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Social support from weak ties: Insight from the literature on minimal social interactions

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Abstract
When people face difficult life events, such as cancer or bereavement, they fare better when they receive support. These “experiencers” are likely to seek and receive support from a wide range of people, from close others to acquaintances. Indeed, the social support literature has long acknowledged the value of having a diverse support network. Research suggests that experiencers often perceive “weak ties” (i.e., acquaintances) as sources of support, and that experiencers sometimes prefer to get support from weak ties rather than strong ties. Providing support can be challenging for all kinds of supporters, however weak ties may be more likely than strong ties to allow worries about their inability to provide effective support to stop them from providing any support at all, thus depriving experiencers of opportunities for additional support. In this paper, we focus on the fact that often the provision of support occurs via a social interaction. We draw on the social psychology literature on minimal social interactions to suggest reasons why potential weak tie supporters might doubt their ability to provide effective support, and to generate advice to encourage potential supporters to reach out. Finally, we suggest future areas of research, with the ultimate goal of helping to expand the support that is available for people experiencing difficult life events.
1 | INTRODUCTION

When people experience difficult life events, such as cancer and bereavement, they fare better when they receive support from other people: support helps people deal more effectively with stress and improves outlook and quality of life (e.g., Arora et al., 2007; Badr et al., 2012; Uchino et al., 1996). People seek and receive support from a variety of individuals in their social networks, but the majority of research has focused on support from close others, such as family members or spouses ("strong ties"; Collins et al., 2011; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009). However, there are acknowledged benefits of having a diverse support network that goes beyond these more obvious sources.

A series of studies by Cohen and colleagues finds evidence that the diversity of one’s social network has protective benefits for physical health. In one study, people who report greater social network diversity (regular contact with 12 types of people, including strong ties, but also neighbours, workmates, classmates, etc.) are less likely to develop a cold after receiving nasal drops containing a rhinovirus (Cohen et al., 1997). The more diversity in their social network, the lower their risk; people with the greatest network diversity were more than four times less likely to develop a cold, compared to people with the least network diversity. Even more consequentially, a meta-analysis found that social isolation, characterized by a lack of social contact and low participation in social activities, increased likelihood of death by 29%, even after controlling for age and other covariates (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

As studies of social network diversity suggest, “weak ties” – relationships involving “low emotional intensity, and limited intimacy” (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014a, p. 910)–can be a source of support for experiencers dealing with difficult life events. A hairdresser might lend a listening ear as you talk about how you are coping after the death of your spouse. A colleague down the hall who also had a miscarriage might be able to point you to a support group or tell you about support available from the workplace. A neighbour might walk your dog when you need to take your Mum to a doctor’s appointment.

Perceptions of the value of social (vs. support) interactions with weak ties have changed over time. When Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed that humans have not only a preference for connecting, but an evolutionary-based need to belong, they placed special emphasis on strong ties, arguing that “interactions with a constantly changing sequence of partners will be less satisfactory” (p. 497). More recently, researchers have theorized multiple pathways to belonging, proposing that minor, pleasant interactions with weak ties and strangers can also satisfy belongingness needs and contribute to well-being (Hirsch & Clark, 2019; Van Lange & Columbus, 2021), though people are often reluctant to interact with weak ties and strangers, and report a wide range of social concerns (Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021).

In the current paper, we provide evidence that weak ties can provide effective support to people experiencing difficult life events. We argue that everyday weak ties (e.g., hairdresser, colleague, neighbour), due to their ready availability, have the potential to be an even more valuable source of support than they currently are. We propose that, because provision of support often occurs via a social interaction, it is therefore subject to worries that are similar to those that people experience in other social situations, such as talking to strangers. We draw on the literature on minimal social interactions to gain insight into potential supporters’ specific concerns, and the extent to which they might be overblown. Finally, we draw on this literature to provide advice to would-be supporters, in an effort to encourage more support.

