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This week we'll look at how social support, social network, and social cohesion affect health.

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In this mini-lecture:

- Social network
 - What is social network?
 - Structural components
 - Characteristics of network ties
 - Five psychosocial mechanisms of social network
- Biological & psychological pathways related to health status
- Social support

Our aim of this mini-lecture is to give a brief review of the concepts and measures available, to assess aspects of social networks and social support.

So first of all, we will briefly review a few concepts:

- social network – what is social network?
- We will also discuss structural components of social network,
- characteristics of network ties, and
- five psychosocial mechanisms of social network.

We'll also review biological and psychological pathways closely related to health status, and discuss social support.

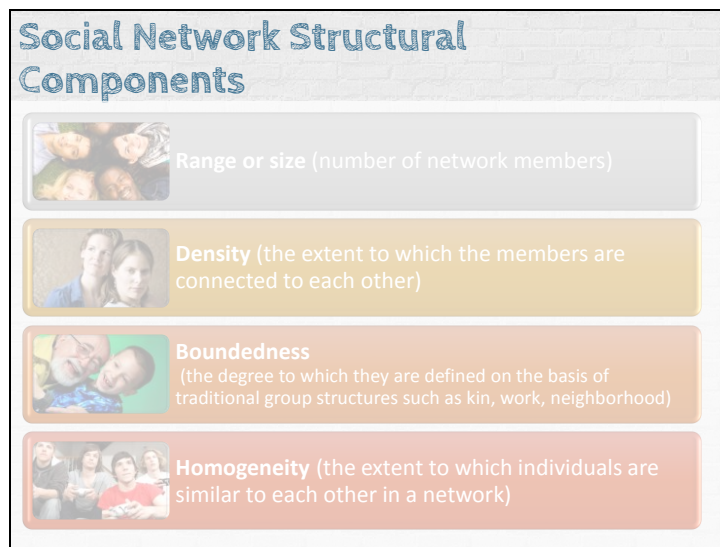
These are many instruments in this area now and our aim is not to be comprehensive but, rather, to help you identify instruments that are relevant to your work.

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A social network might be defined as the web of social relationships that surround an individual and the characteristics of those ties.

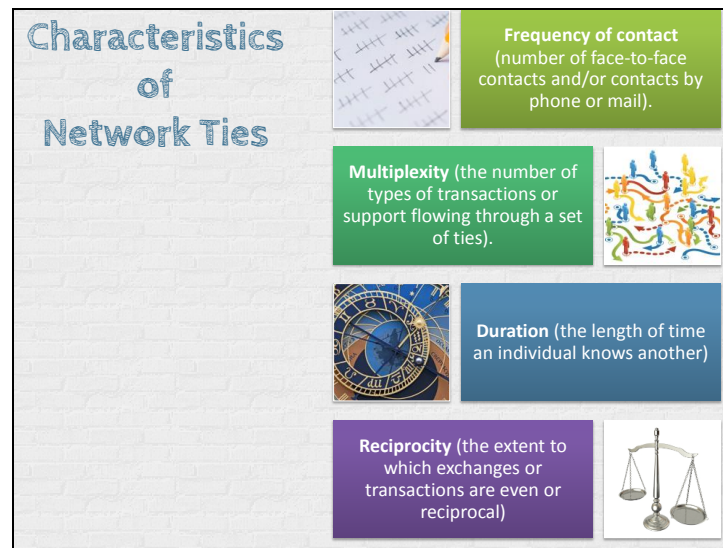
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Social networks have various characteristics;

- Range or size
- Density
- Boundedness, and
- Homogeneity.

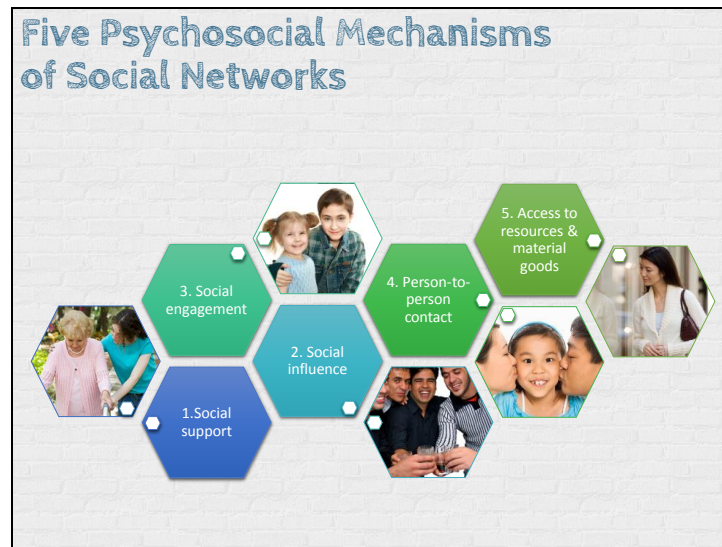
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Network ties vary, based on:

- The frequency of contact;
- The number of types of support that flow through a tie, or “multiplexity”
- The length of time an individual knows another individual,
- And reciprocity – how even or reciprocal are the transactions.

