SOCIAL SUPPORT: A FACTOR OF PROTECTION AGAINST STRESS DURING ADOLESCENCE

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Social Support: A Factor of Protection against Stress during Adolescence

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Abstract

The present study focused on the relationship between the adolescent's perception of minor stress in different domains (school, relationship with parents, managing free time, romantic relationships, work and future) and the social support received from the family, friends, and other important people and perceived as such. The study participants were 525 students, from which 186 masculine and 339 feminine, with ages between 15 and 18, from three high schools from Maramures county. The instruments used for collecting the data were *Problem Questionnaire* (PQ), by Seiffge-Krenke, which allowed us to identify the stress perceived in different domains, and *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* (MSPSS), by Gregory Zimet, for evaluating the social support perceived from family, friends or other important people. From the analyses done, it results the fact that adolescents who registered a high score regarding the social support perceived from family members, evaluate the issues with parents, issues regarding the managing of free time, self-issues and issues on their whole as being less stressful in comparison with the group which reports a lower level of social support perceived from the family. On the other hand, high values of social support perceived from friends represent a protection factor only in the case of the problems which adolescents have with themselves, in comparison with the group which declares that has a low social support from friends. Finally, the article underlines the need to educate the teenagers and parents as well in receiving and giving social support, as a factor of protection against problematic life situations.

Keywords: adolescence, stress, social support, developmental tasks, multicausal approaches of adolescence, self-efficacy.

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Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial period of formation, which implies new challenges and presumes the acquisition of new competences, essential in order to cope with the events and the changes from this period of transition to the adult life (Bandura, 2000). The researchers' interest for the theme of adolescence was maintained due to both the fundamental social changes suffered by the Western countries in the last decades and which contributed to establishing a relevant place in the study of adolescence, and to the increase in the degree of acknowledging the need to explore and interpret through scientific methods this stage of life, as it results from the numerous European and American researches in this field.

Therefore, during the years, wider and wider sectors of psychological and social research started to recognize the crucial role of adolescence in human development, classifying it as being one of the most "sensible" life stages. Indeed, during this period, take place simultaneously the development of identity and sexuality, the acquisition of intellectual and emotional autonomy, the creation of a set of personal values, taking some decisions regarding its own interest, life style, and its own future, but in the same time there can appear some risking behavior, deviant, or some disturbances (Albiero, 2012). The adolescent has to face multiple transformations from a physic, cognitive affective and social point of view.

In all the areas mentioned above, this period of crucial formation implies new challenges, especially today, when more than in the past, our society characterized by uncertainties, relativism and multiple possibilities of choosing. (Galardi and Aristarchi, 2001; Mion, 2008), requires from the part of the adolescent more complex personal and social competencies, in order to cope with different moments, more or less conflicting, in the process of creating its own identity.

A new vision on adolescence

Beyond the concordances on the theme of adolescence, in the special literature still remains difficult to find a wide agreement regarding the characteristics and essential limits of this evolutionary transition. Without getting into the credit of these debates, we have to remember the fact that lately, there was a recognition of the inherent complexity of human development and a more positive and constructive vision upon the adolescence than in the past. In this sense, we are witnessing a passing from the determinist paradigms, presented in the first studies about adolescence, centered mainly on the conflicting aspects of this age, to the probabilistic and multicausal approaches, more flexible and adaptive, according to which the adolescent must face a multitude of challenges in order to build its own personal and social identity, as it is underlined in the most recent theories of human development (Becciu and Colasanti, 2007).

Along with surpassing the conceptions which considered adolescence as being the age of the big crises, this life stage began to be described as being a period of transition, characterized by profound and significant changes, from a physic, intellectual, affective and social point of view, stage which, similar to other evolving transitions, implies a series of challenges for an adolescent, called "developmental tasks" or "evolving tasks" (Camaioni and Di Blasio, 2007).

