely independent of one's amount of social contact, thereby confirming Weiss's observation. Interpersonal relations require physical and mental energy to be maintained. Social connectivity may also have a direct influence on our health (Uchino, Uno & Holt-Lunstad, 1999).

Multiple research studies have shown that distressing social encounters are related to poor physical and mental health (Pereira & Elfering, 2014; Norman, Devries, Hawkey, Cacioppo, & Berntson, 2010), and negative social exchanges are more predictive of psychological health compared to positive social interaction (Edwards, Hershberger, Russell, & Markert, 2001). The level of pain reported in older adults has also been linked with social factors (Jordan, Thomas, Peat, Wilkie, & Croft, 2008).

Briefly, Positive Affect (PA) reflects the extent to which a person feels enthusiastic, active, and alert. In contrast, Negative Affect (NA) is a general dimension of subjective distress and unpleasurable engagement that subsumes a variety of aversive mood states, including anger, contempt, disgust, guilt, fear, and nervousness. Trait PA and NA roughly correspond to the dominant personality factors of extraversion and anxiety/neuroticism, respectively (Tellegen, 1985; Watson & Clark, 1984). Hall (1977) has suggested that low PA and high NA are major distinguishing features of depression and anxiety, respectively. Transient affective states exclude strong emotional states such as distress which have a strong arousal component (Mano, 1994), or affective personality traits (Staw & Barsade, 1993), or task related affect (Dunegan, Duchon, & Barton, 1992).

Psychological well-being is usually conceptualized as some combination of positive affective states such as happiness (the hedonic perspective) and functioning with optimal effectiveness in individual and social life (the eudemonic perspective) (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In other words, it refers to subjective well-being by which an individual subjectively assess one's life (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Psychological well-being refers to both a theory and measurement scales designed and advocated primarily by Ryff (1996). Psychological well-being (PWB) is about lives going well. It is the combination of feeling good and functioning effectively. By definition, therefore, people with high PWB report feeling happy, capable, well-supported, satisfied with life, and so on; Huppert's (2009) review also claims the consequences of PWB to include better physical health, mediated possibly by brain activation patterns, neurochemical effects, and genetic factors.

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Ryff (1996) recognized the need for an instrument to measure theoretically derived constructs of psychological well-being. After summarizing the theoretical literature in mental health, self-actualization, optimal functioning, maturity, and developmental lifespan, Ryff found these diverse areas converged around a set of core constructs or dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth.

Psychological well-being refers to how people evaluate their lives. According to Diener (1997), these evaluations may be in the form of cognitions or in the form of affect. The cognitive part is an information based appraisal of one's life that is when a person gives conscious evaluative judgments about one's satisfaction with life as a whole. The affective part is a hedonic evaluation guided by emotions and feelings such as frequency with which people experience pleasant/unpleasant moods in reaction to their lives.

Among older adults, emotional support has been associated with better physical functioning (Seeman et al. 1995) and reduced mortality risks (Penninx et al. 1997). Successful aging has been described as adaptation (Baltes & Baltes 1990), morbidity compression (Fries 1980), and high functional, affective, and cognitive status (Garfein & Herzog 1995). Recent work has shown that perceived support also relates to mortality (Berkman, Leo-Summers, and Horwitz 1992; Blumenthal et al. 1987). In the light of past literature, the present study addresses the following research questions:

- Do married and widowed older men and women differ in terms perceived social support, affect and psychological well-being?
- Is there a relationship between perceived social support, affect and psychological well-being and their dimensions in married and widowed older men and women?

### ***Objectives***

1. To observe whether is a role of marital status (viz., married and widowed) and gender (viz., men and women) of the older adults on perceived social support (three dimensions, viz., appraisal support, belonging support, tangible support), affect (two dimensions, viz., positive affect and negative affect) and psychological well-being (six dimensions, viz., autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others purpose in life and self-acceptance).
2. To study whether there is a relationship between perceived social support, affect and psychological well-being and their dimensions in married and widowed older men and women.

