The Importance of Social Support Networks on Mental Health Status of Custodial Grandparents

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Session 2500 (Symposium)

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS ON MENTAL HEALTH STATUS OF CUSTODIAL GRANDPARENTS

Chair: Deborah Whitley  
Co-Chair: Youjung Lee  
Discussant: Yanfeng Xu

This symposium presents a collection of papers that examine the concept of social support and its effect on custodial grandparents’ (CG) mental health state. Each paper explores a different perspective about grandparents’ access to and/or use of social support networks and mental health outcomes; several papers view social support within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nadorff and colleagues explore social support by middle-generation family members and its effects on grandparents’ stress and depressive symptoms. Musil and colleagues report on psychosocial and social support predictors of self-appraised healthcare and financial security by CG during the Covid-19 pandemic. Whitley and Kelley describe current social networks relied upon by a preliminary sample of CG while managing the daily stresses and strains associated with COVID-19 and its restrictive mandates. The final two papers report the use of specialized technology and support services delivered to homebound CG during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lee and colleagues describe a telemental health model using Solution-Focused Brief Therapy to serve socially isolated grandparents experiencing mental health distress as during the pandemic. Mendoza and Park report on program challenges and outcomes of implementing a support service for grandparents living under COVID-19 restrictions. The highlights of the papers will be discussed by Yanfeng Xu and give attention to the ways scholars and practitioners can build upon these works to maximize the mental health outcomes of CG, while managing to live in socially restrictive and challenging environments.

LIVING WITH COVID-19: DESCRIPTIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CUSTODIAL GRANDPARENTS MENTAL HEALTH STRESS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS: A PILOT STUDY

Deborah Whitley, and Susan Kelley, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia, United States

Research suggests custodial grandparents (CG) with chronic health conditions, limited economic resources, and restricted social connections are at risk for adverse mental health outcomes. The growing uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 seems to accentuate these findings. This paper presents preliminary descriptions of mental stress by a small sample of CG (n=26) surveyed after the onset of COVID-19. They described the social groups comprising their networks, and the methods used to engage with them. A majority of the sample (96.2%) reported experiencing mental stress since the onset of the virus; based on Brief Symptom Inventory results, five CG scored in the clinical range for stress. Food access, fear of getting sick, and grandchildren’s school requirements are leading sources of stress. Despite such challenges, CG report varying levels of social engagement with their support networks. The reported descriptions give preliminary insight how CG can maximize their social networks to build/sustain positive mental health well-being.

CONNECTING GRANDPARENT CAREGIVERS THROUGH TELEMENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19

Youjung Lee,1 Laura Bronstein,2 and Kelley Cook,3
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Since the COVID-19 outbreak, children and their caregivers throughout the world are experiencing unprecedented long-term social isolation. For too many, especially grandparent-headed families, underrepresented minorities, and those living in poverty, this precipitates and exacerbates mental health conditions including anxiety and depression. Despite these families’ increased needs for mental health services during the pandemic, professionals often lack experience and expertise in telemental health, which is a safe and effective way to provide these services. In this symposium, we will present a telemental health model for working with grandparent-headed families that draws upon Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), an evidence-based approach focusing on strengths. This SFBT-based telemental health training program prepares mental health professionals to implement this safe and innovative intervention, enabling them to effectively serve isolated and marginalized grandparent caregivers and their families when providing in-person services is not possible.

THE MODERATION OF MIDDLE-GENERATION SUPPORT ON THE RELATION OF STRESS AND DEPRESSION IN CORESIDENT GRANDPARENTS

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Consistent with Cohen & Wills’ Buffering Hypothesis, social support has been found to moderate the relation between stress and depressive symptoms but has yet to be examined among coresident grandparents (CGPs), a population at risk of increased stress and depression. The current study sought to extend the model to this highly prevalent, vulnerable population. Participants were 180 grandparents across the USA living with their grandchildren. Measures included depression, stress, and satisfaction with support provided by the middle generation (MG) parent of the grandchild. After controlling for age, gender, income, and household type (skipped or multi-gen), MG support moderated the relation between perceived stress and depressive symptoms, accounting for 49% of variance. For CGPs least satisfied with support provided by the MG, the more stress, the higher their depressive symptoms. These findings indicate that improving relationships with grandchildren’s parents is an important avenue for interventions focused on grandparent caregivers’ mental health.