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Review

Social isolation and social support in good times and bad times

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Abstract
People who are socially isolated or lonely report having lower levels of social support. Supportive social networks help buffer individuals against the deleterious effects of negative events and stressors. Supportive social networks also help individuals maximize the benefits of positive events and accomplishments. In short, those who are socially isolated suffer more when bad things happen and gain less when good things happen than those who are more socially connected.

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Social isolation, a lack of interactions with, and ties to, others in the community is strongly linked to loneliness, the subjective feeling of isolation from others in the community or not having a close set of intimates [1]. The effects of objective and subjective social isolation are well-documented across numerous studies that have used various methodologies and included diverse samples of humans and nonhuman primates. Social isolation and loneliness interrupt developmental processes [2], increase the risk for mental illness onset or the exacerbation of existing mental health symptoms [3], and are strong predictors of physical health and mortality [4] (see also Holt-Lunstad and Steptoe, this issue). Even though these effects have long been known in the scientific literature, the recent forced social isolation necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the negative impact that social disconnection, even relatively short-term disconnection, can have on health and well-being into clear focus for the entire world [5,6].

Our understanding of the mechanisms that link social ties to psychological and physical health is not complete. However, research has clearly documented that social support plays a critical role in the links among social connection and mental and physical health [7−9]. Social support has been broadly conceptualized as the degree to which people in our social networks are responsive to our needs and perceived to be available to be responsive to our needs in the future [10−12]. Although early research focused almost exclusively on how social support buffers people from the effects of negative events and stressors, contemporary approaches have expanded research into the role that social support plays in maximizing the gains of positive events [13−15]. Here we lay out evidence for the critical pathway that connects social isolation to development, health, and well-being, illustrated in Figure 1. People who are socially isolated, either objectively or subjectively, do not incur the benefits of social support, the presence of which helps maximize the ups *and* minimize the downs of life.

Social support in bad times

Traditionally, social support has been conceptualized as the aid provided by others in the context of negative events and stressors. A large literature has examined social support in this context, and has found that perceived social support — the perception that one has supportive others who would be available in times of need — and received social support — the actual transaction of tangible or emotional support from others — are only moderately correlated [16]. Moreover, the strongest and most consistent positive associations between support and outcomes such as psychological well-being and health are observed when support is operationalized as perceived support [17]. In contrast, research has found less consistent associations between received support and outcomes [8,18]. Research has suggested that received support can sometimes be unskilled, draw more attention to the problem, undermine self-esteem and self-efficacy, or lead to feelings of indebtedness [19].

Figure 1
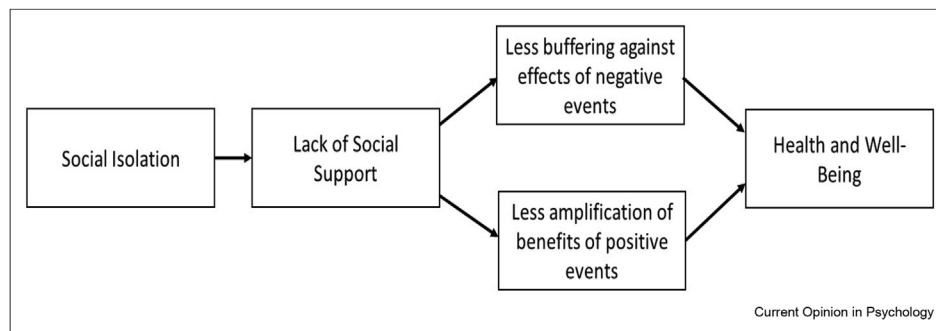
Proposed pathways from social isolation to health and well-being through social support.

Nevertheless, researchers have hypothesized that believing that others will respond to our needs when life is difficult, and receiving that support, can mitigate the toll that those difficulties take on health and well-being. This is known as the stress-buffering effect [7]. Consistent with the stress-buffering hypothesis, a great deal of research has shown that social support is associated with the impact that a variety of stressors have on health and well-being [20]. For example, social support has been shown to mitigate the stress of major life events, including recovery from major medical events, reactions to natural disasters, and traumatic war experiences. Specifically, people who report having supportive others in their lives spend less time in the hospital after surgery [21] and regain more mobility after hospitalization from a major medical event [22]. In a study on the effects of Hurricane Katrina in the United States, researchers found that the amount of social support reported by low-income mothers before the disaster was inversely related to the negative psychological effects of living through the hurricane [23]. Finally, a recent study showed that social support predicted telomere length (a marker of cellular aging and health) in repatriated exprisoners of war [24].

Although the work on buffering the effects of singular major life events is compelling, other work has shown that social support can also mitigate the effects of chronic stressors. For example, socially supportive friends and family have been found to reduce the impact that the stress associated with parenting a child with a challenging medical condition has on life satisfaction [25] and the impact that the stigma of a mental illness diagnosis has on mental health [26]. Social support has even been found to reduce the impact of mild or everyday stressors. For example, the presence of social support is associated with less work-related daily stress [27] and less stress related to the daily hassles of parenting young children [28].

