

Podcasts as a Form of Social Support for Individuals with Chronic Illness

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ABSTRACT

Chronic illness frequently decreases individuals' abilities to receive social support. 105 listeners of health-related podcasts completed online closed and open-ended surveys. Results indicate 97% of respondents experience social isolation because of their illness, and 90% report listening to podcasts helps them feel less isolated. Additionally, condition-specific podcasts allow people to gain relevant information about managing health challenges, as well as feel part of a community of people who understand them. Finally, results suggest parasocial relationships with hosts of the podcasts correlate positively with informational support, which subsequently is correlated positively with perceived emotional support.

INTRODUCTION

Lack of social support has been an ongoing issue for individuals with chronic illness, and the need is increasingly prevalent due to isolation:

- caused by their chronic illness
- exacerbated by the Covid-19 global pandemic

It is important to consider:

- causes of that isolation
- if social support needs might be met by listening to health-related podcasts
- if listeners believe they have a parasocial relationship with the host that may influence perceived support

METHOD

Procedure. Data were collected electronically over seven weeks via a link to an anonymous Google Form provided to nine podcast hosts.

Participants. There were 105 participants with a mean age of 39.95 (SD = 13.79) and reported having at least one chronic illness. The most frequent chronic illnesses reported were postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS) or dysautonomia (n=59, 56%), Ehlers Danlos Syndrome (n=23, 21%), and diabetes (n=20, 19%).

Measures. The survey was a combination of 56 closed- and open-ended questions including demographic questions on gender, age, and chronic illness conditions.

Analysis. Analyses included content analysis of open-ended responses as well as statistical analysis using SPSS.

RESULTS

Causes of isolation

RQ1 - To what extent do people with chronic illness report feeling isolated from their support networks?

97% of respondents reported feelings of isolation during the time of their illness and described the causes of their isolation below.

Causes of Isolation

Cause	Number Reported
Lack of Understanding by Family/Friends/Employers	53
Lack of Regular Social Interaction	45
Feelings of Being Trapped/Alone/Disconnected	26
Lack of Understanding by Medical Professionals	18
Lack of Physical Accessibility in Certain Places	5
Not Wanting Others to Know about Condition	5
Did not Feel Isolated	3

Podcasts are accessible and helpful

RQ2 - What forms of communication are most accessible / helpful to people with chronic illness?

Respondents reported podcasts to be both the most accessible (42.9%) and most helpful form of communication (36.5%).

Forms of Communication Most Accessible and Helpful Reported

Form of Communication	Accessible	Helpful
Podcasts	45	38
Other social media	30	10
Online support group	21	23
FTF with a friend or loved one	8	18
Interaction with healthcare professional	1	12
FTF support group	0	3

Parasocial relationships

RQ3 - How do people who listen to health-related podcasts describe their attitudes about the podcast or the hosts and how does this affect perceived support?

Evidence of parasocial relationships suggesting that the podcast is valuable to chronically ill participants:

- 94% reported podcasts share relevant information
- 85% would be sad if the podcast were no longer available
- 74% trust the host

Informational needs were met by both the podcast and the host (InfoMet x Show $r=.222$, $p<.05$; InfoMet x Host $r=.302$, $p<.01$; Show x Host $r=.750$, $p<.01$).

When people feel connected to both the podcast and the host, their needs for informational support are met, and subsequently they also feel emotionally supported.

CONCLUSION

The majority of those with chronic illness feel isolated by their illness from lack of understanding, lack of socialization, and feelings of loneliness.

This study established several significant motivations for why individuals with chronic illness listen to podcasts:

- to decrease isolation
- to learn new information
- to feel understood

Finally, a more extensive understanding of perceived social support for individuals with chronic illness who use podcasts might help to improve quality of life by:

- benefitting those feeling socially isolated
- increasing niche chronic illness podcasts produced
- increasing awareness of this medium as a resource

It is our hope these results, and the results of future studies, will increase understanding of ways people can receive social support.

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