

# The role of social support in the mental health of medically vulnerable Canadians during COVID-19

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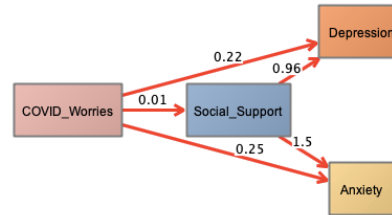
## Introduction

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Canadians have struggled with their mental health, with levels of anxiety and depression doubling since the outbreak (Dozois, 2020)
- One mechanism through which mental health may be promoted is social support. According to the stress-buffer model (Cohen & Wills, 1985), social support is vital for coping with stress and is protective against negative health outcomes
- In general populations, higher amounts of perceived social support are associated with decreased anxiety and depressive symptoms (Grey et al., 2020)
- With current social distancing policies, individuals may struggle to get enough social support, evidenced by high rates of loneliness (Gratz et al., 2020)
- The efficacy of social supports for individuals who are medically vulnerable to COVID-19 is unknown

## Methods

- The sample consisted of Canadians who reported a heightened vulnerability to COVID-19 due to either a medical condition (n=1041) or advanced age over 70 years (n=821), who were taken from a large, representative online survey of Canadians (N=6,629)
- Recruitment timeline: August - September 2020
- Survey included measures for COVID-19 related worries, perceived social support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988), anxiety (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006), and depression (PHQ-9; Kroenke et al., 2001)

### Model 1: Social Support as a Mediator



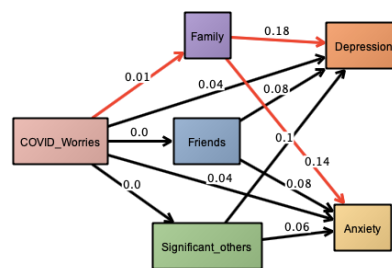
Direct effect of COVID worry on **anxiety**: (B = 0.220, SE = 0.009,  $p < .001$ )

Direct effect of COVID worry on **depression**: (B = 0.255, SE = 0.012,  $p < .001$ )

Indirect effect on **anxiety**: (B = 0.006, SE = 0.003,  $p = .032$ )

Indirect effect on **depression**: (B = 0.009, SE = 0.004,  $p = .031$ )

### Model 2: Sources of Social Support as Mediators



#### Significant effects:

Direct effect of COVID worry on **anxiety**: (B = 0.220, SE = 0.009,  $p < .001$ )

Direct effect of COVID worry on **depression**: (B = 0.255, SE = 0.012,  $p < .001$ )

Indirect effect of COVID worry through support from **family** on **anxiety**: (B = 0.004, SE = 0.002,  $p = .019$ )

Indirect effect of COVID worry through support from **family** on **depression**: (B = 0.007, SE = 0.003,  $p = .014$ )

## Results

- An initial mediation analysis indicated that perceived social support partially mediated the relationship between COVID-19 related worries and both anxiety and depression ( $p < .05$ )
- To examine separate sources of support, a parallel multiple mediation model assessed the mediating role of friends, family, and significant others
- This model found that **only support from family** mediated the relationship between COVID-19 related worries and mental health outcomes ( $p < .05$ )

## Discussion and Implications

- Contrary to our expectations, having more social support predicted greater anxiety and depression
- In particular, support from family members increased ratings of distress. This may have occurred due to interpersonal conflict, as almost ½ of people have reported deterioration of their familial relationships during the pandemic (Günther-Bel et al., 2020)
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, social support may not be an effective coping mechanism **for individuals who are medically vulnerable to COVID-19**
- This relationship may exist due to some vulnerable Canadians seeking social support in unsafe ways, and experiencing anxiety about this potential exposure

## References

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