

Impact of Walking Groups on Fostering Social Support and Social Connectedness



Among Older Adults in San Diego, California

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Abstract

Objective: The goal of this study was to determine whether participating in walking groups fostered social connectedness and social support among older adults.

Methods: Participants ($n=350$) were involved in Peer Empowerment Program 4 Physical Activity (PEP4PA) from 2015 to 2019. At enrollment and after 12 months of the intervention, participants completed a survey which measured social support and connectedness. A focus group ($n=7$) was conducted during year 4 of the intervention to gain participant testimonials on feelings of social support and connectedness.

Conclusion: Participation in walking groups increased feelings of social support among older adults, which has been linked to positive health behaviors and outcomes. Organized group exercise appears to aid in fostering feelings of social support among older adults.

Introduction

- Older adults are a vulnerable population that are at an increased risk for diabetes, depression, hypertension, and injury from falls.
- Older adults often experience social isolation due to life events such as retirement, passing of friends, or moving away.
- Social isolation and a lack of social support increase risk for chronic disease among older adults.
- Lack of social support decreases the likelihood of older adults pursuing an active lifestyle.**
- Sedentary lifestyle increases one's existing risk for chronic disease.

Methods

- Survey responses to the categories Social Support and Social Connectedness from the PEP4PA study were accessed.
- Responses were measured at enrollment and 12 months of participation.
- A paired samples t-test was conducted to measure whether a difference in feelings of social support and social connectedness occurred between enrollment and 12 months of participation.
- One focus group was conducted to gather participant testimonials to compare to the quantitative results.

Results

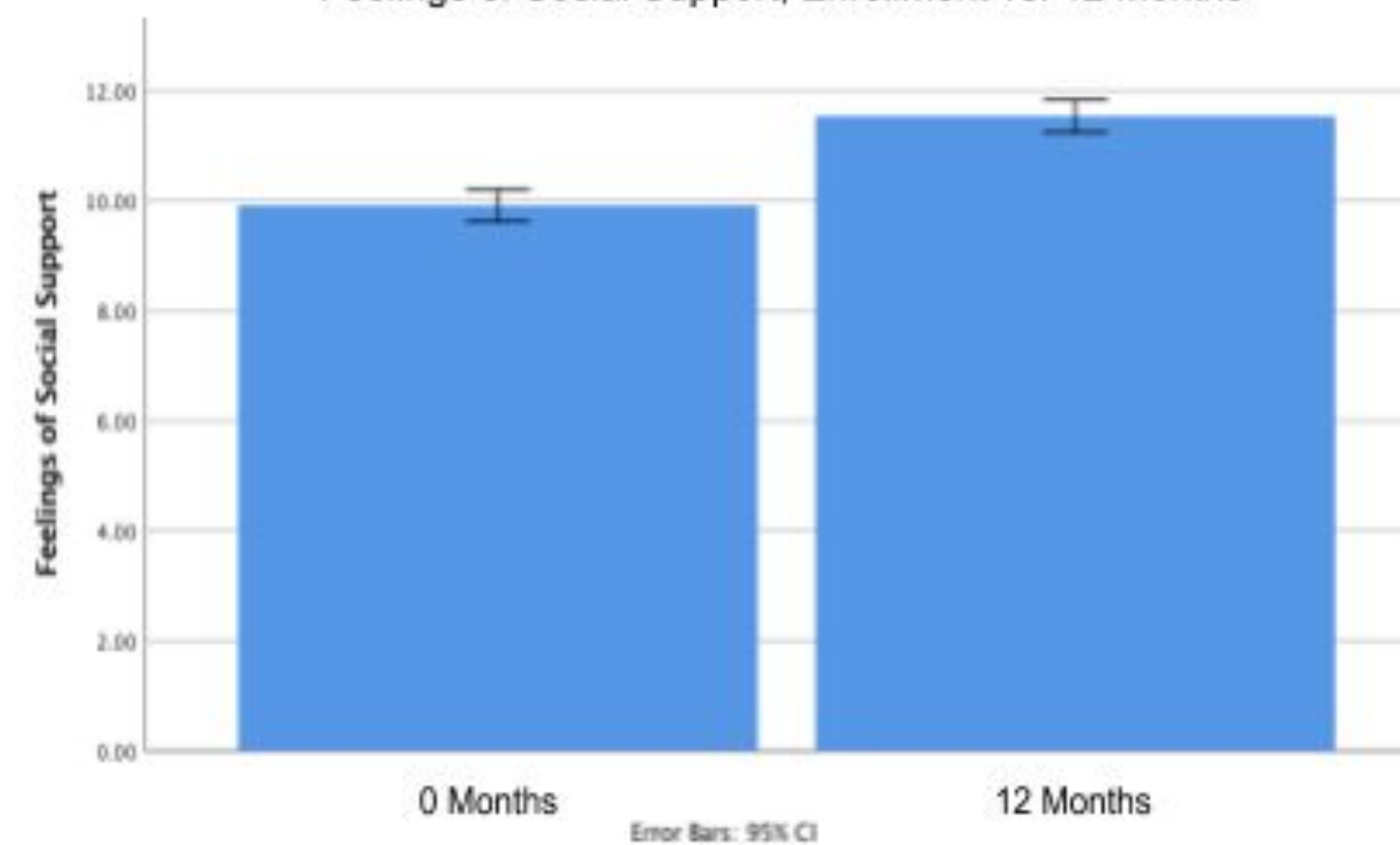
- Feelings of social support increased after 12 months of program participation ($p \leq .000$)
- No statistically significant change in feelings of social connectedness was measured after 12 months of program participation ($p = .626$)
- Testimonials from the participant focus group reflect these findings:

We learn that there's a lot of benefits from walking, but I don't think anybody would keep walking if it wasn't for the support.

I don't like exercise, but this group of people make it okay.

We're already talking about what we're going to do, how we're going to be together after the program ends. Because we don't want it to stop.

Feelings of Social Support, Enrollment vs. 12 months



Policy Implications

- Allocate city funds to support existing walking groups and create new community-based walking group programs for older adults.
- Establish a media campaign to raise public awareness about the effects of social isolation on the physical and mental health of older adults.
- Implement an educational campaign to inform healthcare providers about counseling patients on the importance of social support to promote physical activity.

Conclusion

- Participants' survey responses indicated increased feelings of social support due to participation in the walking groups.**
- Survey data and focus group testimonials demonstrated the benefits of organized group exercise in promoting physical activity among older adults.
- Survey data did not demonstrate any statistically significant changes in feelings of social connectedness, but the focus group reported feeling more socially connected as a result of participation.**

