

# An Assessment of the Relationship between Social Support and Mental Health of Students of Zabol University of Medical Science in 2017

Hossein Shahdadi (1)

Ali Mansouri (1)

Ali Akbar Nasiri (2)

Esmat Bandani (3)

(1) M.Sc, Nursing and Midwifery School, Zabol University of Medical Sciences, Zabol, Iran.

(2) Department of Anesthesiology, Zabol University of Medical Sciences, Zabol, Iran.

(3) Bsc, Nursing and Midwifery School, Zabol University of Medical Sciences, Zabol, Iran.

## Corresponding author:

Ali Akbar Nasiri

Department of Anesthesiology, Zabol University of Medical Sciences,  
Zabol, Iran

**Email:** Nasiriali7@gmail.com

## Abstract

**Introduction & Objective:** Students in each society are considered the most important forces influencing the development of the country. The prevalence of any mental disorders among them can lead to waste of material and spiritual investments. Therefore, the present study was conducted to identify the importance of social factors' role in mental health as well as the relationship between perceived social support and resilience with mental health of students.

**Materials and Methods:** The statistical population included 1,900 undergraduate bachelor students at Zabol University of Medical Science during the academic year of 1997-98. In this research, 500 students were selected by stratified sampling from the whole society and evaluated using the 12 general health questionnaire (GHQ-12) and the multidimensional perceived social support scale (MSPSS). For data analysis, in addition to descriptive statistics, inferential statistics methods were used including: the Pearson correlation coefficient, t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) by SPSS software and linear regression analysis using Stata software.

**Results:** The findings of this study showed that there was a significant correlation between social support and mental health ( $P < 0.0001$ ). Among the social support sub-scales, social protection of the family, social support of the most important individuals in their lives and social support of the friends were mostly related to mental health, respectively ( $P < 0.0001$ ).

**Conclusion:** The findings of the study showed that mental health of students improved with increasing their perceptions of social support, and their mental health was compromised by decreasing the sources of support.

**Key words:** Mental Health, Social Support, Students

Please cite this article as: Hossein Shahdadi, Ali Mansouri, Ali Akbar Nasiri, Esmat Bandani. An Assessment of the Relationship between Social Support and Mental Health of Students of Zabol University of Medical Science in 2017. *World Family Medicine*. 2017; (10):248-252. DOI: 10.5742/MEWFM.2017.93169

## Introduction

The WHO experts have defined mental health as being able to have harmonious communication with others, changing and modifying the individual and social environment, and resolving conflicts and personal preferences logically, fairly and appropriately, and they believe that mental health is not lack of psychological diseases, but the ability to respond to different types of experiences of life flexibly and meaningfully (1).

Universities are organizations that attract a significant number of young people annually and, over a specified time, foster the scientific and practical capabilities of these individuals, and ultimately provide more educated and specialized staff to the wider community. The Academic period, due to the existence of multiple factors, is a stressful period and a common model which has been introduced to describe the onset of mental illness is the vulnerability-stress model (2).

In recent years, the progressive increase in the number of students referred to counseling centers, the increased prevalence and severity of their mental health problems have increased the concern of experts about mental health of students (3). Many studies in Iran also suggest that there are many psychological problems among students. Multiple reports from 1963-2001 show that the range of mental disorders between students varied from 11.7% to 54 % (4). The study of mental health of student groups in the country conducted by the Youth National Organization (5) shows that 53.4% or more than half of the students are among those who need counseling to be able to resolve their own problems and enter society as a powerful and strong young person.

In several studies, researchers from different psychosocial variables reported a strong relationship between social support and mental health (6). "Social Protection" has been defined as the level of enjoyment of love, companionship, care, respect, attention, and received assistance by the individual from other individuals or groups such as family members, friends and important people (7). Various studies have shown that social support is associated with social isolation, stressors, psychiatric disorders, depression symptoms, intimate marital relationships, rate of suicide attempts, and the rate of social interaction (8).

