SOCIAL SUPPORT: SEEK AND YE SHALL FIND

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Studies of social support typically have relegated the recipient of support to a passive role. Little empirical work has looked at an individual's active attempts to garner support from others. Two studies are reported that investigate individual differences in active support seeking. In study one ($n = 66$), the criterion validity of a new scale — dubbed SEEK — was demonstrated. Subjects who reported that they seek support from others in times of need (as measured by SEEK) requested more social support following failure at a laboratory task than did subjects who reported that they do not seek social support. Study two ($n = 60$) examined the relationship between the reported seeking of social support and its perceived availability. As predicted, a positive relationship obtained, suggesting that those who received social support may in part have created this condition. Seeking social support was also positively associated with self-esteem, self-efficacy, and optimistic beliefs about the consequences of seeking support. People who seek social support may be psychologically predisposed to do so. Taken together, these studies imply that investigations of social support should take into account: (a) people's active roles in obtaining support, and (b) the psychological concomitants of support seeking.

Social supports are the psychological, informational, or material resources provided by one person to another person in need (Cobb, 1976; Heller, 1979). The lack of social support is associated with poor psycho-social adjustment and poor health, while the presence of social support is associated with healthy and stable functioning (e.g. Gore, 1978; Holahan & Moos, 1981, 1982). Thus, naturally

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occurring supportive contacts among people may buffer the effects of stressful life events (Dean & Lin, 1977).

How should social support be conceived? Several writers have suggested that social support processes may be more complex than some researchers have previously assumed. Although social support may buffer the impact of stressful life events, other dynamics may be involved in the relationship between social support and psychological health (Shinn, et al., 1984; Thoits, 1982). For example, symptoms resulting from emotional disturbance (e.g. depression, anxiety, etc.) may alienate potential support-givers, thus reducing the level of social support available to the individual (Monroe, 1983). More generally, a person's social behavior, together with his or her psychological status, may affect social selection processes which dictate how much support he or she has available from others (Cohen et al., 1986; Heller et al., 1986; Sarason et al., 1986; Shinn et al., 1984). The active search for social support is one facet of the individual's behavior which may be influenced by his or her psychological status, and which may directly influence the level of support the person receives.

To date, most research has relegated the recipient of social support to a passive role, ignoring the possibility that the individual may actively garner support from others. Several authors have criticized this neglect (e.g. DiMatteo & Hays, 1981; Gottlieb, 1983; Thoits, 1986), and some data suggest that people's actions do indeed influence the nature and extent of support received from others. For example, Gottlieb (1981) found positive correlations between indices of social participation (e.g. number of community events attended, frequency of chatting with neighbors) and the number of people available for help with personal and task needs. Patterns of social interaction may influence the amount of available social support. Not known from these data is the relationship between initiating contacts with others in times of need and receiving social support in everyday situations.

We believe that individuals receive social support to the degree that they actively seek it under appropriate circumstances (cf. DePaulo, 1982; Gross & McMullen, 1982). If a person is troubled by a lack of money, he or she may ask another person for a loan, rather than wait for money to be offered. Similarly, if a person is upset by an unhappy romance, she or he may request advice from friends or family, rather than wait for comments that might not be made spontaneously.

We also believe that people who are psychologically well adjusted are the most likely to seek social support when it is needed. Collins & Pancoast (1976) found that people who frequently gave support to others saw themselves as having the psychological strength to interact socially without diminishing their own well-being. Analogously, we believe that people who esteem themselves (Coopersmith, 1967), who see themselves as capable of effective action (Bandura, 1982, 1986; Sherer et al., 1982), and who expect the consequences of seeking social support to be positive are those who seek support. People who are negativistic toward themselves and the process of seeking help may avoid initiating contacts with others during times of need.