KEYWORDS
conversation, psychological distance, self-disclosure, social interaction, social support, weak ties
2 | SUPPORT FROM WEAK TIES

2.1 | Weak ties are widely available and often provide support

Although people report being extremely close with, and discussing important matters with, only a small handful of people (Roberts et al., 2009; Small, 2013), the total number of people in one's social network is likely to be at least several hundred, especially if you include technology-mediated connections such as those on social media (Dunbar, 1993; Golder et al., 2007; Tong et al., 2008). People not only have more weak ties in their network, they also interact with weak ties more frequently than strong ties. In two studies that involved (1) students and (2) adult community members counting their daily interactions using hand-held tally counters, weak ties accounted for 60% of daily social interactions (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014a). According to these numbers, weak tie interactions more than double a person's opportunities to receive support on a given day.

Weak ties might be widely available, but how often do experiencers receive support from weak ties? Two recent studies of everyday support (i.e., support to deal with daily hassles), one using experience sampling and one using daily diaries, both find that people are more than four times as likely to receive support from close others and attachment relationships (e.g., family members, romantic partners, friends) than non-close others and non-attachment relationships (e.g., people at work, acquaintances; Kammrath et al., 2020, Liu et al., 2021). However, people may prefer different supporters for everyday concerns than they do for more significant stress-inducing concerns. Indeed, in a study of people with breast cancer, the majority had disclosed their concerns not only to close relatives, friends, and partners, but also to non-close relatives and co-workers (73% and 61%, respectively; Figueiredo et al., 2004). Given that people have hundreds of weak ties in their networks, and the majority of their daily interactions are with weak ties, even these statistics represent an under-utilization of the potential of weak ties for social support.

2.2 | Weak ties are perceived as supportive

The wide availability of weak ties is only relevant to experiencers if weak ties are capable of providing effective support. Social support is theorized to lessen the experience of stress predominantly through two pathways: by helping people perceive less stress in the first place, or through lessening the effect of stress when it happens (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Based on the research in Section 2.1, we suspect that experiencers underestimate the availability of weak ties for support provision, so weak ties may not be particularly effective at decreasing experiencers' perceptions of stress directly (i.e., through the first pathway). In contrast, when weak ties do provide support, the recognition of that support likely helps to reduce stress when it occurs. Imagine running late to work, sprinting to catch the bus, and hopping on only to realize you forgot your wallet. If this is your regular route, perhaps the bus driver commiserates about the rough start to your day and allows you to board without paying. Certainly, the driver's gesture would make your stressful morning easier to handle.

Research suggests that the perception of support (believing support is available) can be more important for the well-being of experiencers than received support (the objective actions others take to provide support; Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010). There is evidence that experiencers perceive support interactions with weak ties as positively as they perceive support interactions with strong ties. In one study of people experiencing bereavement, experiencers were asked whether others had said/done something that was especially helpful/unhelpful. Although they were not specifically asked about who the supporter had been, the experiencers often spontaneously named the supporter. Of these cases, help had been provided by acquaintances almost as often as friends (27% and 30%, respectively; Lehman et al., 1986).

Another study asked experiencers (people with cancer) about helpful/unhelpful actions from different kinds of supporters. The majority of experiencers (62%) could recall at least one thing that acquaintances had done to "help [them] with [their] cancer" (Dakof & Taylor, 1990). Although this is lower than for friends (94%), it is worth noting that
people were often recalling support that had been provided years in the past, so smaller acts from weak ties might be easily forgotten.

2.3 | Weak ties are sources of information

When facing a difficult life event, experiencers often seek out information to help them understand their situation and to reduce uncertainty. One way to do this is to talk to someone who has the expertise that comes from experiencing a similar life event. For example, people living with cancer seek information from a variety of sources such as health professionals, online services, and support groups (Czaja et al., 2003; Northouse & Northouse, 1988; Rutten et al., 2006). Information is one of the key benefits of support groups; people with cancer and other medical conditions report that support groups often provide useful information about their illness and its expected course (Seale et al., 2006; Ussher et al., 2006; Zigron & Bronstein, 2019).

