Role of Social Support Networks in Maintaining Mental Health & Well-being in Older Age: A Qualitative Review

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Abstract:
Social support networks play a vital role in sustaining mental health & well-being and are gradually recognized as crucial especially in old age when people often experience unique challenges such as social isolation, decline of physical health & psychological stress. The purpose of this qualitative review is to explore the dynamics and effects of social support on older adults' mental health by synthesizing findings from previous studies and inspecting the types of social support like emotional, instrumental, informational and companionship to mitigate the risks of depression, anxiety and cognitive decline. It also highlights the impact of various sources of social support such as the family, friends, community groups and the digital platforms. The factors like geographical distance, generational gaps and the stigma around help-seeking are also addressed which put hindrance. Findings of the study emphasize the importance sustainable support networks to increase resilience, reduce loneliness and promote overall health and well-being in older people. Some valuable recommendations for future research like exploring the role of technology-mediated supports and developing interventions tailored to specific demographic needs are also discussed.

Key words: Social Support Networks, Mental Health & Wellbeing, Older Age.

Introduction:
According to the report of UNO, the population of the older age people belonging to 60 years and above across the globe is growing rapidly projected to reach almost 2.1 billion by 2050 (United Nations, 2020). Moreover, it has become a critical public health priority with expanding these demographics to understand those factors that contribute to the well-being and mental health of these older adults. There is a wide range of challenges which are associated with aging such as decline of physical health, loss of loved ones, changes in social roles and reduction of economic opportunities and these challenges can lead to various mental and physical health issues such as depression, anxiety and loneliness (World Health Organization, 2021). Keeping in views these contexts, the social support networks play a significant role in mitigating these risks and enhance psychological resilience among older people. Social support is an experience of being valued,

cared for and part of a web of mutual help (Cohen & Wills, 1985) encompassing different forms such as emotional support, empathy, understanding, instrumental support, advice, guidance and companionship such as shared activities & belonging. The main sources of this web are family, neighbors, friends, community organizations and digital platforms especially as the aged people adopt technology at high rates (Chopik, 2016). The significance of social support networks cannot be denied for the growth and maintenance of mental health as various research studies depict that social ties can safeguard from the negative impact of stress, can reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression and can enhance life satisfaction and mental functioning (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). The maintenance of these networks becomes difficult and challenging because of retirement, mobility limitations and loss of close relationships in older age. Resultantly the aged people are more vulnerable to isolation and other associated mental health repercussions (Nicholson, 2012). There exist significant gaps in understanding the multifaceted ways these networks impact mental health and well-being in older age in spite of the increasing recognition of the vitality of social support networks. For example, the cultural differences construct the perception of social support and its associated sources. The gender roles affect availability and type of support being received (Antonucci et al., 2014). Moreover, the differences of social and economic status also play a significant role in access to and the quality of support networks, emphasizing the need for equitable interventions. So the major purpose of this qualitative review is to synthesize existing literature on the role of social support networks in maintaining mental health and social well-being among aged people. It investigates the sources and types of support, the difficulties and challenges in accessing and maintaining them and the interventions used to increase social connectedness. This review contributes to the development of holistic, evidence-based strategies for promoting healthy aging by addressing these aspects.

Rationale of the Study:
As the population of the world is growing aged, the welfare and wellbeing of older adults both physically as well mentally has become critical public health concerns because aging brings difficulties and challenges such as social isolation, physical decline and the loss of loved ones. All these factors lead towards depression, anxiety and loneliness. The social support networks are key protective factors in this regard. However, the availability and effectiveness of these networks vary due to cultural, social and economic and demographic differences.
This study intends to tie the prevailing literature by producing evidence on the types, sources and effects of social support. It also seeks to provide insights to inform holistic and inclusive strategies for fostering healthy aging.

Objectives:
- To investigate various forms of social support and their roles in improving mental health and well-being among aged people.
- To discover the main sources of social support for older adults and to evaluate their importance and accessibility.
- To assess how social support networks, influence mental health outcomes in older age.