The present research explicitly examined the active seeking of social support and some of its psychological concomitants. We describe a newly developed self-report questionnaire called SEEK, which measures the degree to which individuals initiate supportive contacts with others following experience with potentially stressful events. We report two preliminary investigations using this questionnaire. Study one ascertains the criterion validity of this questionnaire by seeing if it predicts the actual behavior of seeking support following failure at a task. We expected that the individuals who scored high on SEEK would be the same individuals who initiated requests for social support following failure, when it would be appropriate to ask for support, but not after success, when it would be unnecessary (and therefore inappropriate) to do so. Study two assesses the relationship between self-reported seeking of social support, the perceived availability of social support, and some psychological concomitants of support seeking (self-esteem, self-efficacy, beliefs about the outcomes of support seeking). We expected social support availability to be positively associated with the seeking of social support. In keeping with the notion that positive psychological adjustment is associated with seeking social support when it is needed, we also expected the seeking of social support to be positively associated with self-esteem, with self-efficacy, and with positive beliefs about the consequences of seeking support. Our more general intention in this research is to suggest that social support is not simply given to passive recipients; instead, those who do or do not receive support may in part create this condition. In addition, our intention is to suggest that people who seek support may be psychologically predisposed to do so.

Study One

Subjects. Sixty-six undergraduate volunteers at a large state university in the South-eastern United States (thirty-six males, thirty females) participated in this study.

Questionnaire. The SEEK scale used in this study contains seventeen forced-choice items. Each item presents respondents with a hypothetical problem involving themselves and asks them to choose their response from two alternatives. One alternative describes the active seeking of appropriate supportive contacts from others. The other alternative describes not seeking such contacts. The full-length version of the SEEK scale (35 items) is presented in a table in study two.

A response seeking social support is scored 2, whereas a response not seeking support is scored 1. Thus, SEEK is scored in the direction of the active seeking of social support. In the present sample the mean of SEEK was 27.24 ($SD = 2.70$). Internal consistency, estimated by Cronbach's (1951) alpha, was modest: 0.56. Males and females did not differ in their average scores.

Procedure. Subjects participated individually. They were randomly assigned to success (easy problems) versus failure (difficult problems) conditions, given a sheet of paper with anagrams at the top, and asked to spend eight minutes unscrambling as many as possible and writing the solution at the bottom of the page. In the success condition, there were 15 anagrams to be solved; these had common words as solutions (e.g. CAIHR = CHAIR). In the failure condition, there were 24 anagrams; these had less common solutions (e.g. PMUOI = OPIUM). Subjects working at easy problems indeed solved more anagrams than subjects working at difficult problems (14.36 versus 9.00, $t = 6.83$, d.f. = 64, $p < 0.0001$), so this manipulation was deemed successful.

After the problems, the experimenter announced a five-minute break. During this break, the experimenter unobtrusively counted the number of specific and unambiguous requests for social support that were initiated by the subject (e.g. 'How did I do?'; 'Is this as hard as it seems?'). To avoid influencing subsequent requests, the experimenter responded to the subjects' comments in a noncommittal fashion. Following this break, the subject was asked to complete several questionnaires, among them SEEK. (Questionnaires were completed after the problems and the break in order to minimize demand characteristics that might be created if SEEK were completed before the manipulation.) SEEK scores were not affected by success versus failure.

Results

Sex of subject did not affect the results, so the data were collapsed across this factor. To test the prediction, the sample was dichotomized at the median of SEEK ($= 27.50$), and a 2×2 between-subjects analysis of variance, with the factors experimental condition (success versus failure) and SEEK (high versus low), was conducted on the number of requests for social support. Figure 1 presents the mean number of requests for social support for the different conditions. As can be seen, more requests were made following failure than following success (main effect: $F = 27.59$, d.f. = 1, 62, $p < 0.001$), showing the manipulation to be a plausible one. As expected, there was an interaction between condition and SEEK (interaction: $F = 4.37$, d.f. = 1, 62, $p < 0.05$). Subjects who scored high on SEEK made more requests for social support following failure than did subjects who scored low ($p < 0.05$).