## METHOD

### *Research Design*

The present study adopts a between-groups design to determine whether there is a difference between married and widowed (men and women) older adults with respect to perceived social support and its 3 dimensions (viz., appraisal support, belonging support, tangible support), positive affect and negative affect, and psychological well-being and its 6 dimensions (viz., autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others and purpose in life) in married and widowed men and women. This study also adopts a correlational design to determine whether there is any correlation between perceived social support, positive and negative affect and psychological well-being in married and widowed (men and women) older adults.

### *Sample*

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to select a sample of 120 older adults. Out of the total sample, 60 (30 men and 30 women) were married and 60 (30 men and 30 women) were widowed. Older adults above 60 years of age and belonging to upper middle socioeconomic status were included in this sample.

### *Instruments*

*Four questionnaires were used in this research. They were:*

- **Information Schedule**

Participants were asked to provide details regarding their gender, age, education, familial information, physical and psychological health, number of years they have been widowed and the like on the Information Schedule.

- **Interpersonal Support Scale (Shortened Version)**

The 12-item Interpersonal Support Scale was developed by Cohen & Hoberman in 1985. It measures perceptions of social support. This measure is a shortened version of the original ISEL (40 items; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). This questionnaire has three different subscales designed to measure three dimensions of perceived social support. These dimensions are: appraisal support, belonging support, tangible support. Each dimension is measured by 4 items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “definitely true” to “definitely false”. Appraisal support is the perceived availability of material aid; Belonging support refers to the perception that there is a group with which one can identify and socialize; Tangible support is the perceived availability of someone with whom to discuss issues of personal importance. The ISEL presents good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha: 0.452-0.752) and test-retest reliability (correlation coefficients: 0.631-0.847).

- **PANAS (Positive and Negative Affect Schedule)**

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (affect) is a 20-item self-report measure of positive and negative affect developed by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988). It comprises two mood scales, one that measures positive affect (PA) and the other which measures negative affect

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(NA). Used as a psychometric scale, the affect can show relations between positive and negative affect with personality stats and traits. Positive affect refers to the extent to which a person feels enthusiastic, active, and alert. High PA is a state of high energy, full concentration, and pleasurable engagement, whereas low PA is characterized by sadness and lethargy. Negative affect refers to a general dimension of subjective distress and unpleasurable engagement that subsumes a variety of aversive mood states, including anger, contempt, disgust, guilt, fear, and nervousness, with low NA being a state of calmness and serenity.

Ten descriptors are used for each PA scale and NA to define their meanings. Participants in the affect are required to respond to a 20-item test using 5-point Likert scale that ranges from “very slightly or not at all” (1) to “extremely” (5). Watson (1988) reported Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.86 to 0.90 for the Positive Affect Scale and 0.84 to 0.87 for the Negative Affect Scale. The test-retest correlations were 0.47-0.68 for the PA and 0.39-0.71 for the NA. **Psychological Well-Being Scale:** The scale used in this study is a 14 -item scale which is derived from its 20-item parent scale. The psychological well-being scale was published by Ryff in 1989. The six 14-item scales of psychological well-being are constructed to measure the dimensions of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance. Respondents rate statements on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 6 indicating “strongly agree”. Correlations of each scale with its own 20-item parent scale are between 0.97-0.99.

### ***Procedure***

After selecting the measures, a few arrangements were made for data collection. Rapport was established with the older adults and they were made aware that their participation in the study was purely voluntary. The older adults who agreed to participate in the study were requested to sign an ‘Informed Consent Form’. Next, the Information Schedule was administered. The older adults who met the sampling criteria were screened. On the next appointment the instructions for the questionnaires (namely, Interpersonal Support Scale, PANAS, and Psychological Well-Being Scale) were given and the subjects were requested to respond to the items. There was no fixed time limit for any of the questionnaires. However, the respondents were asked to complete each questionnaire in about 40 minutes.

