



Research Week 2021

Role of Mutual Support in the Involvement of Close Support in Veterans with Depression

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Abstract

Background

Social support research has more recently shifted focus from the benefits of being on the receiving end of support to the giving end. Current research has not taken the leap to look at both simultaneously. Mutuality, distinct from mutual support, is a broader concept of bidirectional flow of feelings, activities, and thoughts often found in caregiving research. The concept of mutuality within social support has not yet been explored. Mutuality is measured by the Mutual Psychological Development Questionnaire in six dimensions: empathy, engagement, authenticity, zest, diversity, and empowerment. High mutuality scores have been correlated with higher quality of life in chronic illness patients and shown to ameliorate depression in difficult caregiving situations.

Objective

To examine how mutuality influences the involvement of close relations in depression care of veterans.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 30 primary care patients with depression at a VA medical center. Patients nominated in total 17 friends and/or family to be interviewed as their close supports. Both sets of interviews were coded and sorted into themes by two teams of researchers.

Results

Empowerment, engagement, and empathy were more commonly discussed forms of mutual support. Reciprocity was key to experiencing empowerment and led to ongoing engagement in each other's lives. While empathy was commonly found, the detrimental

effects of its absence was more pronounced. In the most intimate relationships, authenticity was found by those who adopted “team” identities.

Discussion

Relationships where patients feel empowered, engaged, and empathized are most likely yield mutual support. When discussing with patients about involvement of close supports, identifying how patients can also contribute in the relationship can be an innovate approach to combat traditionally ~~masculine attitudes of self-reliance~~ in veterans. For close supports, an entry point to getting involved in depression care could be finding how patients can return the support.

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