

The Family and Social Support System

Defining Generic Key Terms and Concepts

- **Social support systems:**
A subset of the social network includes those individuals who form a social support system.
- **Social support:**
Social support is both an ongoing need as well as situation specific: the types, amounts, sources of support needed vary with the situation, time, place and health of the person receiving the support (Sutherland & Murphy, 1995).
- **The Beanpole theory:**
Noting the simultaneous impact of decreased mortality and decreased fertility (the outcome of the demographic transition) to family structure, social scientists theorized that as people lived longer *and* had fewer births, it should result in a *verticalization* of the family (Bengston et al., 1990). In other words, as people live longer, it should increase the number of generations living at the same time; but within each generation, there should be fewer siblings and cousins because of decreases in fertility. Consequently, the family structure should change from the horizontal or pyramid family structure (two or three living generations, but many siblings and kin within a generation) to a vertical or beanpole family structure (four or five living generations, but with only a few siblings and kin within a generation).
- **Social network:**
All the relationships an individual has with family, friends, coworkers, neighbours and people in groups to which a person belongs make up a social network.
- **Support system:**
A social support system provides social support – positive and reassuring presence, emotional support, affirmation and validation, information, and financial and personal assistance.

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Additional Thought-Provoking Questions

- **List the four basic types of social support:**

1. *Emotional Support* includes confiding, comforting, reassuring and listening
2. *Informational Support* provides advice and information (e.g. decision making about medical issues, selling or buying a home, and long term care options)
3. *Instrumental Support* involves for example, babysitting, housework, transportation, shopping, and personal care
4. *Financial Support* includes such things as direct money transfers, assistance with banking and check writing, and housing assistance.

- **Explain the importance of social support in a senior's life:**

Blanchard (1998), in an extensive review of the literature on the relationship between older persons, their family and community ties, and social support, drew the following conclusions from current research: First, the quality and quantity of social relationships (social network) and social support significantly influence the well-being of older people. Second, these influences can be both positive and negative. Third, social support is complex and sensitive to numerous factors, such as time, place and circumstance. Fourth, the presence of someone in a social network, regardless of the relationship, does not necessarily indicate that person provides social support in a given situation or in general. Fifth, the negative aspects of social relationships can be as important as the supportive aspects. Finally, social support and networks are strengthened through reciprocity, by promoting feelings of independence and the self-esteem gained through meaningful social exchange.

- **Describe the different impact of widowhood on men and women**

Marriages that survive through the years ultimately end with the death of one spouse, leaving the other a widow or widower. In most Western countries, life expectancy is longer for women, resulting in more widows than widowers. The likelihood of a wife becoming a widow increases significantly with age. Despite its inevitability, death of a spouse is one of the most difficult family transitions families go through – emotionally, socially and financially. While death of any family member is tragic, the death of a long time spouse is particularly devastating. Along with grieving the loss of the individual, the spouse is dealing with the loss of the role and identity of being a spouse and part of a couple, “potentially one of the most pervasive, intense, intimate and personal roles that they have ever had in life” (Lund & Caserta, 2004).

Widowhood for both spouses is associated with increased physical and mental health problems, as well as increased risk for serious illness, hospitalization, long term care

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placement, and death (Laditka & Laditka, 2003; Pienta et al., 2000; Prigerson, Maciejewski & Rosenheck, 2000; Smith, Zick & Duncan, 1991). The death of a spouse is an intensely personal experience and is influenced by a number of factors, such as how close the couple were before death, whether it was sudden or the result of a prolonged illness, the presence of health issues with the surviving spouse, and the use of hospice services. Noting the tremendous variation among individual experiences, it is still possible to highlight some generalizations between how men and women cope with the loss of their spouse.

Since men do not expect to outlive their wives, they are usually less prepared at every level to deal with their loss. Having relied solely on their wives for emotional support, and feeling like they need to put up a strong front for their children, husbands often have no one to share their grief with in an intimate way. Simple household jobs may become overwhelming. Men are less likely to ask for help, attend counselling or self-help groups or seek other support services. Men who are widowed are more likely than women to remarry.

In general, women seem to cope better emotionally than men with the death of a spouse. Women are more psychologically prepared for widowhood, have a larger and more intimate social support network, and are more willing to ask for and receive help. Women can sometimes report feelings of freedom after the loss of their spouse, and may be reluctant to remarry because they want to maintain their autonomy and avoid the potential for future care-giving demands.

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Review Questions:

1. The mutual exchange of “affection, trust, and confidence” is the definition of which type of emotional bond:
 - A. Belonging – fulfills our need to be part of a group that shares and validates our values and beliefs and offers an environment in which we feel safe, secure and free to be ourselves
 - B. Intimacy – refers to the mutual exchange of “affection, trust, and confidence” (Atchley & Barusch, 2004, p. 188). When we share secrets or inside jokes with long time trusted friends or family we experience intimate moments. Intimacy can also be in the form of sexual or sensual interaction.
 - C. Interdependence – is a mutual, reciprocal relationship between two or more people, whereby people get their needs met better together than they would alone. Interdependence can also increase the resources available to a person.

2. Support that involves babysitting, housework, transportation, shopping and personal care is known as which type of support:
 - A. Financial support
 - B. Emotional support
 - C. Informational support
 - D. Instrumental support

3. Which of the following characterizes the typical pattern of marital satisfaction?
 - A. High in early years of marriage, wanes in middle age, and increases after children leave home
 - B. High in early years of marriage, wanes in middle age, and remains low after children leave home
 - C. High in early years of marriage, high in middle age, wanes after children leave home
 - D. High throughout life
 - E. Low throughout life



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Answer Guide to Review Questions:

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1. b
2. d
3. a