There are several ways by which social support may mitigate the impact of negative events or stressors. The most direct and logical path is that others can provide tangible assistance (e.g., lending money) or information that resolves or lessens the problem or stressor. However, research has also shown other pathways through which social support might mitigate the impact of negative life events and stressors. The presence of supportive others seems to alter how people perceive potential threats and stressors in their environment [29]. Moreover, social support is associated with processes that occur early in the appraisal of potential threats and negative stimuli. For example, a study of visual estimation found that the presence of a friend (real or in one's thoughts) led observers to perceive a hill to be less steep than when estimations were made alone [30]. In a recent fascinating study, researchers found that social support may inhibit basic learning of fear conditioning [31]. Specifically, they found that participants acquired a basic fear-conditioned response when an electric shock was paired with the image of a stranger but not when the electric shock was paired with the image of a supportive other. Thus, perceiving available sources of social support helps with reappraising negative situations as less threatening.

Social support also seems to lessen the impact of negative life events after they have occurred, particularly by moderating rumination frequency and the impact of rumination [32,33]. For example, a daily experience study found that compared with people who reported high levels of social support, those who reported low levels of support ruminated more over daily negative events [34]. They also found that those with high levels of support had lower negative affect when they did ruminate compared to those with low levels of support. More broadly, research has found myriad evidence supporting the long-held theory that social support helps people cope more adaptively with negative life events and stressors [35]. For example, in a recent

study, college students' use of adaptive coping strategies in response to stressful experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic was positively associated with social support levels [36]. Finally, recent work has also found that social support positively predicts restorative processes, such as sleep, during stressful time periods [37].

Altogether, this research shows that people are better at coping with negative life events when they have a strong social support network. However, social isolation is consistently linked to reports of low social support [38,39]. A recent study showed that measures of both objective (social integration) and subjective (loneliness) social isolation predicted lower perceptions of social support [40]. People who are socially isolated are less likely to reap the benefits that social support confers during major and minor stressors. Social isolation leaves people without that helpful buffer and so they must instead face the full force of life's inevitable negative events.

Social support in good times
Although the lion's share of work on social support has focused on how support mitigates the impact of negative events and circumstances, contemporary approaches have emphasized the role that supportive others can play in a variety of contexts, not just in the context of stressors [13,41]. Of specific interest, a body of research has emerged that focuses specifically on the role that supportive others play when positive events occur. Just as people turn to others in their network when negative events happen, people often turn to others when positive events happen, a process called capitalization [42]. Research on capitalization has investigated how supportive others can amplify the benefits of positive events and circumstances.

Mirroring the social support literature, a large body of research has found that when people perceive that others in their lives will respond to their needs when good things happen, or actually receive a supportive response when they discuss their positive events or good fortunes, they experience positive psychological outcomes [14,43,44]. Specifically, having other people in one's life who respond supportively and enthusiastically when a positive event occurs is associated with myriad benefits beyond the original positive event, including higher positive affect, subjective well-being, and self-esteem [42]. More recent work has extended these findings and shown that capitalization support is associated with fewer symptoms of depression, decreased inflammation, less negative affect, and greater overall happiness (see Peters et al., 2018 for a review). In addition, although more

tenuous, there is emerging evidence that responsive support for positive events may be linked to better physical health [45,46].

Although the mechanisms linking capitalization support to outcomes are not well understood, there has been some work unpacking potential pathways. A series of studies found that capitalization support increases the perceived value of positive events in the mind of the person who experienced the event [47]. People also have better recall for the positive events that they shared with supportive others compared with those they did not share, regardless of how important the events were rated in the first place, thus contributing to well-being [42]. Supportive responses to capitalization responses are also strongly linked to more positive emotions, and positive emotions have been shown to have a host of benefits for the individual [48]. Recent work also suggests that other pathways may lie in restorative processes; for example, in a recent study, capitalization support predicted sleep patterns, such that those people who reported receiving high-quality capitalization support during the day slept better that night than those who received low-quality capitalization support [49].

Finally, capitalization support seems to be directly linked to perceptions of social support availability for negative events and stressors. That is, the quality of support during good times serves as a diagnostic indicator of what people can expect from their networks during bad times. Specifically, when people receive effective capitalization support from others, they then expect that others will be supportive when negative events occur [15,50]. Overall, people who are socially disconnected report having less capitalization support available to them [42]. Thus, social isolation not only limits the direct benefits people can garner when positive events occur, but also may decrease the buffering effects of social support for negative events by lowering the perceived availability of social support.

Conclusions
Social isolation is associated with lower levels of social support. A supportive network is an important resource for buffering against the deleterious effects of negative events and stressors. A supportive network is also an important resource for maximizing the benefits of positive events and accomplishments. Thus, those who are socially isolated suffer more when bad things happen and gain less when good things happen than those who are more socially connected.

Conflict of interest statement
Nothing declared.

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