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Social Contacts and Depression

November 22, 2013



A collaborative study including Ms. Lindsey E. McKenzie, Mr. Ram Polur, Ms. Cholrelia Wesley, and Ms. Jessica Allen, MPH students at the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health Georgia Southern University examine social contacts and depression in middle and advanced adulthood. The report is coauthored by Dr. Jian Zhang, associate professor of epidemiology at the the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health Georgia Southern University. The aim of the study is to assess how social contacts are associated with depression among the general population. We analysed the data of 5,681 adults aged 40 or older, who completed a depression screening as a part of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2005–2008. Depression was ascertained using the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ), a nine-item screening instrument asking about the frequency of depression symptoms over the past two weeks. A PHQ score of 10 or higher was defined as depression.

The findings of the current study are of great importance for both public health and clinical practices. Although the digital technology has been changing almost every aspect of modern society, the current study provides additional evidence that traditional social contacts, through religious activity and marriage, remain strongly associated with a reduced risk of depression. The interventions based on family, neighborhood, church or community might have a greater impact and relevancy in the treatment or prevention of depression, in particular among men. Digital social networking is one of the biggest growing industries, creating a new platform to make social contacts. There is an urgent need to explore how to maximize the potential of digital social networking to strengthen social bonds while minimizing its negative effects.

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