FIGURE 1
Mean number of requests for social support among high versus low seekers under success versus failure conditions

Interestingly, subjects who scored low on SEEK made more requests following success than did subjects who scored high ($p < 0.05$). There was no main effect of SEEK per se.

Discussion

These results support SEEK's criterion validity. A self-report measure of the degree to which a person seeks out social support in the face of difficulties indeed predicts the behavior of doing so following failure at a task. More generally, we conclude that people do differ in the degree to which they initiate supportive contacts, and that this difference may be measured by self-report.

That subjects who scored low on SEEK made fewer requests for support following failure than subjects who scored high was predicted. That such subjects made more requests following success than subjects who scored high was not specifically predicted. Apparently, the appropriate seeking of social support may involve not just knowing when it is reasonable to seek support (after failure) but also knowing when it is unreasonable to do so (after success); future research should work to clarify the

influence of situational and psychological factors which might influence support seeking (e.g. see the decision model proposed by Gross & McMullen, 1982).

Study Two

Subjects and procedure. Sixty undergraduate volunteers (thirty-nine males, twenty-one females) at a large state university in the Southeastern United States participated in this research. They completed five questionnaires in a single session.

Questionnaires. A 35-item version of SEEK, lengthened to improve the scale's internal consistency (see Lord & Novick, 1968), was employed in this study (see Table 1). [Items, 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 25, and 28 on the 35-item version of SEEK also appeared on the shorter version of SEEK. In an effort to balance the range of situations represented in the longer version of SEEK, five items from the short version were replaced with new items.] The mean of SEEK was 55.31 ($SD = 6.60$). Cronbach's (1951) alpha for this version of SEEK was 0.82, an improvement over that found in study one. Subjects also completed a 40-item version of Barrera et al.'s (1981) Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB). The ISSB asks respondents to rate how often they would have received various supportive behaviors from others if each had been needed during the previous four weeks (e.g. provided transportation; listened to private feelings; assisted in setting a goal). These ratings of perceived availability of social support were made on a five-point scale, where 1 = not at all and 5 = about every day. Thus, ratings reflected the support perceived as available from the social environment rather than actual support received. The mean of the ISSB for the present sample was 103.20 ($SD = 30.11$). The internal consistency of the ISSB, estimated by alpha, was 0.96, a figure comparable to that found by Barrera et al. (1981).

The SEEK Beliefs Scale was developed for this study, and it contained 20 items designed to measure expectations about the consequences of seeking help from other people. This scale asks subjects to indicate on a five-point scale the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements regarding either positive or negative consequences of support seeking (e.g. 'When I ask for help, I feel foolish'; 'When other people help you, they feel close to you'; 'When I ask somebody to help me, they usually will'). Items were scored in the direction of positive consequences of support seeking. In the present sample, the mean of this scale was 74.90 ($SD = 8.60$), and its internal consistency was 0.83.

Also included were Coopersmith's (1967) Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) and Sherer et al.'s (1982) Self-Efficacy Scale. The SEI asks subjects to endorse a series of 25 statements as 'like me' or 'unlike me' (e.g. 'I have a low opinion of myself'; 'I'm unpopular with persons my own age'). Items were scored in the direction of higher self-esteem (1 = low esteem response, 2 = high esteem response). In the present sample, the mean of this scale was 42.68 ($SD = 4.33$), and alpha was 0.78. The Self-Efficacy Scale includes items measuring both general self-efficacy (e.g. 'When I make plans, I am certain I can make them work'; 'I give up on things before completing them') and social self-efficacy (e.g. 'It is difficult for me to make new friends'; 'I have acquired my friends through my personal abilities at making friends'). Subjects were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale the extent to which they agreed with each statement (from 1 = agree strongly, to 7 = disagree strongly).

Items were scored in the direction of higher self-efficacy. The mean of the scale was 112.68 (SD = 19.66), and its internal consistency was 0.90.

Results

No sex differences were found on any of the measures. The results are therefore presented for the sample as a whole.