These "development tasks" refer mainly to accepting your own body, learning the social role (masculine or feminine), orientation toward a profession, getting the emotional independence towards the parents, and to the necessity of establishing a scale of ethical values in their own lives (Havighurst, 1956).

On the other side, these evolving requirements call into question the personal equilibrium of the adolescent (from a biologic, psychological and social point of view), stimulating towards a process of delimitation and accomplishing some choices, which will influence in a significant way the path of its own identity (Frydenberg, 1997). These "development tasks", at the proper and pre-set time, must be solved, or otherwise the individual development can be undermined.

Social support as a mediator and moderator of the stress perceived in the adolescence

Even though most of the researches regarding the health of the adolescents prove the fact that most of these successfuly pass this stage, without major difficulties in fulfilling the development tasks, there are, still, daily events, connected to a number of changes which the adolescent must face, which can constitute a stress source for them (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995; Frydenberg, 1997). The way in which the adolescents view the problems as being stressful, generally depends on the impact and interaction between the personal variables and the situational variables (Elkind, 1984).

During its journey toward maturity, adolescent is exposed to the issues connected to the fulfillment of the development tasks specific to this age, but he can live stressful experiences, like: parents' divorce, death in family, issues connected to health and work, daily stress, and depending on his degree of having the competences and the support required in order to deal with these situations, he will manage to reach the maturity without having major psychical disequilibrium (Becciu and Colasanti, 2010).

Researches proved that the major sources of stress in the adolescence are not the major crises, but daily issues, related to school, to the relationship with parents or colleagues, or economic uncertainty (Seiffge-Krenke, Schulman & Klessinger, 2001), and furthermore difficulties as choosing the outfit, money spending, or free time management (Douvan & Adelson, 1966). Also the poverty or living in an

area with little employment opportunities (Garmezy, 1985; Masten and Garmezy, 1985), represent other problematic aspects which adolescents deal with.

These daily stressful situations were considered by Lazarus (1966) as being "irritating, frustrating requests and a source of discomfort" which characterizes, in a way or another, the routine and the daily transitions.

The researches made by Seiffge-Krenke and Shulman (1993) in this area, proved that the minor daily problems, become significant during time, and they require a continuous adapting effort, which can be in the end more expensive than the efforts made in coping with the major problematic situations, even if their incidence, and the severity perceived, vary in accordance to the person and circumstances.

On the other hand there are a number of factors, personal and situational, like *coping strategies*, own-efficacy, optimism, social support, which have an important role on the way in which the adolescent overpasses the problematic issues. In this regard, the social support from the part of family and friends – considered as being a set of significant interpersonal relationships – has a relevant impact on how the intensity of stress is perceived, in childhood and adolescence (Caplan, 1974).

The sources from which the social support comes from are represented by all the people considered to be important by the adolescent and who form the members of a social network (Hirsch, 1980). In adolescence, the social support can come from different contexts of social interaction in which the adolescent activates: family, colleagues, friends, other important people, and sometimes this support can have a very different effect. While some adolescents rely more on the group of friends and colleagues, considered to be a dense network of social relationships, in other moments they rely mainly on family members. In this regard, the researches prove that an inadequate parent support is associated with a larger orientation towards the group of friends, along with the inadequate behavior, disobedience and opposition toward the authority (Condry & Siman, 1974).

Social support can promote the health and well-being through a direct effect, due to the fact that the people with a high level of social support feel more appreciated and understood, and this fact entitles them to look to the events into a positive way, regardless of the nature of the stressful situation. In this way, the social support, throughout its buffering effect, protects the individual from the negative impact of stressful experiences (Grossi & Ravagnan, 2013).

We have to state the fact that the social support can be offered in different shapes: information, instrumental or financial help, emotional support (Reevyl & Maslach, 2001). The most significant studies made in this aspect, focused mainly on the buffering effect of the social support on stress (Bradley, 1997, 30), the social support received being able to mediate the negative effects of the stress perceived (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak & Cribbie, 2007).