Review of Literature
Various research studies have signified the critical role of social support in raising social and psychological well-being among older adults as social support acts like a buffer against stress and minimizes the rates of depression, anxiety and cognitive decline (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010) explored that the people with strong social relationships have almost 50% increased likelihood of survival which highlights the significance of connectedness for both

physical as well as mental health. The older adults are benefitted from various forms of social support such as emotional, instrumental, and informational support. The companionship and empathy significantly reduce the feelings of loneliness and depressive symptoms (Antonucci et al., 2014). The instrumental support is also crucial for aged people who are facing mobility or health challenges and helps older individuals navigate complex health and social systems (Berkman et al., 2000). The members of the family acts as the primary providers of both emotional and instrumental support who offer stability and care to aged people in old age (Chopik, 2016). After family, the friendships contribute a lot to companionship and shared activities that are important for the life satisfaction and well-being of older adults. The faith-based groups and the community organizations play a significant role in providing belonging and opportunities for social engagement to aged people in old age (Fiori et al., 2006).

The digital technology, the online platforms and the social media have emerged as valuable tools which foster social support, especially to those who are facing geographical or physical barriers (Chopik, 2016). Studies showed that those aged people who use digital communication face reduced loneliness and improved mental health outcomes during older age (Quan-Haase et al., 2018) but despite its various benefits, a number of aged people face barriers to get access and maintain social support networks. The physical health limitations and the reduced mobility can restrain their participation in social activities (Nicholson, 2012). The loss of close relationships and retirement leads to reduced social networks. Apart from this, the social and cultural factors such as stigma in seeking help and the gender norms complicate access to support among men (Antonucci et al., 2014). The research indicates that the social isolation is an important risk factor that cause poor mental health among older adults and prolonged isolation is connected with increased rates of anxiety, depression and cognitive decline (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015) as Nicholson (2012) stressed the need for the prevention of isolation at early stage by suggesting community-based programs and other initiatives as effective strategies. Various programs can be helpful for enhancing social support such as community engagement programs, intergenerational activities and use of technology to foster connections for example, the programs including services and group therapy sessions are very useful for emotional well-being and these can reduce loneliness among older adults (Cattan et al., 2005). The training of digital literacy can enable older adults to get virtual social networks which can further broaden their sources of support (Quan-Haase et al., 2018).

Methodology:
The study design:
The present research is qualitative review which is designed to synthesize evidence on the role of social support networks in sustaining and maintaining mental health and social well-being among aged people. This review was formulated according to the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews & meta-analyses which is known as (PRISMA).

The search strategy:
The electronic databases such as PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus and Web of Science were used to conduct a comprehensive literature search and the study was restricted to the peer-reviewed research articles which were published in English between 2000-2023. Moreover, the following keywords were used in the study:
- Social Support.
- Mental Health.
- Social Well-being.
- Older adults or Aged People.

- Social Networks.

The inclusion criteria:
- Studies related to social support and well-being in individuals aged 60 years.
- The qualitative, the quantitative & the mixed-methods studies.
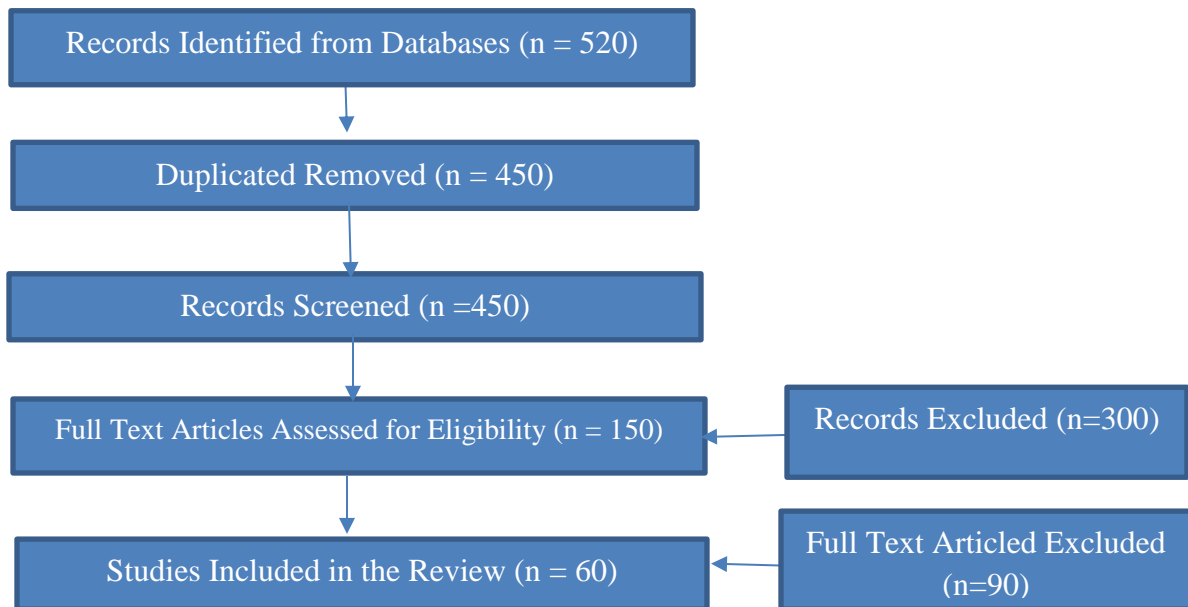- The research articles published in peer-reviewed journals.