Subjects who reported that they sought support from others also perceived that social support was available (see Table 2). In addition, people who reported a tendency to seek support expressed a positive outlook about themselves (i.e. high self-esteem and high self-efficacy), and about the consequences of seeking support (i.e. positive SEEK beliefs). Feelings of self-esteem, feelings of self-efficacy, and positive beliefs about the consequences of support seeking were intercorrelated, as one would expect. The perceived availability of social support was unrelated to any measures, except SEEK.

Discussion

This study suggests that the seeking of social support may influence its availability. This study also suggests that those who seek support are characterized by high self-esteem, high self-efficacy, and positive beliefs about seeking support. On the surface, these conclusions may not seem surprising. However, several issues neglected in previous research are raised by this study and its results. First, social support is not always given just to passive recipients. Some people actively seek out social support (study one), and these people are more likely to report that it is available (study two).

Second, previous research has shown a link between the receipt of social support and psychological and physical health (Cobb, 1976; Holahan & Moos, 1981, 1982). Neglected in this research are the interpersonal dynamics that may underlie the beneficial consequences of social support. It is possible that people with positive outlooks about themselves and social interaction may be predisposed to seek support when it is needed, thereby maintaining their psychological adjustment (cf. Kobasa's work on 'hardiness': Kobasa, 1979; Kobasa, et al., 1982). Conversely, people with negative outlooks about themselves and social interaction may not seek support, thereby maintaining their psychological maladjustment. It is also possible that some of the salutary effects attributed to the receipt of social support may be due to the active search for it. For example, the successful seeking of social support may enhance an individual's self-efficacy regarding the social domain, which might in turn increase well-being above and beyond any direct benefits of the support per se (cf. Bandura, 1982, 1986).

At the present time, little is known about those who do or do not seek social support (cf. Shinn et al., 1984). Future research might try to characterize them further in terms of personality, social competence, self-disclosure, and so on. In addition, the causal links among seeking support, receiving support, perceiving support as available, and psychological factors should be disentangled.

General Discussion

Taken together, the two studies suggest that the active seeking of social support is an important individual difference. Whether or not

TABLE 1
SEEK scale

SEEK Scale Instructions: For each item, choose the one alternative that better describes what you would do in the situation listed. Circle the letter in front of the alternative you choose. Please answer all items as accurately as possible.

1. You are failing at a difficult task. Do you:
 - (a) find someone who can teach you how to do it better?
 - (b) keep working on your own?
2. After being involved in an embarrassing incident, do you:
 - (a) remain silent about the incident?
 - (b) talk with others about the incident?
3. When you are upset, do you prefer:
 - (a) to be alone?
 - (b) to talk with others about your problem?
4. You are writing an agenda for your organization's next meeting. Before the meeting takes place, would you:
 - (a) have the agenda reviewed and approved by your committee members?
 - (b) give the final copy to the committee members at the meeting?
5. If you had to catch a plane flight at the airport, and you weren't able to drive yourself there, would you:
 - (a) take a bus or limo to the airport?
 - (b) ask someone to give you a ride?
6. When you are feeling lonely, do you call someone on the telephone to talk?
 - (a) yes, I do call;
 - (b) no, I don't call.
7. Before a social event, do you ever ask someone if he/she thinks your outfit looks good?
 - (a) yes;
 - (b) no.
8. If a relationship you had unexpectedly broke up, would you:
 - (a) go off by yourself and think about it?
 - (b) talk to someone about the break-up?
9. When you have developed a plan for a new, difficult project, do you:
 - (a) have others check it before carrying it out?
 - (b) carry it out without having others check it over?
10. If you are troubled by a personal problem, do you:
 - (a) keep it to yourself and try to resolve it on your own?
 - (b) call someone to discuss the problem?
11. If you have just moved into a new place to live without a phone, and you need to make a local phone call, would you:
 - (a) use a nearby pay phone?
 - (b) ask someone nearby if you could use their phone?
12. If you think you did badly on a project, do you:
 - (a) ask someone knowledgeable about it to give you feedback?
 - (b) wait and see how you did?
13. You are wearing a new item of clothing that you think may not fit properly. Do you:
 - (a) ask someone how it looks?
 - (b) not ask others what they think?
14. You are trying to find a street in an unfamiliar town. Do you:
 - (a) search around for it?
 - (b) ask a local person for directions?
15. You have just placed an order at a local sandwich shop, and you realize that you are 25 cents short. Do you:
 - (a) cancel your order?
 - (b) ask someone if you could borrow 25 cents?
16. You are unsure of your career goals. Do you:
 - (a) try to figure them out on your own?
 - (b) seek someone who can help you clarify your goals?

