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Social Support Is Most Effective When Provided Invisibly

New research by University of Minnesota psychologists shows how social support benefits are maximized when provided "invisibly" -- that is without the support recipient being aware that they are receiving it.

The study, "Getting in Under the Radar: A Dyadic View of Invisible Support," is published in the December issue of the *Journal of Psychological Science*.

In the study, graduate student Maryhope Howland and professor Jeffrey Simpson suggest there may be something unique about the emotional support behaviors that result in recipients being less aware of receiving support.

"While previous research has frequently relied solely on the perceptions of support recipients, these findings are notable in that they reflect the behavior of both parties in a support exchange," Howland said. "They also mark a significant step forward in understanding how and when social support in couples is effective."

Receiving social support such as, advice or encouragement is typically thought of as positive, a generous act by one person yielding benefits for another in a time of need. Effective support should make someone feel better and more competent, it is generally acknowledged. However, what is supposedly considered "support" may make someone feel vulnerable, anxious, or ineffective in the face of a stressor, Howland and Simpson found.

In the U of M study, 85 couples engaged in a videotaped support interaction in the lab. Support recipients were instructed to discuss something they'd like to change about themselves with their partners, who thus had the opportunity to provide support. After the interaction, support recipients reported how much support they had received (or were aware of receiving), and trained observers then watched the videotapes and coded the interactions to gauge the extent to which any support provided was invisible or visible.

Recipients whose partners provided more invisible emotional support such as reassurance or expressions of concern, but believed they had received less emotional support, experienced greater declines in anger and anxiety. This was also true for invisible practical support such as advice or direct offers of assistance. Additionally, in the case of invisible practical support, recipients experienced increases in self-efficacy.

Romantic partners are often a primary source of support, and understanding how the support process works between the two partners is likely to inform counseling and clinical approaches as well as future research in this area, according to the study's authors.