

Policy Brief: The Protective Role of Social Support for Caregiver Mental Health

Selected citations:

- Casale, M, Wild, L, Cluver, L and Kuo, C (In press). *The relationship between social support and anxiety among caregivers of children in HIV-endemic South Africa. Psychology, Health and Medicine.*
- Casale, M., Wild, L., & Kuo, C. (2013). "They give us hope": HIV-positive caregivers' perspectives on the role of social support for health. *AIDS Care*, doi:10.1080/09540121.2013.763893.

Primary caregivers of children in poor HIV-endemic communities represent a high risk population for mental health conditions, given the challenges associated with caring for biological and foster children in difficult social and financial conditions. This may be especially true if caregivers are living with HIV or other chronic illness. Studies from many parts of the world have shown social support (emotional and tangible support from friends, family and the broader community) to be a protective factor for health. However, no large studies have previously explored the relationship between social support and health with caregiver populations in HIV-endemic areas of southern Africa. Also, in southern Africa and beyond, there are gaps in our understanding of *how* social support may be positively influencing health. Yet this understanding is central to developing effective interventions. The mixed methods research described below aimed to determine whether more social support was associated with better caregiver mental health, and to explore caregivers' perceptions of how social support was affecting their health.

The Questions:

- Is more available social support associated with lower odds of depression and anxiety among caregivers of children in poor, HIV-endemic communities?
- What are the pathways and mechanisms through which caregivers perceive social support to be influencing their health?

The Research:

- Cross-sectional survey of 2477 adult caregivers of children aged 10-17 years in a rural and urban site in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (Young Carers KwaZulu-Natal Study)
- Qualitative follow-up study with 24 male and female caregivers (12 HIV-positive, 12 HIV-negative) who participated in the survey.

Finding 1: Living with HIV or other chronic illness was associated with worse caregiver mental health

Analysis of the survey data showed that:

- caregivers living with HIV were about **four times** more likely to be experiencing anxiety or depression than healthy caregivers
- caregivers living with other chronic illness were **about twice** as likely to be experiencing anxiety or depression than healthy caregivers

Finding 2: More social support was associated with better caregiver mental health

- Caregivers who reported having more available social support were less likely to be experiencing anxiety or depression than caregivers who reported having less support.

Finding 3: Pathways explaining the support – mental health relationship

The qualitative data showed that caregivers perceived social support to be positively influencing their mental health in various ways:

- By providing them with the opportunity to communicate their problems and receive advice
- By boosting their self-esteem, confidence and hope, which are factors associated with greater resilience
- By encouraging them to cope more proactively with stressors, e.g. by tackling problems more directly
- By reducing 'rumination', that is: by preventing caregivers from repetitively and negatively thinking about the causes of their illness and their imminent death.

Conclusions:

- Emotional and instrumental social support can be protective for the health of caregivers of children in HIV-endemic communities, whether or not they are living with HIV or other illness. Social support should be a key element of mental health interventions.
- Qualitative findings suggest that social support could be positively influencing caregiver mental health in various ways, for example by boosting psychological factors associated with resilience and encouraging them to cope with stress in ways that may be more beneficial for their health. It is important to instil hope among HIV-positive individuals in particular and to protect (particularly HIV-positive and/or female) caregivers from social isolation.

This research was generously funded by: