The Effects of High and Low Technologies on Emotional Support for Caregivers: An Exploratory Study

Robert Z. Zheng, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA
Candice M. Daniel, VA Salt Lake City Medical Center, Salt Lake City, UT, USA
Robert D. Hill, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA
Marilyn Luptak, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA
Bret L. Hicken, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA & VA Salt Lake City Medical Center, Salt Lake City, UT, USA
Marren Grant, VA Salt Lake City Medical Center, Salt Lake City, UT, USA
Randall Rupper, VA Salt Lake City Medical Center, Salt Lake City, UT & University of Utah, Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Center, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

ABSTRACT

Understanding the role of modern technology in providing adjunctive emotional support to caregivers has been a focus in contemporary caregiving research. However, it remains largely unknown (1) whether there are differences regarding the technologies used in caregiving support to achieve this objective and (2) which factors influence the outcome of emotional support. The current research describes a framework to address this issue and examines the role of different technologies in supporting caregiver emotional needs. Sixty older caregivers were recruited in the current study and randomly assigned to high and low technology guided caregiver support conditions. The findings revealed a significant impact in the high technology guided intervention for emotional support as measured by burden reduction. The discussion on the use of high technology guided support strategies for older caregiver training is offered with implications for future research and practice.

Keywords: Burden Reduction, Caregiver Burden, Caregiving, Digital Technology, Emotional Support, Internet

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INTRODUCTION

Family caregivers provide important physical and emotional support for individuals with advanced aging conditions including dementia, chronic disease, and other age-related issues associated with severe frailty (Family Caregiving Alliance, 2012; Funk, Stajduhar, Toye, Aoun, Grande, & Todd, 2010; Stajduhar, Funk, Toye, Grande, Aoun, & Todd, 2010). Studies have shown that caregivers, especially older caregivers, are under physical and emotional pressures. These increase emergent risk for a wide range of psychiatric and medical disorders which, in turn, diminish their ability to provide ongoing care to a loved-one in need (Leggett, Zarit, & Taylor, 2011; Vetter, Myllykangas, & Donorffio, 2011). The provision of support for caregivers has been elevated in recent years to one of the largest national public health concerns facing older Americans. It is not surprising, therefore, that caregiver support programs have proliferated.

Of particular interest to researchers and practitioners is how to maximize the support to caregivers when professionals have limited personnel to address a large population in need. This is especially the case for caregivers who live in remote rural areas. Traditionally, because formal caregiver support from agencies or healthcare providers is provided through in-person visits, caregivers must leave the home (and the care recipient) to attend support groups or receive other caregiver services. However, leaving the care recipient with another person (if one can be found) is difficult for many caregivers and distressing for care recipients. In some cases, agencies provide support services in the home, though cost and travel often limit these services to only those caregivers who have the resources or the access to professional in-home support. Modern technologies such as personal computers, tablets, smart phones, and other digital devices offer isolated caregivers an opportunity to receive caregiving services without having to leave the home or travel for facility-based services. Many of these devices connect to the Internet, allowing caregivers access to multimedia information that can enhance learning caregiver skills. Agencies may use modern technologies to deliver caregiver support at lower cost because such innovation obviates the need for travel and in-person appointments.

The literature offers mixed findings regarding the use of the Internet for caregiving support. Some studies report the benefits of applying the Internet to caregiving issues. New forms of modern digital technology known as high technology can improve caregiver skills and result in positive caregiving outcomes (Beauchamp, Irvine, Seeley, & Johnson, 2005; Colvin, Chenoweth, & Bold, 2004). Other studies, however, reported data that argues for low technology approaches such as phone communication since some older caregivers have difficulty accessing and using the web and other forms of high technologies (Bank, Arguelles, & Rubert, 2006; Gray-Stanley & Muramatsu, 2011). Given the equivocal literature pertaining to the use of the high and low technologies in caregiving support, further research on the role of both kinds of technologies in caregiving support is warranted. The goal of the current study was to examine the effects of high and low technologies on caregivers’ emotional support.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research has indicated that failing to provide caregivers with timely support when needed often leads to high levels of stress which may further result in anxiety, depression, sleep disorder, and other health problems (Family Caregiving Alliance, 2012). Providing caregivers with emotional support may reduce burnout rate, alleviate caregiver burden and more importantly, improve their health condition as well as their abilities to cope with stress and pressure.

Emotional Support for Caregivers

The current literature demonstrates that caregivers are under chronic stress and are therefore vulnerable to emotional and physical problems. Using a path analysis Yoon (2003) examined the relationship between emotional support and physical/mental health of the caregivers. The results showed that emotional support is
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