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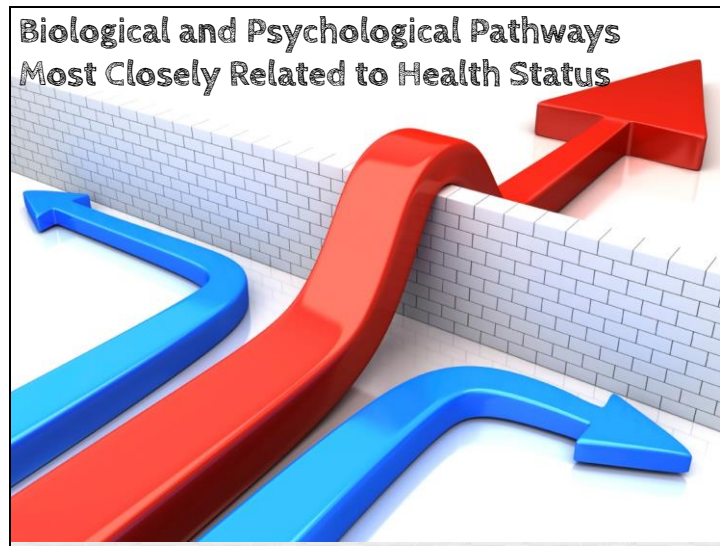
We have identified five mechanisms by which the structures of social networks might influence disease patterns.

- Social support is the mechanism most commonly invoked, but social networks also influence health through additional behavioral mechanisms, including
- Forces of social influence
- Levels of social engagement and participation
- Regulation of contact with infectious disease, and
- Access to material goods and resources.

These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. In fact, it is most likely that in many cases, they operate simultaneously.

The researcher starting an investigation in this area needs to develop clear hypotheses about which aspects of network structure and mechanisms may influence health.

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Social networks operate through the five behavioral mechanisms in shaping the health of individuals. In turn, these behavioral mechanisms affect other downstream factors through biologic and psychological pathways most closely related to the health outcomes.

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First, social networks through social influence or supportive functions influence health-promoting or health-damaging behaviors, such as tobacco and alcohol consumption, physical activity, dietary patterns, sexual practices, and illicit drug use.

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Psychological Pathways

social networks influence
cognitive and emotional states


A photograph of two people, a woman in a blue shirt and a man in a white shirt, running barefoot on a sandy beach. They are captured in motion, with their hair and clothing slightly blurred, suggesting a sense of speed and freedom. The background is a bright, hazy sky.

Second, social network through any number of pathways influence cognitive and emotional states such as self-esteem, social competence, self-efficacy, depression, and affect.

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Physiological Pathways

social networks
influence
physiologic
pathways related to
stress responses

A photograph of four men in business suits running on a red athletic track. They are captured from a high angle, showing their shadows on the track. The track has white lane markings and a red starting line. The men are in various stages of their running stride, conveying a sense of urgency and physical exertion.

And third, networks may have direct effects on health outcomes by influencing a series of physiologic pathways largely related to stress responses.

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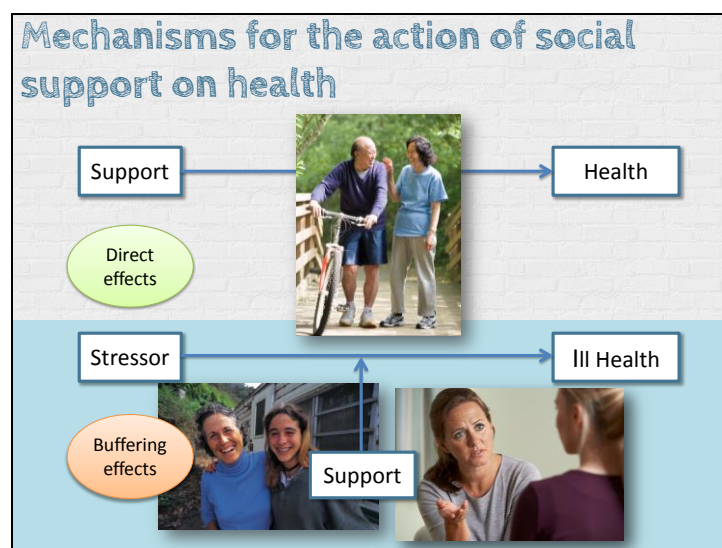


In general, types of social support may be divided into “emotional” and “practical” (or in other words “instrumental”).

In assessing the impact of support on health, it is important also to acknowledge the source of the support. For example, emotional support from different sources may have a different meaning, dependent on the closeness of the source to the respondent.

In recent years, social support research has recognized that close relationships can have negative, as well as positive aspects.

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There are two types of mechanisms for the action of social support on health. The first mechanism is that of direct effects of support on health. According to this mechanism, positive effects of support, or the lack of support resulting from social isolation, have direct effects on people's health.

The second mechanism operates through the so-called "buffering effect". According to this mechanism, support does not have any direct effect on health but helps to moderate the impact of acute and chronic stressors on health.

How does a largely psychologically perceived set of processes, such as social relation, directly influence bodily physiology? There are a number of pathways through which social support may affect health. Support from others may encourage healthier behaviors, such as reducing fat intake, exercising, or giving up smoking.

There are several ways in which the buffering effects of social support may also act.

- First, discussing a potential threat with a supportive person may help to reappraise the stressor, perhaps making it more manageable or even avoiding it.
- Secondly, practical aid or emotional consolation may help to moderate the impact of the stressor and help the person deal with the consequences of the stressor, which might otherwise be damaging for their health.


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Acknowledgements

This presentation contains excerpts from several online mini-lectures that were originally offered as part of a fully online course in “Social Justice in Public Health”, offered to University of Wisconsin students interested in earning a Master of Public Health degree.

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(No narration)