This fact proves that the people involved in a favorable way in the social relationships, can have benefits in connection to health, moral development and *coping strategies*.

On the contrary, the lower levels of social support are correlated with wick physic and psychic health (Cohen, Underwood & Gottlieb, 2000).

Other empirical studies like the ones made by Sgarro (1985), Cohen and Wills (1985), Cohen and Pressman (2004), showed that there is a positive correlation between the social support perceived and the indicators of an optimal physic and mental health, and the inadequate social support causes a greater vulnerability to stress.

Even though the mechanisms which explain the efficacy of the social support for promoting the well-being and health are not yet very clear (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990), the researchers consider that the social support perceived, along with other social resources, interferes both preventive, during the stage of evaluating the stressful life events, and in the adapting stage, to the stressful requests (Schwarzer & Buchwald, 2004). Beside the social support perceived, social abilities and social resources which a person has (like the dimension and variety of social relationships in which he lives) tend to act as protection factors in front of different life challenges (Schwarzer & Buchwald, 2004).

Methodology

Starting from these aspects, our study focused on the relationship between the stress that adolescents experience daily, in different domains (school, relationship with parents, managing free time, the romantic relationships and future) and the social support received from the family, friends and other important people.

The hypothesis of research

The hypothesis from which we started was that the subjects who have high levels of social support, in comparison to those who have lowers levels, perceive the problems from different life domains as being less stressful.

Knowing the degree in which the social support perceived from the family, friends, or other important people, moderates the level of stress perceived in the domains mentioned above, it can contribute to the embracement of functional strategies at an educational level, which could help adolescents to deal with the stressful situations from daily life.

The study sample

The study participants were 525 students, from which 186 masculine (35.4%) and 339 feminine (64.6%), with ages between 15 and 18 (average age = 16; DS = 1.04), from three high schools from Maramures county. The sampling method realized for this study was un-probabilistic, because it wasn't possible a random choosing of the students taken into consideration.

The identification of the sample was made starting from the interviews made with the form masters of the students' classes, and with the subjects of the research as well, who were explained the objectives and the way of managing the questionnaire.

Regarding the school training, most of the students are enrolled at high schools with a scientific profile (62.7%), followed by students who study at high schools with a humanistic profile (23.0%) and services (13.0%).

A percentage of 80.3% from the subjects, declare that they live with both parents, these having a medium-superior level of education, for the biggest part of the sample (78.3% from the parents have baccalaureate or license diploma), and 80.6% have a permanent job. These two last variables are the result of the combination of the answer of the adolescents regarding the studies diploma and their parents' job. Even though the job status of their parents is mainly a good one, we mention the fact that in the case of this sample, the unemployment rate is 4,4% among the parents (especially mothers), while almost 15% from the parents work irregularly or are retired.

The family context of the population taken into consideration is formed mainly from married people, for 88.6% from the subjects the parents live together. Yet, 10% from the subjects live only with one parent and 3.6% declare that they are part of a reunited family. From the total of 525 students, a quite large percentage (11.4%) declare that they have separated parents or divorced, which indicates the fact that destroying the family connections represent a phenomenon which affects a larger number of families. The emigration phenomenon which affects Maramures county, is reflected in our sample too, like this: 17.6% from our subjects have one or both parents working abroad. Regarding the economic status of the family: 80.8% from our subjects declare that they have an average income, 17.7% have a high income, while only 1.5% from our subjects declare that they live in a family with small income. In conclusion, by describing the socio-cultural context of the family of our subjects, it results that the students questioned come from families with quite a high economic (job, income) and cultural level (studies, educational level).

Research instruments

The instruments used for collecting the data were *Problem Questionnaire* (PQ), elaborated by Seiffge-Krenke (University of Köln), which allowed us to identify the stress perceived in different domains (school, family, free time, the self, job, future, romantic relationships), and *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* (MSPSS), by Gregory Zimet (University of Indiana), for evaluating the social support perceived from family, friends or other important people.

