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Title: Visualization of social support alters mood: clinical implications of a conceptual mapping tool

Background: Health benefits of social support are well documented across a wide range of populations, yet measurement does not always capture the complexity of this multi-faceted concept. The aim of the current study was to examine the effect that visualization of social support has on mood and factors that influence this effect, using a social mapping tool.

Methods: Sixty-two adult participants (53 female) aged 18-38 years (mean=21.16) were recruited for an on-line study. Participants completed a series of psychosocial well-being measures including underlying happiness, empathy, stress, anxiety, depression, and acute physical health symptoms. A visual perceived social support mapping tool (VSSM) was created to report the number and closeness of social contacts (friends, family, significant others). Immediately before and after completion of the VSSM, positive and negative mood was assessed.

Results: Mood state altered significantly from pre to post completion of the VSSM, showing a main effect of negative mood reduction ($p=.005$). Interaction effects of stress ($p=.035$) and happiness ($p=.014$) on positive mood were observed pre to post VSSM completion.

Participants who reported higher happiness scores showed the greatest increases in positive mood pre to post VSSM completion, whilst those reporting higher levels of stress had greater reductions in positive mood pre to post completion of the VSSM. Calculations of perceived support number and closeness of contacts were not significantly associated with mood changes and social support did not moderate happiness or stress. Additionally, empathy (affective drive) was significantly related to support number and closeness ($p=.011$) but did not act as a moderator of support indices. There were no effects found for anxiety, depression or acute physical health symptoms with social support number or closeness.

Conclusions: Visualizing social support using the VSSM influences positive and negative mood, independently of perceived number and closeness of social contacts and these effects are related to underlying well-being indicators such as stress and happiness. The VSSM acted as a brief intervention that served to alter mood; findings indicate that manipulating stress and happiness levels prior to use may have the greatest benefit. The tool has significant potential for application in a clinical context.