Social support affects mental health and the human body directly and indirectly. Social support is defined as one's confidence in their abilities to overcome stress, and improve stress coping ability, self-esteem, emotional stability, and individual characteristics that increase social support on the part of others (9). Research shows that people with high social support who do not have self-defeating behaviors, are emotionally calm and able to cope with adverse and unpleasant conditions (10). In the context of the outcomes of social support, we can point out to increased level of mental health and life satisfaction in the research of Lazarus (11) and Basu (12) and on mental health or reduction of emotional problems and life

satisfaction in the research of Basu (12) and Samani et al. (13).

The mental health of people in a community, especially its effective and constructive class, is a necessity for the dynamics, maturity and promotion of that community. The unique and imperative role of students as future managers and future-makers of each society necessitates supporting their mental health as well as identifying and eliminating negative factors affecting their mental health. Considering the increasing prevalence of psychological problems in students, the imperative role of social support in preventing these problems, and also due to inadequate research and cultural conditions in Zabol city, this study was conducted to determine the relationship between social support and mental health of students.

## Materials and Methods

Research method is correlation, which is one of the descriptive research methods. The statistical population consisted of 1,900 students who studied in nursing, midwifery, medicine, pharmacy, paramedical and public health schools of Zabol University of Medical Science in 2016-17. In this research, 500 students were considered as a random sample of the entire community. Individuals were selected through stratified sampling and being selected from the colleges, academic years and both sexes.

After selecting the students, the relevant questionnaires were randomly distributed in the classrooms between the students and were collected by appropriate specified time immediately after completion by the researcher and colleagues. Four questionnaires were used in this study. The general profile of the respondents was set by the researcher and the individual and demographic characteristics of the respondents were questioned. The General Health Questionnaire with 12 questions (GHQ-12) was prepared with the aim of screening healthy people for mental disorders. This questionnaire is validated and used in many countries around the world.

In Iran, the short form of 12 questions was validated by the Research Institute of Health Science of Jihad University of Iran under the direction of Dr. Ali Montazeri and his colleagues with Cronbach's alpha,  $r = 0.87$ . The validity of the questionnaire was also obtained through convergent validity with the quality of life scale ( $P < 0.0001$ ,  $F = 58.6$ ). (34). Questions are scored in terms of two digits scoring (0-0-1-1), resulting in a range of 0 to 12 variables. Further scores indicate less mental health. According to the cut-off point of the questionnaire, scores greater than 3.5 were identified as suspect to mental disorders and scores below 3.5 as healthy subjects (34).

Multidimensional perceived social support (MSPSS) was used to evaluate social support. This questionnaire as a 12-phrasal is developed by Zimet to assess perceived social support from three sources: family, friends and imperative people in life. The multidimensional perceived social support scale measures the extent of perceived social support in each of the three mentioned areas. The

scale of multidimensional perceived social support has a favorable internal consistency. The alpha coefficient of the whole test is 0.91 and the alpha coefficient of its sub-scales is in the range from 0.9 to 0.95 (35). Salimi et al. have achieved the validity and reliability of this scale in Iran, so that the reliability coefficient of Cronbach's alpha for each dimension was 0.86, 0.86 and 0.82, respectively, and its validity was appropriate by causal analysis method (36).

In this study, the following mentioned options have specific points: totally disagree; 1 point; disagree; 2 points; almost disagree; 3 points; I have no comment; 4 points; almost agree; 5 points; agree; 6 points; totally agree; 7 points. To obtain the average score of the total test, all the scores are summed and divided by their number. To obtain a score for each sub-scale, the score of the terms associated with the sub-scale are summed up and divided by the number of its terms. A high score on this scale reflects a high level of perceived social support. According to the midpoint of the questionnaire, scores above 3.5 were assigned as high social support and scores below 3.5 as low social protection (35).