PQ refers to a number of situations, daily life aspects which adolescents identified as being problematic, as being the relation with school (for example: taking low grades), with parents (for example: scarce communication), with friends (the lack of a friend with whom to share his own issues), but with the free time as well (not knowing how to spend the free time), with the self (not being satisfied with its own aspect), romantic relationships (not having a close friend) or connecting to the future (fear of unemployment). The most frequent form of PQ has 61 questions, the subjects being invited to evaluate, with sincerity and spontaneity, to what extent the issues presented are perceived as being stressful. Each item was assessed on a 5 – point Likert scale, with "1" = "not at all stressful" to "52 = very stressful.

MSPSS includes 12 questions (each subscale having 4 items) (Zimet *et al.,* 1988). The total score can vary between 12 and 84, a high score at each subscale meaning a high level of the social support perceived. "There is a certain person who is close to me when I need her", "My family tries to help me", "I can talk about my problems with my friends" are some examples of items regarding the sources which provide social support. Items are answered on a 7-point Likert scale, from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (7).

Both questionnaires were translated from English to Romanian, and from Romanian into English, using the back-translation procedure. For testing the comprehensibility of the chosen instruments, a pilot study was made, on a sample of 60 high school students (34 girls and 26 boys), identifying in this way the issues related to understanding the items and eliminating any possible linguistic ambiguity.

Submitting the questionnaires took place in classroom and it lasted approximately half an hour. Students were presented the objectives of the research for establishing a relation as good as possible and a trustful climate.

The results and discussion

There were made analyses of reliability of subscales and of global scales (where it was possible), as well as correlational analyses between different scales of the same instrument, the two instruments having, as an average, a good internal consistency.

Therefore, the internal consistency of PQ scales proved to be in a good average (α = .630 - .941), excepting the first 2 subscales, regarding the issues with school (α = .698) and with the future (α = .630), where there was a low level of Alpha Cronbach coefficient.

The correlations between the different issues perceived as being stressful emphasized the existence of some significant relationships with colleagues and issues regarding the spending of free time (r = .696), between problems regarding the management of the free time and problems related to the opponent gender (r = .672), as well as problems with the self and the ones regarding the relations with the opponent gender (r = .668).

Also the Alpha Cronbach coefficient was calculated for the total scale of MSPSS and for the correspondent subscales. In this case, Alpha Cronbach for those 12 items is α = .863, more exactly α = .846 for the social support from the family, α = .821 for the support from friends and α = .785 for the social support perceived from other important people. These values indicate a good internal consistency of the total scale, and of the three subscales, the social support from the families being the most used (M = 5.89, DS = 1.25).

Analyzing the correlations between the subscales, it seems that the dimensions "the social support from other important people" and "social support from friends" are correlated in a moderate way, as in the case of the original studies (Zimet et al., 1988).

For identifying the effects which the variables age, sex, gender, family situation, have on the level of stress perceived and on the social support, we made the analyses of the variation (ANOVA) with the *post-hoc* test by Bonferroni, and the size of the effect with square eta (η^2).

We want to state the fact that the gender of the participants had a significant effect from a statistical point of view regarding the level of stress reported by the adolescents. So, girls perceive the problems related to school (t = -3.48, p = .001) (M = 2.86), future (t = -4.43, p <.001) (M = 3.15), parents (t = -2.67, p = .008) (M = 2.80), colleagues (t = -2.25, p = .025) (M = 2.52), with free time (*t* = -1.99, *p* = .047) (M = 2.75), with themselves (t = -3.38, p = .001) (M = 2.71) and in general with problems on their whole (t = -3,298, p = .001), more stressful than boys (respectively M = 2.61, 2.83, 2.59, 2.34, 2.59, 2.45, 2.55), who tend to minimize the stressful nature of events.