An experiencer’s weak ties are often more likely than their strong ties to have the information that experiencers seek. Because people only have a small number of strong ties, it is less likely that one of an experiencer’s few strong ties has experienced the same difficult life event, particularly if the event is uncommon (e.g., a rare disease, an early-in-life diagnosis of cancer). Indeed, people with cancer and other medical conditions say that their strong ties often cannot provide information about their illness and its expected course (Ussher et al., 2006; Zigron & Bronstein, 2019). This may explain why one of the main reasons that people turn to weak ties for support is that they have the right expertise (Small, 2013). Of course, there are exceptions; bereavement is often co-experienced with strong ties, whose social networks tend to overlap.

2.4 | Weak ties are sometimes preferred sources of support

Further evidence that weak ties are capable of providing effective support comes from a growing body of studies demonstrating that people sometimes prefer to receive support from weak ties rather than strong ties. Wright and Miller (2010) developed a measure of the preference for weak tie support, which assesses the extent to which experiencers acknowledge the disadvantages of receiving support from strong ties, and the advantages of receiving support from weak ties (utility, objectivity, security, comfort). They found that people prefer weak tie support in two situations.

First, people prefer weak tie support when they perceive deficiencies in their social networks. One study asked participants to consider which Facebook friends they would turn to for support for a “sensitive and significant problem” (Wright, 2012). The less people perceived a strong tie available for emotional support, the more they could see the value in support from weak ties (though see Krämer et al., 2021, which argues that, on Facebook, people value everyday informational and emotional support from weak ties less than support from strong ties). The deficiency may simply be lack of availability at the moment when support is needed; people often disclose to someone who just happened to be in the right place at the right time (Small, 2013).

Second, people prefer weak tie support when they are self-conscious about their difficulty. People who are generally prone to feeling self-conscious about their struggles, such as younger people, and particularly young males, express concern over disclosing to strong ties, such as friends and colleagues (Hilton et al., 2009). Similarly, people often choose to disclose to a stranger rather than a strong tie when the disclosure concerns a personal insecurity (Kim et al., 2020). According to construal level theory, people feel more psychological distance from weak ties (Trope & Liberman, 2010), and this distance may provide more objectivity and less judgment.

People are especially likely to feel self-conscious when the difficult life event they are experiencing is stigmatized. If an experiencer feels their health issue represents a mark of discredit and is a source of embarrassment or guilt (e.g., health issues related to one’s own smoking or drinking or eating), they may avoid close others for fear of
judgement (Goldsmith, 2004). Indeed, discussing stigmatized health issues with strong ties can prompt unwanted or insensitive advice, and lead to increased stress levels and negative health outcomes (Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011; Wright, 2016; Wright & Miller, 2010).

In one study, when support group members were more concerned about health-related stigma, they preferred weak tie support (Wright & Rains, 2013). Further, those who felt more positively (vs. less positively) about weak tie support reported less stress and depressive symptoms. Note, however, that one study of people with cancer found the opposite; when experiencers reported more stigma, those who felt more positively (vs. less positively) about weak tie support reported more stress (Rising et al., 2017).

3 | BARRIERS TO PROVIDING SOCIAL SUPPORT TO WEAK TIES

We have reviewed evidence suggesting that weak ties are perceived as capable sources of support. However, the fact that weak ties can provide effective support only matters to experiencers if they do provide support. Anecdotally, we have heard of people going to extremes (e.g., crossing the street) to avoid an experiencer. Even when they don't avoid the experiencer, supporters often avoid talking about experiencers' difficulties, by steering conversations to avoid emotionally charged topics (Badr & Taylor, 2006; Brashers et al., 2004; Dunkel-Schetter & Wortman, 1982; Helgeson et al., 2000; Lepore & Revenson, 2007; Wright & Miller, 2010).

If we assume that people generally want to support someone going through a difficult situation, given that humans are innately prosocial (Rand et al., 2012), then we need to ask: Why do people sometimes refrain from providing support when they might be inclined to? We propose that one important reason, worth further investigation, is that people lack confidence in their social skills, which results in doubts about their ability to provide effective support.

