Chapter 6
The Role of Social Support in Dealing With the Different Types of Stressors:
Social Support in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Social support plays an integral role in every person's mental health and well-being. This is especially apparent in the work environment, where stress levels can range from moderate to severe depending on how each individual manages and cope with his or her own circumstances. The goal in this chapter is to outline current research on the role of social support in dealing with different types of stressors in the workplace. Further, this chapter will summarize key findings and concepts, particularly focusing on the following areas: 1) definition of social support, 2) social support theories, 3) social support on mental health and well-being, and 4) social support as a form of intervention in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

In the past, various stress models have identified social support as a coping mechanism towards life stressors and the negative effects of stress (Gore, 2008; Kahn & Byosiere, 1992; Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Although the definition surrounding the concept of social support appears to be multidimensional, there is a general agreement that social support serves as a basis for people to connect and feels to belong on other people to meet certain basic needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). A person's social relationships stem from multiple sources within the immediate

environment they live in. These social relationships include, but are not limited to, peers, family members, employers/supervisors or work colleagues. Over the years, the pursuit of practical research and theory development concerning social support has led to more specific and operational defined terminology related to the concept of social support.

Based on some of the past conceptual understanding of social support and its functionality, social support provides people a sense of belonging. The individual feels that he/she is receiving care, being loved and valued within the social support network that he/she belongs and the obligation is reciprocated by individuals within the social support network. Nevertheless, from a workplace context, Karasek and Theorell (1990) pointed out that social support generates communication that provides help on a social and task level on the job from co-workers and organizational leaders. Social support in the workplace serves as a means for individuals to take control over stressful aspects and manage their responsibilities more efficiently in the working environment.

What is Social Support?

Social support has been defined by past researchers as the mediating intervention that occurs after the onset of an adverse situation. In an earlier study on the concept of social support, House (1981) suggested people think of social support as "who gives what to whom, regarding what problems" (p.39). Moreover, House (1981) pointed out that social support reflects an individual's perceived and actuality support that they receive, whereby the individual feels that he/she is being cared for and there is help available from their social network. He further defined the concept of social support as a problem-centered interaction involving one or more of the traditional interpersonal support functions. In all these definitions, a great emphasis is placed on acts that follow the occurrence of a stressful event and address one or more needs that arose as a consequence of the stressor.

Based on House's (1981) definition, the taxonomy of social support consists of four aspects: informational (e.g., to equip with knowledge or information to be competent on the task), instrumental (e.g., material aid or service types of support), appraisal (e.g., feedback or evaluation on one's performance), and emotional support (e.g., being cared for and loved, trust, and empathy). These four domains together amalgamate the term "social support" and its functionality in every individual's life, as further illustrated below (House, 1981; Krause, 1987; Weinert, 1987).

Informational support refers to the assistance given in the form of resources and knowledge, whereby the person could use the resources or knowledge to address existing challenges within the context that he/she is facing (Collins, Hislop, & Cartwright, 2016). For example, sharing information about resources or providing advice is often treated as informational support to a person in need. Instrumental support refers to material aid that directly supports a person's needs, such as financial resources, food, shelter, transportation, or other essential daily needs. Appraisal support refers to the transmission of evaluative information used to make social comparisons from a trustworthy source. For instance, a person who provides feedback to help improve a certain task is a form of appraisal support. Finally, emotional support refers to how a person expresses empathy, care, and acceptance towards others by establishing a trustworthy bond. The understanding of social support within the specific context of the workplace began with House's theory (1981) about the types of social support a person can experience at work.

Social support is a multidimensional construct that has been conceptualized and tested in many ways depending on the domain of studies. Despite the diversity of conceptualizations and measurement strategies to understand the functionality of social support, the significant evidence from past findings

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