TABLE 1 (continued)
SEEK scale

SEEK Scale Instructions: For each item, choose the one alternative that better describes what you would do in the situation listed. Circle the letter in front of the alternative you choose. Please answer all items as accurately as possible.

17. You are about to move out of where you live, and you need help loading your possessions into a moving van. Do you:
 - (a) find people who can help you load the van?
 - (b) do it yourself?
18. You need a hammer to do a job in your home, but you don't have one. Do you:
 - (a) ask someone if you could borrow their hammer?
 - (b) go out and buy a hammer?
19. If you felt confused about some issues in your personal life, would you:
 - (a) think them through by yourself?
 - (b) find someone who is willing to listen to your feelings?
20. You need to do many small tasks for an organization you belong to. Do you:
 - (a) do them yourself?
 - (b) ask someone to help you?
21. If you were about to cook a new dish you had been wanting to try, but you realized you were short one important ingredient, would you:
 - (a) ask someone if you could borrow what you needed?
 - (b) go to the store to get what you needed?
22. On a busy day, you have an overwhelming number of little tasks to take care of. Would you:
 - (a) try to do them by yourself?
 - (b) find people who could help you with some of the work?
23. A crisis arises in your life. Do you:
 - (a) find someone who can help you through it?
 - (b) go through it on your own?
24. You are doing something difficult. Do you:
 - (a) continue working on it alone?
 - (b) ask someone for assistance?
25. If you had the urge to express your innermost feelings, would you:
 - (a) wait for the feeling to pass?
 - (b) get a hold of someone who will listen to you?
26. You need some important information. Do you:
 - (a) look for it on your own?
 - (b) ask people where you might find it?
27. You are feeling a little bit depressed. Do you:
 - (a) keep it to yourself?
 - (b) talk with someone about your feelings?
28. You are feeling disturbed about how a relationship is going along. Would you:
 - (a) think about it on your own?
 - (b) find someone to help you figure it out?
29. You need some materials to get a job done. Do you:
 - (a) look for them on your own?
 - (b) ask other people where you can find the materials?
30. You are not sure about how to start a project that needs to be done soon. Do you:
 - (a) seek out others who have done similar projects before?
 - (b) attempt to figure out what to do by yourself?
31. You need to find out how to get to a city in another state. Do you:
 - (a) look at maps, travel information, etc. on your own?
 - (b) try to find someone who can give you directions?
32. You are unsure about what you want to do with your life. Do you:
 - (a) try to find people who can help you make some decisions?
 - (b) think about it by yourself?

Table 1 continued on next page

TABLE 1 (continued)
SEEK scale

SEEK Scale Instructions: For each item, choose the one alternative that better describes what you would do in the situation listed. Circle the letter in front of the alternative you choose. Please answer all items as accurately as possible.

33. If you had accidentally offended someone, and you wanted to apologize to him/her, would you:
 - (a) discuss the problem with someone before apologizing?
 - (b) not discuss the problem before apologizing?
34. You have to fill out some confusing, official forms. Do you:
 - (a) work your way through them without seeking assistance?
 - (b) try to find someone who can help you with the forms?
35. Your day was full of hassles. Do you:
 - (a) seek out someone who will listen to you talk about your day?
 - (b) not seek out someone?