3.1 | Weak ties doubt their ability to provide effective support

Potential supporters may have doubts about whether they can provide effective support to a weak tie. In a study examining the long-term effects of bereavement, supporters seem to know what to say to experiencers in a hypothetical situation, but at the same time, the majority of experiencers reported occasions when would-be supporters, both weak ties and strong ties, said or did something unhelpful (Lehman, et al., 1986). To reconcile these conflicting findings, the authors theorized that the tension of face-to-face interactions can lead to confusion and distress about what to say and how to say it.

There is some evidence that potential supporters worry about their own competence, and about how the experiencer feels during the support interaction. In one study, parents who needed to inform children about family illness struggled with knowing what to say due to concerns about causing the children sadness and anxiety (Patenaude & Schneider, 2017). A recent set of studies examining everyday support finds additional evidence that potential supporters worry about their own competence and how the experiencer will feel, and also how they will feel during a support interaction: supporters worry that it will be awkward, uncomfortable, and difficult to provide support, and they predict that the experiencer will not feel good or supported (Dungan et al., 2021). Further, supporters expected to feel more awkward and less competent the more distant their relationship was with the experiencer (i.e., with weak ties vs. strong ties).

Although potential strong tie supporters are also likely to experience these doubts, they may feel obliged to at least try to provide support, whereas weak tie supporters may feel less obliged, and they may conclude that it is better to say nothing at all. A further understanding of the cognitions that make people feel anxious about providing support could help both weak and strong tie supporters feel more comfortable, and result in them providing more support.
3.2 | Weak ties' doubts about their ability to provide effective support are similar to people's doubts about their ability to talk to strangers

Weak ties are likely to doubt their ability to provide support when that support is conveyed via social interaction (whether in person or mediated by technology). Accumulating evidence suggests that people consider themselves to be less socially skilled than others (Davidai et al., 2021; Deri et al., 2017; Whillans et al., 2017). This lack of confidence in one's social skills may be especially likely to manifest in support (vs. social) interactions, because it may seem even more important to say the “right thing”.

People’s worries about their social skills have been studied in the social psychology literature on minimal social interactions. Research finds that social interactions with weak ties are associated with well-being and belonging (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014a), and even interactions with strangers have consequences for well-being (Epley & Schroeder, 2014; Gunaydin et al., 2021; Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014b). If talking to strangers makes people feel good, why are so many people reluctant to do so? In the case of talking to strangers, people worry about not enjoying the conversation, not liking their partner, and not having the necessary conversation skills (Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021). They also worry about their partner not enjoying the conversation, not liking them, and lacking conversational skills.

Many of these worries are theoretically relevant to support interactions with weak ties (and likely strong ties too). The supporter is likely to worry about how they will feel during the conversation (e.g., will I feel anxious?), whether they have the necessary skills (e.g., will I find the words to express my support?), how the experiencer will feel (e.g., will I make them feel sad?), and how the experiencer will perceive them (e.g., will they feel supported or will they feel like I let them down?) Indeed, the literature reviewed in Section 3.1 provides evidence of supporters worrying about how they will feel during a support interaction, whether they have the necessary skills, and how the experiencer will feel. But of course, some of the worries people have about talking to strangers are less likely to be relevant to support interactions (e.g., worrying about being liked), and people might have additional worries for support interactions that are not relevant (or, at least, less relevant) to talking to strangers (e.g., worrying that the conversation will be emotionally charged).

3.3 | Weak ties' doubts about their ability to provide effective support are likely overblown

Although people report a wide range of concerns before talking to a stranger, these worries seem to be overblown. People enjoy conversations with strangers and feel more conversationally competent than they had anticipated (Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021; Sandstrom et al., 2022). They also think their partner enjoyed the conversation more and judged them more positively than they had anticipated.

Are people’s worries about providing support to a weak tie similarly exaggerated? To the extent that people’s worries about support interactions with weak ties stem from similar feelings of social inadequacy, then we might expect this to be true. A recent study of everyday support to strangers found that supporters reported fewer negative feelings (awkwardness and discomfort) than they had expected, and reported feeling more competent (i.e., the conversation had been less difficult) than they had expected (Dungan, et al., 2021). However, this study involved providing support to strangers rather than weak ties, and cannot separate the worries about providing effective support from the worries about talking to a stranger. Further research is needed to examine this question, both for everyday support and support for difficult life events.

