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Exploring the Protective Role of Perceived Social Support on Physical Health in the Retirement Transition

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Abstract

New Zealand has an ageing population which will pose a number of economic challenges as the population structure changes. This has prompted a need to find ways to help people age healthily and successfully into later life to reduce the costs associated with poor health and dependence. The transition to retirement is focused on in this study as a key period of time when numerous contextual factors undergo change and adjustment that may impact on later health outcomes. One change in the retirement transition is often the reorganisation of social relationships, and in accord with previous research it was hypothesised that perceptions of available social support would play a protective role on physical health for middle-to-older age adults as they make the transition from paid employment to retirement. This longitudinal study used data obtained from the 2006, 2008 and 2010 waves of the New Zealand Health, Work and Retirement Study. The participants were a representative sample of middle to older age New Zealanders who provided responses to a postal survey in each wave of data collection (N = 1834). Hierarchical regression analysis was employed to explore the relationship between retirement, social support, social network type and health outcomes. Regression analysis revealed that retirees experience slightly poorer health than workers and that this relationship cannot be accounted for by age or health status prior to retirement. Contrary to predictions, social support prior to retirement and changes in social support during the retirement transition did not explain this relationship. Further to this, social support only had a weak and unstable impact on health regardless of employment status. However, when examining the different types of social support, Social Integration was found to be important to health. Social Integration had a small positive direct effect on health for both retirees and workers, but particularly so for retirees as demonstrated by a significant interaction. Further investigation of the impact of Social Integration on health during the transition to retirement is suggested as a useful direction for future research.
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