In this research, in order to analyze the data and test the hypotheses in accordance with the levels of measurement of variables, in addition to descriptive statistics, inferential statistics methods were used by Stata 12 software, including: the Pearson correlation coefficient, t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) by SPSS software version 18 and linear regression analysis.

## Findings

The results showed that the mean age of students was  $20.7 \pm 1.55$  years and most students (52.6%) were in the age group of 21-23 years. Furthermore, according to the findings, most students were female (76%), single (86.2%), unemployed (97.2%), native (60.2%) and dormitory-resident (70.2%).

The findings showed that there was a significant negative relationship between social support and mental health ( $r = -0.33$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). This means that by increasing the social support score, the mental health score will decrease. In other words, students with higher social support had higher mental health. Moreover, among the sub-scales of social support, the social protection of the family mostly related to mental health ( $r = -0.32$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). This means that students who had more family support had higher mental health (Table 1).

## Discussion

The findings of this study showed that mental health of students will improve their perception and imagination of the received social support rate by family, friends and important people in their life and by reducing the supportive resources, their mental health is compromised. This finding, according to the results of conducted research in this field, including Azad (37), Bakhshani et al. (38), Bakhshi Pour et al. (39), O'Connora et al. (40) and Landman et al. (41), suggests that perceived or received social support can improve mental health.

Additionally, the findings of this study showed that among social support types, family social support was more important than the support of friends and other people. Indeed, this study showed that those who felt they had high social support had greater mental health than other people. This result is consistent with the studies conducted by Tabrizi and Razi (42) and Chi and Chou (43).

The relationship between social support, health and its beneficial effect on mental and physical health in recent years has attracted the attention of researchers. Social support is one of the strongest predictors of mental health, so that the better and wider social network of the individual will lead to a greater level of mental health. In fact, social support acts as a backbone or a mediator between the stresses of life and the disturbance of well-being (44). Sarafino maintains that social support from friends, family, and others leads to reduction in mental health problems in people, thereby affecting the mental health of individuals (7). Lo also believes that social support modifies the effects of stressful events and leads to experiencing positive emotions (45). Stroebe et al. reported that the higher receiving of social support from others led to greater mental health (46). Social support also acts as a barrier against stress. This support can be especially important for those experiencing stress in life (47).

According to the results of this research and other research, it can be stated that informal support and the perception and efficiency of family and friends as sources of support can play an essential role in controlling and reducing stress. Thus, protecting the umbrella of the family, friends and important individuals in a students' life, as well as having strong social relationships and interactions, can help a person to better face and adapt to life problems. Obviously, it is important to note that in the meantime,

**Table 1: Evaluation of the correlation between social support and its sub-scales with mental health**

Variable	The Pearson correlation coefficient	Significance
Mental health etc.		
Total social support	-0.33	<0.0001
Social support of family	-0.32	<0.0001
Social support of friends	-0.2	<0.0001
Social support of imperative persons	-0.26	<0.0001

receiving social support from the family has a significant effect on reducing stress, better adaptation, and more desirable performance.

The possible explanation in this regard is that social support may reduce the adverse effects of pressures (stressors) in two ways. First, social support reduces psychological pressure by attempting to vaccinate a person against experiencing pressures. If someone has a rich social network for advice, resources and facilities and financial assistance, potential pressures will not be a cause for concern and anxiety. Secondly, social support networks act as a barrier to psychological pressure. Knowledge and confidence of a person can be under the social network support when he / she experiences stress that allows him/her to evaluate the events of life as less threatening. Ultimately, social support can increase the resistance of individuals to the negative effects of stressors, and therefore, the individual's mental health is more likely to be protected and improved.

## Conclusion

The most important result of the present study was to confirm the relationship between the level of social support perceived by the students and their mental health, being consistent with the presented research background on social protection and its relationship with mental health. More clearly, as expected, the findings of the research showed that mental health of students increased their perception of social support, and their mental health was compromised by reducing their supporting resources.

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