4 | ADVICE FOR POTENTIAL SUPPORTERS

The minimal social interactions literature provides insight into the specific issues that may concern potential supporters, and prevent them from reaching out to weak ties. The same literature can be tapped for advice on how to overcome these concerns.
The first, and most essential piece of advice for potential supporters is: Don’t avoid weak ties who are experiencing difficult life events. Experiencers emphasize the value of simply being listened to and comforted in a time of need. Both people with cancer and people dealing with bereavement find avoidance of social contact particularly unhelpful (Aoun et al., 2018; Dakof & Taylor, 1990). This advice also resonates with people who worry about talking to strangers; in one study, when an app offered several tips to help make it easier for people to start a conversation with a stranger, “Be brave” (essentially: “Just do it”) was the tip that people used the most often (Sandstrom et al., 2022).

After supporters work up the nerve to start a conversation, what should they say? People who are nervous about starting difficult or unfamiliar conversations often look for tips on what to say. Intuitively, it makes sense that tips (e.g., on how to start a conversation) might help counteract common fears. However, a meta-analysis of two studies found that tips on how to start a conversation with a stranger were not particularly helpful; they reduced some fears (about one’s own and their partner’s enjoyment), but not others (one’s own and their partner’s liking and competence), and had no effect on how the conversation actually went (Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021). Compounding this issue, reducing people’s fears about what to say when providing support may be more difficult than reducing their fears about what to say to a stranger, because the situation is likely to feel more fraught. Though there are several common ways to start a social conversation (e.g., talking about the weather), there is little consensus in the literature about what are the “right” and “wrong” things to say in a support interaction, and whether there even are “right” and “wrong” things to say.

In terms of providing support, perhaps high-level tips are more helpful than tips about specific things to say or avoid saying. Although the Theory of Optimal Matching (Cutrona & Russell, 1990) and Relational Regulation Theory (Lakey & Orehek, 2011) have different ideas about the relative strength of the person and the situation on the effectiveness of different kinds of support, both theories suggest that the supporter should ask the experiencer what kind of support they want. A would-be supporter might simply ask the experiencer whether they want help wrestling with a problem or gathering information, just want to share what is on their mind, or just want to talk about ordinary things and feel “normal”.

Finally, potential supporters may feel reassured to know that providing support to weak ties is likely to get easier with practice. In terms of talking to strangers, people who talked to a new person every day for 5 days reported feeling progressively less worried about being rejected, and progressively more competent (Sandstrom et al., 2022). It may be harder to get such intense, repeated practice in providing support to weak ties, but since 1 in 2 or 3 people will experience cancer in their lifetimes (American Cancer Society, 2020; Cancer Research UK, 2022), and 1 in 4 or 5 pregnancies ends in miscarriage (Miscarriage Association, 2022), opportunities for practice may, unfortunately, be less scarce than one expects. Given the prevalence of these and other difficult life events, and the enormous potential for positively impacting the people who experience them, the importance of developing skills is obvious.

5 | SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper makes connections between the health psychology literature on social support and the social psychology literature on minimal social interactions to investigate social support from weak ties. We examined the following three questions, that we believe are important, but largely overlooked, and we suggest that much more empirical research is needed to address each of them.

5.1 | How often do experiencers receive support from weak ties?

To start, more research is needed to understand the extent to which people already receive support from weak ties. In past research, people report whether or not they feel that certain kinds of support are available to them, or they report whether they feel that they have received certain kinds of support, but they are usually not asked who the source of
the perceived or received support is. Asking people who they think they would turn to for support is not sufficient; people often disclose to someone who just happened to be in the right place at the right time (Small, 2013). Asking people to remember, after time has passed, who they did actually turn to for support is also problematic; memory errors may bias the support interactions that are remembered. Future studies should use methods that minimize the drawbacks of recall. Recent studies using experience sampling and daily diaries have found that people are more than four times as likely to receive everyday support from strong versus weak ties (Kammrath et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2021). Similar methods should be used to understand how often weak ties already provide support for more difficult life events, and how effective they are for various types of support.