**RESULTS**

*Table 1 Results of Two-Way ANOVA and descriptive statistics with relationship status and gender as the IVs and the 3 dimensions of perceived social support, 2 dimensions of affect and 6 dimensions of psychological well being as the DVs*

Variables	Marital Status			Gender			Marital Status* Gender
	Married	Widowed	F	Men	Women	F	F
Appraisal Support	12.73 (2.887)	12.18 (2.581)	1.265	12.30 (2.812)	12.62 (2.681)	0.419	6.886**
Belonging Support	12.05 (2.807)	12.22 (2.532)	0.115	12.17 (2.345)	12.10 (2.967)	0.18	0.558
Tangible Support	12.55 (2.645)	12.55 (2.594)	0	12.48 (2.467)	12.62 (2.672)	0.077	1.398
Positive Affect	30.62 (6.887)	26.82 (5.441)	11.627**	29.30 (6.970)	28.13 (5.925)	1.096	4.899*
Negative Affect	21.52 (6.127)	25.70 (4.777)	18.158**	24.37 (6.078)	22.85 (5.581)	2.387	4.796*
Autonomy	50.3 (7.851)	48.82 (7.208)	1.152	49.13 (6.310)	49.98 (8.633)	0.378	0.615
Environmental Mastery	51.016 (9.623)	46.55 (7.301)	8.241**	48.77 (8.564)	48.78 (8.796)	0	2.513
Personal Growth	60.15 (10.030)	56.95 (9.210)	3.375	60.08 (8.996)	57.02 (10.244)	3.1	1.108
Positive Relations With Others	51.97 (8.649)	48.20 (6.372)	7.277**	50.10 (7.327)	50.07 (8.303)	0.001	0.415
Purpose In Life	55.97 (9.749)	51.75 (7.070)	7.282**	53.85 (8.040)	53.87 (9.457)	0	0.822
Self Acceptance	54.92 (8.460)	54.25 (8.041)	0.194	53.93 (7.503)	55.23 (8.905)	0.739	0.381
**p<0.01							
*p<0.05							

df for frequency of relationship status =1

df for gender = 1

Table 1 revealed that there is a significant difference between married and widowed older adults with respect to the dimensions of positive affect (F=11.627, p<0.01), negative affect (F=18.158, p<0.01) environmental mastery (F=8.241, p<0.01), positive relations with others (F=7.277, p<0.01) and purpose in life (F=7.282, p<0.01). As is evident from the mean scores married older adults (M=30.62, M=21.52 M=51.016, M=51.97, M=55.97 respectively), scored a significantly

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higher mean than the widowed older adults (M=26.82, M=25.70 M=46.55, M=48.20, M=51.75 with respect to the dimensions of positive affect, negative affect, environmental mastery, positive relations with others and purpose in life respectively). This shows that married older adults are more positive when compared to widowed older adults. Married older adults also have better psychological well-being as they can maintain better positive relations with others and know their purpose in life as compared to widowed older adults. Moreover, there was a significant interaction effect of marital status and gender in the dimensions of appraisal support, positive affect and negative affect ( $F=6.886$ ,  $p<0.01$ ;  $F=4.899$ ,  $p<0.05$ ;  $F=4.796$ ,  $p<0.05$  with respect to these dimensions).

**Table 2 Results of the correlation between the dimensions of perceived social support, affect and psychological well-being in married men (n=30).**

	Appraisal Support	Belonging Support	Tangible Support	Positive Affect	Negative Affect
Positive Affect	-0.192	-0.049	-0.007		
Negative Affect	0.063	0.149	-0.105	-.597**	
Autonomy	0.187	0.115	0.068	-0.023	-0.13
Environmental Mastery	0.115	0.108	0.312	.505**	-.637**
Personal Growth	.421*	0.311	.388*	0.08	-0.013
Positive Relations With Others	0.015	-0.102	0.066	.446*	-.537**
Purpose In Life	-0.028	-0.116	0.072	.482**	-.581**
Self Acceptance	0.107	0.072	0.258	0.265	-.509**

\*\* $p<0.01$

\* $p<0.05$

Table 2 shows that there is a significant positive correlation between the dimension of appraisal support and the dimension of personal growth ( $r=0.421$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This means that the higher the appraisal support, higher the personal growth. There is also a significant positive correlation between the dimension of tangible support and the dimension of personal growth ( $r=0.388$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), between the dimension of positive affect and the dimensions of environmental mastery ( $r=0.505$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), positive relations with others ( $r=0.446$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and purpose in life ( $r=0.482$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). This means that higher the tangible support, higher the personal growth; higher the positive affect, higher the environmental mastery, better the positive relations with others and the purpose in life.