Also, girls perceive a greater social support from families (t = -3.26, p = .001) (M = 6.03), from friends (t = -3.04, p = .003) (M = 5.53), from other important

families (t = -7.11, p <0.001) (M = 6.08) and in total (t = -5.65, p <.001) (M = 5.88), in respect to the boys (respectively, M = 5.64, 5.16, 5.19, 5.33)

For the MSPSS scale appropriate variables were created which defined based on the average the number of subjects with high or low purposes. Starting from these variables, there were calculated the differences for each type of issues perceived as being stressful, using Student's t – Test for independent samples and for measuring the effect it was used d-Cohen.

The hypothesis was thus supported: from the analyses done, it results the fact that adolescents who registered a high score regarding the social support perceived from family members, evaluate the issues with parents (t = 3.19, p = .002) (M = 2.64), issues regarding the managing of free time (t = 2.38, p = .018), self-issues (t = 2.09, p = .037) (M = 2.56) and issues on their whole (t = 2.14, p = .033) (*M* = 2.63) as being less stressful in comparison with the group which reports a lower level of social support perceived from the family (respectively, M = 2.89, M = 2.81, M = 2.73 and M = 2.76) (see table 1).

In the case of our sample, it seems that the family acts as a valuable source of *coping*, being able to influence the choice of the strategies used in treating and solving the problems.

Table 1. Student's t: variables of minor stress between low and high Family Social Support

	Low Family SS (n=188)		High Family SS (n=337)						
	M	SD	M	SD	Diff. in means (MD)	t	df	p	Cohen's D
Problems with school	2.82	0.77	2.75	0.84	0.07	0.89	523	ns	.090
Problems with future	3.03	0.77	3.04	0.82	-0.01	-0.13	523	ns	-.010
Problems with parents	2.89	0.80	2.64	0.95	0.25	3.19	523	.002	.280
Problems with peers	2.50	0.82	2.43	0.89	0.07	0.90	523	ns	.080
Problems with leisure time	2.81	0.88	2.62	0.90	0.19	2.38	523	.018	.210
Problems with romantic relationships	2.54	0.86	2.39	0.99	0.14	1.71	523	ns	.160

Self-related problems	2.73	0.83	2.56	0.87	0.16	2.09	523	.037	.200
Problems TOTAL	2.76	0.60	2.63	0.71	0.12	2.14	523	.033	.190

High values of social support perceived from friends (M = 2.54) represent a protection factor only in the case of the problems which adolescents have with themselves (t = 2.68, p = 0.008), in comparison with the group which declares that has a low social support from friends (M = 2.74) (see *Table 2*).

In other words, adolescents can receive information and advice from friends regarding the aspects related to themselves, aspects which often are not reported to parents due to the fear of being judged by them or from the need of receiving the approval of those around them. The researches about confidentiality and self-disclosure in adolescence confirm this point of view (Broughton, 1981; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995).

Table 2. Student's t: variables of minor stress between low and high Friend Social Support

	Low Friend SS (n=214)		High Friend SS (n=311)						
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	Diff. in means (MD)	*t*	*df*	*p*	Cohen's D
Problems with school	2.83	0.79	2.73	0.83	0.10	1.35	523	ns	.120
Problems with future	3.03	0.73	3.04	0.85	-0.01	-0.11	523	ns	-.010
Problems with parents	2.72	0.80	2.73	0.97	-0.01	-0.07	523	ns	-.010
Problems with peers	2.48	0.79	2.44	0.91	0.04	0.57	523	ns	.050
Problems with leisure time	2.77	0.87	2.64	0.91	0.13	1.68	523	ns	.150
Problems with romantic relationships	2.51	0.87	2.40	0.99	0.11	1.37	523	ns	.120
Self-related problems	2.74	0.83	2.54	0.87	0.20	2.68	523	.008	.230
Problems TOTAL	2.73	0.62	2.65	0.70	0.08	1.41	523	ns	.120

Taking into consideration the multiple functions of friendship, we should underline the fact that friendship differ from other types of support, being less exclusive and marked by a higher equilibrium of powers (Hartup, 1983). In this respect, more authors consider that adolescents have a perception about friendship as being a support relationship, because this offers a new perspective on things, and the adolescent can discover in another way its own abilities of building ideas and receiving understanding, support and approval, throughout the information exchange between colleagues (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). From those who have a high/low social support from the part of other important people (see table 3) or have a high/low social support at a global level (see table 4) there are not significant differences from a statistic point of view in the perception of different problematic situations which cause stress.

