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Longitudinal Associations Between Social Support, Academic Wellbeing, and Depressive Symptoms During the Transition To University

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BACKGROUND

- Many first-year students experience **depressive symptoms** which can have longstanding consequences on their academic, social and personal functioning (Villatte et al., 2017).
- Investigating protective factors to prevent or reduce depression is crucial for this population (Verger et al., 2009).
- **Social support** and **academic wellbeing** (i.e., academic efficacy, college gratitude, school connectedness, and academic satisfaction) may buffer against depression by increasing adaptive resources to thrive under stress.
- Little research has examined whether these factors are protective against depression across the freshman year.
- This study addressed this gap in a sample of Canadian college freshmen.

METHODS

- 704 college freshmen (73% female, $M_{age} = 18$) completed seven monthly surveys across the academic year.
- **Depression:** *Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale* (DASS-21): 7 items rated on a 4-point Likert Scale (Henry & Crawford, 2005).
- **Social Support:** Created for this study by averaging scores of perceived support from 0-100 across six domains.
- **Academic Wellbeing:** *College Student Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire* (CSSWQ): 4 subscales rated on a 7-point Likert Scale (Renshaw & Bolognino, 2016).

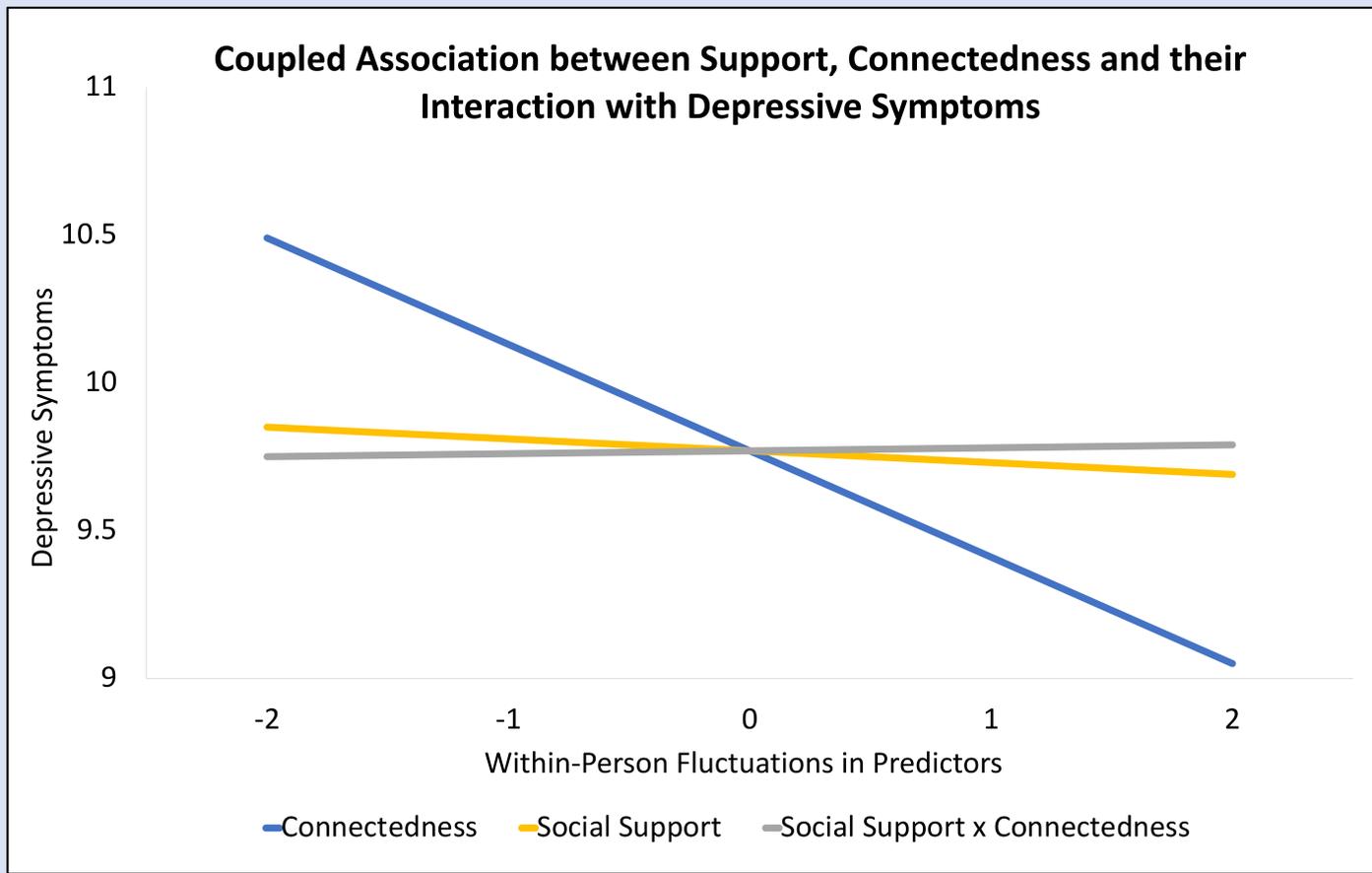
RESULTS

- Experiencing more social support than usual, relative to a student's own mean, predicted **less** depression within one month intervals.
- Within-person increases in connectedness, efficacy, gratitude, and satisfaction predicted **less** depression within one month intervals.
- Social support **attenuated** the within-person association between connectedness and depression.

HLM Output	β	SE	t	p
Depression Intercept β_{00}	9.77	.34	29.07	<.001
Linear Time β_{10}	-.27	.06	-4.27	<.001
Social Support β_{20}	-.04	.01	-4.78	<.001
Connectedness β_{30}	-.36	.05	-6.88	<.001
Efficacy β_{40}	-.30	.05	-7.29	<.001
Gratitude β_{50}	-.25	.06	-4.33	<.001
Satisfaction β_{60}	-.37	.04	-8.94	<.001
Support x Connectedness β_{70}	.01	.004	2.65	.008
Social Support x Efficacy β_{80}	.001	.001	1.13	.261
Social Support x Gratitude β_{90}	.01	.01	1.56	.119
Social Support x Satisfaction β_{100}	.01	.003	1.73	.084

IMPLICATIONS

- Consistent with our hypothesis, within-person increases in social support and facets of academic wellbeing protected against depressive symptoms during the freshman year.
- It was unexpected that social support attenuated the relation between connectedness and depression.
- When students feel supported by close others, perhaps general connectedness to one's college plays a more minor role in predicting depression.
- Previous research shows that a multi-faceted approach to wellbeing promotion for freshmen significantly improves wellbeing throughout the year (Koydemir & Sun-Selişik, 2015).
- Given a majority White, female sample, we cannot say whether these effects generalize across gender identities and racial/ethnic backgrounds, nor if the results may be seen beyond the first year of study.
- Rather than focusing on general wellbeing alone, campuses can bolster social support networks by hosting events for freshmen to connect.



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