Note: The choices on items 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 17, 18, 21, 23, 30, 32, 33, and 35 are scored (a)=2 and (b)=1. All other items are scored (a)=1, and (b)=2.

TABLE 2
Intercorrelations among scales

Scale	2	3	4	5
1. SEEK	0.34*	0.53***	0.37**	0.38**
2. ISSB		0.23	-0.15	0.06
3. SEEK beliefs			0.35*	0.30*
4. Self-esteem				0.59***
5. Self-efficacy				

* = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$; *** = $p < 0.001$

someone seeks support may influence the quantity of support available from others. Further, whether or not someone seeks support may be influenced by the person's psychological adjustment.

In study one, we showed some evidence for the criterion validity of SEEK, a self-report measure of the tendency to seek out social support following stressful events. Our prediction that people scoring high on SEEK would make more requests for support after failure than people scoring low was supported. In study two, we found that reports of support seeking were associated with the perceived availability of such support. People who receive social support may in part garner it from others. We also found that reports of seeking support were associated with high self-regard and optimistic beliefs about support-seeking. People who seek support may be psychologically predisposed to do so (cf. Collins & Pancoast, 1976).

Our research program is a preliminary answer to the call for an inquiry into the role played by an individual in generating and maintaining supportive contacts (e.g. DePaulo, 1982; DiMatteo & Hays, 1981; Gottlieb, 1983; Gross & McMullen, 1982; Heller, 1979; Shinn et al., 1984; among others). But because it is preliminary, our research has limitations. First, the correlation between the seeking of support and its perceived availability was calculated from cross-sectional, self-report data (study two). We do not know from these data if support seeking indeed precedes its receipt. The laboratory experiment in study one implies that this is the case, but prospective investigations of social interactions during times of need are indicated. For instance, a recent, longitudinal study by Hobfoll & Lerman (1988) provides some evidence for our assertion that seeking social support may influence its availability. Hobfoll & Lerman (1988) found that discomfort with seeking support is negatively related to intimacy with others, and also leads to less support being available at a later point in time. In addition, data presented by Dunkel-Schetter et al. (1987) demonstrate that reports of support seeking predict reports of social support received in connection with stressful life events.

Second, although our research suggests a more complete way to conceive of social support, we suspect that the process of social support involves even more factors and dimensions than those we have investigated. Future research must determine the sorts of people who do or do not seek support from others when it is needed. At the same time, future research must determine how situational factors encourage or discourage people in their seeking of social support (cf. Gross & McMullen, 1982). An unresponsive environment might result in decreased motivation to seek out social support, even in other situations where it might be available (Seligman, 1975).

The correlation found in study two between the seeking of social support and its perceived availability might also reflect a bidirectional influence. Although it seems reasonable that active solicitations of support would increase the likelihood of support being available and perceived as such, it is also possible that an individual's perception of support availability might initially influence whether he or she would decide to seek support (Gross & McMullen, 1982). Similarly, an unfavorable environment might result in low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, and pessimism about the consequences of support seeking, thereby reducing the amount of

support sought (see Rook, 1984). To clarify these points, prospective studies should attempt to assess the actual availability of support (e.g. through interviews with social network members) as well as the individual's perceptions of support availability, and then relate these to support-seeking and psychological factors in causal models which allow clarification to the directionality of cause-and-effect over time. Because social support processes are likely to be multidimensional (Thoits, 1986; Heller et al., 1986), it may also be appropriate to further disaggregate the support-seeking construct in these models.

In sum, the connection between social support and adjustment may be more complex than some researchers have assumed. Other things being equal, the active seeking of support may influence its availability, as well as having adjunctive effects. Interventions intended to enhance people's well-being might provide not just social support, but also means by which it can be sought (Gottlieb, 1983; Gross, 1982; Rook, 1984). In general, future research on social support processes should view the individual as one who may generate and maintain socially-supportive contacts — not just as a passive recipient of support.

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