Table 3. Student's t: variables of minor stress between low and high Significant Others Social Support

	Law Significant Others SS (n=214)		High Significant Others SS (n=311)						
	M	SD	M	SD	Diff. in means (MD)	t	df	p	Cohen's D
Problems with school	2.75	0.80	2.79	0.82	-0.04	-0.51	523	ns	-.050
Problems with future	3.02	0.76	3.05	0.83	-0.03	-0.44	523	ns	-.040
Problems with parents	2.74	0.84	2.72	0.95	0.01	0.16	523	ns	.020
Problems with peers	2.49	0.82	2.44	0.89	0.05	0.67	523	ns	.060
Problems with leisure time	2.73	0.87	2.66	0.92	0.07	0.82	523	ns	.080
Problems with romantic relationships	2.46	0.84	2.44	1.02	0.02	0.29	523	ns	.020
Self-related problems	2.66	0.83	2.59	0.88	0.07	0.88	523	ns	.080
Problems TOTAL	2.69	0.62	2.67	0.71	0.02	0.37	523	ns	.030

Table 4. Student's t: variables of minor stress between low and high Total Social Support

	Low Total SS (n=219)		High Total SS (n=306)						
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	Diff. in means (MD)	*t*	*df*	*p*	Cohen's D
Problems with school	2.79	0.78	2.76	0.84	0.02	0.33	523	ns	.040
Problems with future	3.01	0.76	3.05	0.83	-0.04	-0.55	523	ns	-.050
Problems with parents	2.79	0.82	2.68	0.95	0.11	1.40	523	ns	.120
Problems with peers	2.46	0.81	2.45	0.90	0.01	0.12	523	ns	.010
Problems with leisure time	2.71	0.84	2.67	0.94	0.04	0.54	523	ns	.040
Problems with romantic relationships	2.48	0.82	2.42	1.02	0.07	0.85	523	ns	.060
Self-related problems	2.69	0.80	2.57	0.89	0.11	1.54	523	ns	.140
Problems TOTAL	2.71	0.59	2.66	0.72	0.05	0.82	523	ns	.070

Conclusions

In this article we provided a brief introduction to the adolescence transition in our society and we studied thoroughly the role and the importance of the social support in reducing the negative impact of different life events.

The results of the study we made show that the adolescents who perceive the important people around them (especially family) as being available for giving them support, evaluate the problems with parents, the issues related with spending their free time, the problems with themselves, and problems in general, as being less stressful in comparison with the group which reports a lower level of social support perceived from the family.

These results confirm the fact that teenagers must be encouraged to establish easily close relations with the others (parents, friends), as a source of security and emotional support, for achieving social skills and for adapting to stressful situations.

So, in the programs of psychosocial intervention for adolescents, and in the educational counseling, we consider necessary to include some activities through which the teenagers become aware of the significance of social support in their own development and to develop skills involved in accessing and maintaining social support perceived from different sources.

Therefore, a major role in teenager's development is played by the support relationships within the family, which contribute to the development of social abilities and to the creation of a positive identity for children. In this regard, it is important that parents accept step by step their children's opinions and point of view, renegotiate the relationship with their own children, and resize the expectations towards them, recognize the commitments and the progress of their children, encourage them in difficult moments and search together the best solution, increase their self-esteem through positive encouragements, and create situations as for the children and adolescents to be able to put into effect their self-efficacy.

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