The exclusion criteria:
- The studies which focused on the clinical intrusions not related to social support.
- Not-peer-reviewed sources like editorials & opinion pieces.

The data extraction & analysis
The identified articles were screened in two stages such as title/abstract review and full-text review. Moreover, the two independent reviewers examined the relevance and the quality of the researches. The data on the study characteristics, methods, population and the findings were extracted through a standardized data extraction procedure and extracted data was analyzed thematically to identify frequent themes related to the objectives of the research.

PRISMA Flow Diagram:

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│  Records Identified from Databases (n = 520) │
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                    │
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│        Duplicated Removed (n = 450)          │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│          Records Screened (n =450)           │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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┌──────────────────────────────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│ Full Text Articles Assessed for Eligibility  │◄─────│   Records Excluded (n=300)   │
│                  (n = 150)                   │      └──────────────────────────────┘
└──────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                    │
                    ▼                                  ┌──────────────────────────────┐
┌──────────────────────────────────────────────┐      │  Full Text Articled Excluded │
│   Studies Included in the Review (n = 60)    │◄─────│           (n=90)             │
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The explanation of PRISMA flow diagram:
- **The identified records**: 520 (500 through database & 20 from other resources).
- **Removal of duplications**: 450 unique records remained after removal of duplications.
- **The screening**: 450 records were screened resulting in the exclusion of 300 records.
- **The full-text review**: almost 150 articles go through full-text assessment for eligibility and 90 articles were excluded.
- **The included Studies**: 60 articles were included in the qualitative synthesis.

Discussion:
The key findings from 60 studies that explored the role of social support networks in maintaining and sustaining the mental health and social well-being in aged people are presented below:

1. Main types of social support and their effects:

The most commonly reported type of social support that was contributing to mental health and social well-being was emotional support and those aged people who got persistent emotional support demonstrated lower levels of depression & anxiety (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). The second one was the instrumental support such as help with daily activities. It also was essential for those who have mobility or health challenges and reducing stress and having a sense of security (Berkman et al., 2000).

The social activities and companionship were found to increase the cognitive function and delay in cognitive decline (Antonucci et al., 2014).

Main sources of social support:

After the emotional support, the members of the family remained the primary source of support who provided both the emotional and practical assistance. The support from spouse was particularly critical and its absence was related with high risks of loneliness (Chopik, 2016). The friends and friendships played a critical role in life satisfaction among aged people without immediate family. Friends relationships contributed a lot to shared experiences and reduced the isolation among older adults in old age (Fiori et al., 2006). Moreover, the community-based support like faith-based organizations and social clubs also provided belonging and purpose that were connected to improved mental health (Nicholson, 2012).

The role of Technology:

The use and adoption of digital forums by aged people facilitated virtual connections. Studies showed that older adults using social media had a tendency to reduce the loneliness and maintained social ties across the distances (Quan-Haase et al., 2018). The usefulness of digital support depended on digital literacy and access to technology.

The barriers to the effective social support:

The mobility issues, physical limitations and chronic illness were major barriers to maintaining social networks. Social and economic differences impacted access to community resources and digital platforms affecting marginalized groups. the loss of relationships due to and retirement reduced the size of social networks increasing to loneliness & depression among aged people (Nicholson, 2012).

The usefulness of interventions:

The intergenerational programs & community-based activities were useful in increasing the social connectedness like group activities, gardening, exercise classes and volunteer work improved participants' mental health outcomes (Cattan et al., 2005). The findings of the study also point out important gaps in the literature. The research on the long-term effects of social support especially in diverse cultural contexts remains limited and the role of gender and intersectional factors in shaping access to social support warrants further investigation.

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