Social Support and NSSI: The Impact of COVID-19 Stress

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Background

Recent research reports an increase in the prevalence of self-injury (NSSI) among adolescents during the pandemic, jumping from 17% to 28% in 2021 (Zetterqvist, 2021). The reasons for this needed exploration. Social support acts as a protective factor for NSSI, meaning that youth with greater levels of social support are less likely to engage in NSSI (Mogens, et al., 2014). During the pandemic, there has been significantly more stress, and many have experienced less social support due to COVID regulations (Carosella, et al., 2021). This study aimed to understand the impact of COVID stress on the relationship between social support and NSSI. We hypothesized that COVID stress would moderate the relationship between social support and NSSI.

Methods

A random sample of undergraduate students at a midwestern university were recruited through an email invitation (n= 309, 77.7% female, 91.6% white) to complete an online survey. Students who accessed the link indicated informed consent and completed an anonymous survey measuring COVID stress, social support, and NSSI frequency over the past year. To test the hypothesis, we ran a moderated regression analysis via process macro in SPSS with 5,000 bootstrapped re-samplings.

Individuals experiencing high levels of COVID stress were significantly more likely to engage in NSSI, especially when social support levels were low.

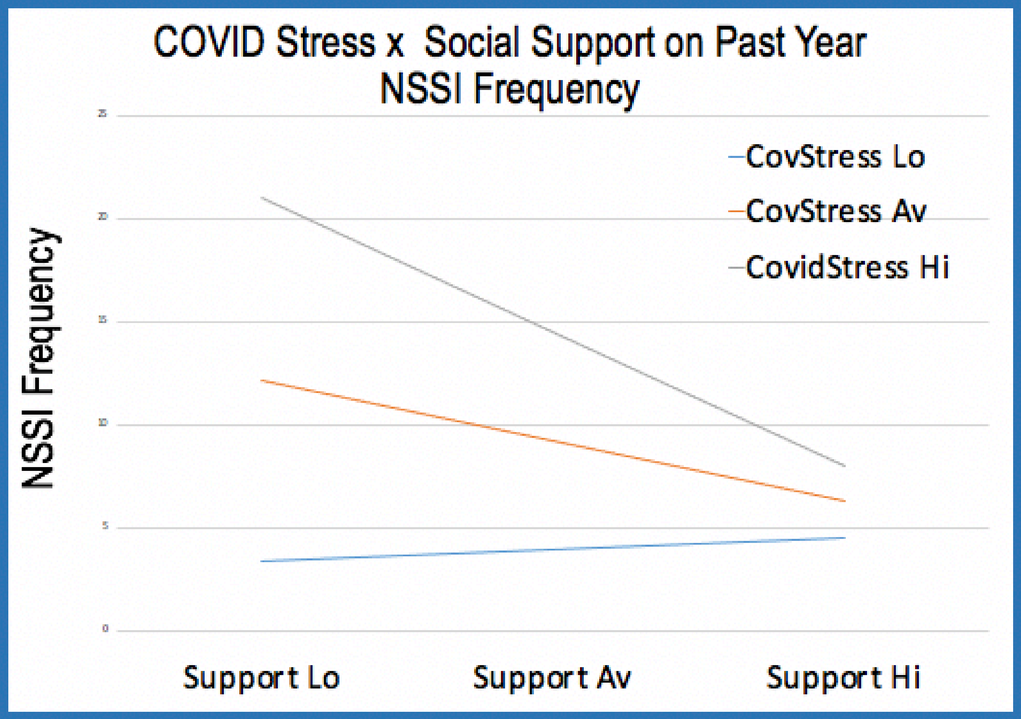

Figure 1: The graph shows when COVID Stress is high, social support levels play a larger role in determining NSSI frequency than when COVID Stress is low.

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Results

Our hypothesis was supported in that COVID stress moderated the relationship between social support and NSSI ($F(1,305) = 5.09$, $p < .03$). When COVID stress was high, the effect of social support on NSSI frequency was the strongest (t = -2.55, p<.01, 95% CI [-9.368, -1.202]). The protective effect of social support was greatest at high levels of COVID stress, contributing to steeper declines in past year NSSI, compared to average or low COVID stress. The full model accounted for 7.0% of the variance (F (3.00, 305.00) = 7.63, p = .000), indicating a small effect.

Implications

Our results highlight the importance of strengthening social support for at-risk individuals during times like the pandemic, even if the support must happen virtually. Limitations to this study include the small, homogenous sample size and the self-report data collection. Future studies could examine if there are specific types of social support that serve as protective factors against NSSI engagement more than other types. In addition, researchers could evaluate whether virtual support has the same impact on individuals that in-person support can.

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