The findings in Table 2 also indicated significant negative correlations between the dimension of negative affect and the dimensions of environmental mastery ( $r=-0.637$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), positive relations with others ( $r=-0.537$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), purpose in life ( $r=-0.581$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and self-acceptance

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( $r=-0.509$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). This means that higher the negative affect, lower the environmental mastery, positive relations with others and purpose in life.

**Table 3 Results of the correlation between the dimensions of perceived social support, affect and psychological well-being in married women (n=30).**

	Appraisal Support	Belonging Support	Tangible Support	Positive Affect	Negative Affect
Positive Affect	-0.097	-0.104	0.005		
Negative Affect	-0.172	-0.034	-0.237	-0.193	
Autonomy	0.308	0.272	0.225	0.043	0.09
Environmental Mastery	0.207	.411*	.441*	0.244	-0.169
Personal Growth	0.224	.374*	.541**	-0.067	-0.181
Positive Relations With Others	0.266	0.252	.407*	-0.22	-0.249
Purpose In Life	0.279	0.274	.435*	-0.19	-0.283
Self-Acceptance	0.35	.448*	.504**	-0.13	-0.357

\*\* $p<0.01$

\* $p<0.05$

Table 3 revealed that there is a significant positive correlation between the dimension of belonging support and the dimensions of environmental mastery ( $r=0.411$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), personal growth ( $r=0.374$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and self-acceptance ( $r=0.448$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This means that higher the belonging support, higher the environmental mastery, personal growth and self-acceptance.

There was also a significant positive correlation between the dimension of tangible support and the dimensions of environmental mastery ( $r=0.441$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), personal growth ( $r=0.541$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), positive relations with others ( $r=0.407$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), purpose in life ( $r=0.435$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and self-acceptance ( $r=0.504$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). This means that higher the tangible support, higher the environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance.

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**Table 4 Results of the correlation between the dimensions of perceived social support, affect and psychological wellbeing in widowed men (n=30).**

	<b>Appraisal Support</b>	<b>Belonging Support</b>	<b>Tangible Support</b>	<b>Positive Affect</b>	<b>Negative Affect</b>
Positive Affect	-0.236	-0.08	-0.116		
Negative Affect	0.241	0.079	0.165	-.384*	
Autonomy	-0.022	0.03	0.04	0.135	-0.079
Environmental Mastery	0.064	0.037	0.102	-0.095	-0.237
Personal Growth	0.058	0.008	-0.049	0.096	0.048
Positive Relations With Others	0.056	0.252	0.148	0.032	-.407*
Purpose In Life	0.092	0.259	0.149	-0.075	-.371*
Self-Acceptance	0.126	0.077	0.142	-0.228	-0.043

\*p<0.05

Table 4 shows that there is a significant negative correlation between the dimension of negative affect and the dimensions of positive relations with others ( $r=-0.407$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and purpose in life ( $r=-0.371$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This means that higher the negative affect, lower the positive relations with others and lower the purpose in life.

