

SOCIAL SUPPORT AS A PREDICTOR OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND NUTRITIONAL BEHAVIORS IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

Leigh Ann Lynn, BSN Honors Student & Diane Von Ah, PhD, RN
University of Louisville, School of Nursing
Louisville, KY 40292

Key Words: Social Support, Health Behaviors, College Students

Purpose: Obesity is an epidemic increasing in prevalence in both developed and underdeveloped nations. Although obesity affects individuals regardless of age, gender, or nationality, the largest increase has been observed in college students. Research has consistently shown obesity is attributable to poor physical activity and nutritional behaviors. Social support, however, has been shown to positively impact health behaviors. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the impact of various types of social support (affect, affirmation, and aid) from family and friends on physical activity and nutritional behaviors (fat, vegetable/fruit intake).

Method: A secondary data analysis was conducted to examine the impact of social support (affect, affirmation, and aid) from family and friends on physical activity and nutritional behavior. Survey questionnaires were completed by 161 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). The Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire (NSSQ) was used to measure specific type, source, and network of social support. Physical activity was measured by 3 questions that asked respondents their level of exercise, physical activity and strength training utilizing a 5-point Likert scale of never = 1 to all the time/every day = 5. Fat intake was measured by one question that asked respondents the amount consumed of foods high in fat. Fruit/vegetable intake was measured by 6 questions that assessed the level of intake utilizing a 5-point Likert scale of never = 1 to all the time/every day = 5. Data was analyzed using multiple regression to determine the impact of social support from family and friends on physical activity and nutritional behaviors.

Findings: College students in this study were found to be borderline overweight with a mean body mass index (BMI) of 25.3 and 23.7 for males and females, respectively. Family members provided significantly more affect and aid support than friends. Students with higher levels of family affirmation support reported higher levels of exercise ($p=.019$). However affect, affirmation, and aid support from family and friends did not have a significant impact on nutritional behaviors including fat intake or fruit/vegetable intake.

Discussion: Support from family played a positive role in predicting exercise behavior. Specifically, affirmation support from family was shown to have a positive impact on exercise behavior in college students. This study emphasizes the key role that family continues to play on health behaviors of college-age students.