5.2 | How effective is support from weak ties?

We reviewed evidence suggesting that weak ties can provide effective support, including work showing that people seek out weak ties for support, especially when they feel they can’t count on their strong ties, or they feel self-conscious. More work is needed to investigate what types of supporters (strong ties, professionals, weak ties) can provide what types of support (informational, emotional, instrumental...) in what situations (everyday, difficult life events). Further, the extent to which the support is high-level (i.e., focused on the cause of the issue) or low-level (i.e., focused on the effect of the issue) predicts what type of supporter people turn to for everyday stressors (i.e., the social proximity of the supporter; Lee & Fujita, 2022), and therefore might also predict the perceived effectiveness of the support. Similarly, we need to know more about the benefits of weak ties as a source of perceived support, a source of actual/received support, and even potentially as a source of invisible support, which occurs when the experiencer does not perceive a supportive interaction occurred but a supporter maintains they provided support (e.g., Bolger et al., 2000). This is, of course, extremely challenging to unravel, and the methods needed to address these questions (e.g., experience sampling, or daily diary) are time-intensive and expensive.

In this paper, we shine a light on support from weak ties because we believe that there is potential here for supporters to receive more support. We do not mean to suggest that support from weak ties will always be effective, or will replace the need for support from strong ties. Indeed, there may be downsides to relying too much on weak ties for support; given that emotional disclosure builds intimacy (Laurenceau et al., 1998), withholding opportunities for a strong tie to provide support can negatively affect one’s closest relationships. As discussed in Section 1, having a diverse support network seems to convey the most benefits to experiencers.

We focused on difficult life events, but sometimes the available evidence was from studies of everyday stressors. Our focus was on worries about social skills, and we expect that the worries people have about providing support for dealing with everyday stressors will be similar, but magnified, when providing support for difficult life events, because the stakes will feel higher, and it will feel more important to get the words right. However, experiencers may benefit from different types of support from weak ties for everyday stressors versus difficult life events, and indeed for different types of difficult life events. For example, belonging support may be especially important for people dealing with bereavement, who have lost a source of their feelings of belonging.

5.3 | Why do people sometimes not provide support, and how could we encourage more support?

More research is needed to understand the barriers to providing support, and to test interventions to break down these barriers. To the extent that people’s worries about providing support stem from general worries about their social skills, many of these worries will affect strong tie supporters as well as weak tie supporters, and interventions are likely to encourage more support from all sources.

Potential supporters might be more likely to reach out to an experiencer if they are reminded that the knowledge they have from going through their own difficult life event might be helpful to the experiencer (though of course it is
important for supporters to acknowledge that the experiencer’s situation is unique). Research on prosocial spending finds that people are in a better mood after donating money when they can see the impact of their spending (Aknin et al., 2013), so supporters might also benefit from seeing, or thinking about, their potential impact.

Another possible intervention would be to direct supporters’ attention to the warmth of their message, rather than its content. Past research finds that when a stranger delivers a compliment, expresses gratitude, or provides everyday support, whereas actors focus on their own competence, targets focus more on actors’ warmth (Dungan et al., 2021; Epley et al., 2022; Kumar & Epley, 2018; Zhao & Epley, 2021). In one study, when actors were induced to focus on the warmth conveyed by their compliment, they were more interested in expressing their compliment (Zhao & Epley, 2021). Similarly, an intervention that helps supporters focus on the warmth of their message of support (rather than its content), and makes supporters aware of the extent to which experiencers value warmth, might make people more likely to reach out.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, we made connections between the health psychology literature on social support and the social psychology literature on minimal social interactions to examine the psychological barriers that are likely to inhibit the provision of social support to weak ties. More research is needed to understand why people are concerned about providing support and how to counteract those concerns so that experiencers have access to more support.

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