**Table 5 Results of the correlation between the dimensions of perceived social support, affect and psychological wellbeing in widowed women (n=30).**

	<b>Appraisal Support</b>	<b>Belonging Support</b>	<b>Tangible Support</b>	<b>Positive Affect</b>	<b>Negative Affect</b>
Positive Affect	0.031	0.195	0.3		
Negative Affect	-0.07	-0.137	-0.207	-.561**	
Autonomy	0.174	0.145	0.125	0.084	-0.219
Environmental Mastery	0.175	0.154	0.283	.456*	-.480**
Personal Growth	0.146	-0.102	-0.042	0.246	-.633**
Positive Relations With Others	.385*	0.221	0.298	0.294	-0.223
Purpose In Life	0.351	0.223	0.34	0.343	-0.31
Self-Acceptance	0.25	0.227	.405*	.402*	-0.345

\*\*p<0.01

\*p<0.05

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Table 5 revealed there is a significant positive correlation between the dimension of appraisal support and the dimension of positive relations with others ( $r=0.385$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This means that higher the appraisal support, higher the positive relations with others. There is also a significant positive correlation between the dimension of tangible support and the dimension of self-acceptance ( $r=0.405$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This means that the more the tangible support, the more the self-acceptance.

Significant positive correlations were also found between the dimension of positive affect and the dimensions of environmental mastery ( $r=0.456$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and self-acceptance ( $r=0.402$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This means that higher the positive affect higher the environmental mastery and higher the self-acceptance.

The table also showed a negative correlation between the dimension of negative affect and the dimensions of environmental mastery ( $r=-0.48$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and personal growth ( $r=-0.345$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). This means that higher the negative affect, lower the environmental mastery and personal growth.

## DISCUSSION

The present study revealed significant differences between older adults based on their marital status. The married couples scored significantly higher than the widowers, in terms of better positive affect and psychological well-being. Researchers have found that married men and women report better psychological well-being than their unmarried peers (e.g., Gove, Hughes & Style, 1983; Gove & Shin, 1989; Gove, Style & Hughes, 1990; Lee, Seccombe & Shehan, 1991). The widowers showed significantly higher negative affect when compared to the married older adults. Characteristic effects of stress appraisal include negative affect, elevation of physiological response, and behavioural adaptations (Baum, Singer & Baum, 1981).

There were no significant gender differences among the older adults. A previous study by Griffith (1985) also found no gender differences in older adults with respect to a different set of variables.

Among married men, positive significant correlations were seen between the dimensions of personal growth and the dimensions of appraisal support and tangible support; between the dimension of positive affect and the dimensions of environmental mastery, positive relations with others and purpose in life. A significant negative correlation was observed between the dimension of negative affect and the dimensions of environmental mastery, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance. Several prospective studies using mental health outcome measures have shown a positive relation between social support and mental health (Aneshensel & Frerichs, 1982; Billings & Moos, 1982; Henderson, Byrne & Duncan-Jones, 1981; Holahan & Moos, 1981; Turner 1981; Williams, Ware & Donald, 1981). Gove (1972);

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Gove and Tudor (1973), and Radloff (1975) accumulated additional evidence that marriage was more of a mental health benefit for men than women in terms of psychological distress.

Among married women, there were significant positive correlations in the dimension of belonging support and the dimensions of environmental mastery, personal growth and self-acceptance; between the dimension of tangible support and the dimensions of environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance. Engaging in a passionate activity in a harmonious manner can lead to increased positive affect, which can over time result in increases in well-being (Diener et al., 1991; Fredrickson, 2002).

Among widowed men, significant negative correlations were shown between the dimension of negative affect and the dimensions of positive relations with others and purpose in life. Positive support from children can help older adults better cope with the loss through decreased feelings of loneliness and isolation (Rook, 1984). Among widowed women, there were significant positive correlations between the dimension of appraisal support and the dimension of positive relations with others; between the dimension of tangible support and the dimension of self-acceptance; between the dimension of positive affect and the dimensions of environmental mastery and self-acceptance and; negative correlations between the dimension of negative affect and the dimensions of environmental mastery and personal growth. Negative aspects of social relationships, in general, have more potent effects than positive social relationships on psychological well-being (Newsom, Nishishiba, Morgan, & Rook, 2003; Schuster, Kessler, & Aseltine, 1990)

The study brings to light that affect plays a significant role in the psychological well-being of older adults and encouraging of social networks can help sustain successful aging. According to Lowenthal & Haven (1968), having an intimate confidant contributes significantly to well-being. Further studies can be conducted using these variables on a different set of age group.

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### ***Conflict of Interests***

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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