The use of outpatient care services, day care, informal and inpatient care were considered. Multinomial regression was applied to investigate the impact of physical and social frailty on the use of outpatient and inpatient care services, controlling for relevant sociodemographic and health related characteristics. Compared to very old adults who did not use any care services, no association was found between frailty and the use of outpatient or informal care. Comparing nonusers of care services with institutionalized individuals, nursing home residents were less likely to experience physical frailty and pre-frailty, but were more likely to be socially isolated and to feel lonely. These findings suggest that physical frailty might have been successfully prevented in the context of institutional inpatient care. However, early identification and intervention focused on social inclusion of the institutionalized very old individuals are needed to reverse social frailty.

Session 4555 (Paper)

FRIENDSHIP IN LATER LIFE

AN EVALUATION OF SOCIAL BRIDGING AND BONDING MECHANISMS IN THE ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL NETWORKS AND COGNITIVE FUNCTION

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Background and Objectives: Substantial evidence links social connectedness prospectively to cognitive aging outcomes, but there is little agreement about the social processes or mechanisms that drive this relationship. This study evaluated nine measures of social connectedness, focusing on two distinct forms of social enrichment – access to an expansive and diverse set of loosely connected individuals (i.e., social bridging) and integration in a supportive network of close ties (i.e., social bonding). Research Design and Methods: This study used egocentric social network and clinical cognitive data from 311 older adults in the first wave of the Social Networks in Alzheimer Disease (SNAD) study. Linear regressions adjusting for gender, age, education, and depression symptoms were used to estimate the association between nine measures of social connectedness and global cognitive function, verbal memory, and attention.

Results: Measures indicative of social bridging (larger network size, lower density, presence of weak ties, and proportion non-kin) were consistently associated with better cognitive outcomes, while measures of social bonding largely produced null effects.

Discussion and Implications: These findings suggest that the protective benefits of social connectedness for cognitive function and memory may operate primarily through a cognitive reserve mechanism that is driven by irregular contact with a larger and more diverse group of peripheral others. Population-level interventions that promote the cultivation of social bridging relationships and activities may have benefits for cognition later in life.

BIG AND MINI: A PROMISING PROGRAM TO LINK GENERATIONS TO COPE WITH SOCIAL ISOLATION

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Introduction: Social isolation disproportionately affected older adults prior to and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. To help older adults cope with social isolation, a new program “Big and Mini” was created in April 2020 to link young and older adults together (matched through a custom website developed for this program) and to help increase social connectivity through weekly phone calls. Using a survey with both closed and open questions, this study evaluated participant feedback three months after the program was launched.

Methods: 63 Bigs (age 50+) and 53 Minis (age 18+) completed the survey. Stress compared to before COVID-19, social isolation, life satisfaction, intergenerational solidarity, and satisfaction with the program were measured for both the Big and Mini participants. Descriptive, bivariate correlation, group comparison and conventional content analyses were conducted.

Results: Results showed that 38.1% of Bigs and 37.7% of Minis felt higher levels of stress than before COVID-19. Both Bigs and Minis had moderate levels of social isolation. They also reported higher levels of satisfaction with life, satisfaction with the program, and intergenerational solidarity. Content analysis suggested that the reasons to join or expectations of the program were curiosity, friendship, mutually beneficial intergenerational connections, and coping with loneliness. Both Bigs and Minis reported benefits from the learning and sharing opportunities that the program offered.

Conclusions: The Big and Mini program offers a promising approach with mutual benefits for both Bigs and Minis. Strategies to improve the program and implications for other phone-based intergenerational programs are presented.

BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS THROUGH VOLUNTEERING IN LATE LIFE: DOES GENDER MODERATE THE RELATIONSHIP?

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Friendship plays a crucial role in maintaining social connectedness in late life. Volunteering helps older adults to stay socially engaged and often times provides the opportunity to meet and make new friends. A small literature suggests that volunteering may be associated with friendship, but many studies are limited by reliance on small, non-probability samples and simplistic analytic approaches. The literature is also unclear on how volunteering behaviors relate to specific characteristics of friendships and whether there are gender differences that condition these relationships. Using the 2014 and 2018 waves of the Health and Retirement Study (N=1,638), we investigate whether volunteer status and hours volunteered in 2014 are associated with friendship characteristics in 2018 (i.e., number of close friends, friendship quality, and contact frequency) among community-dwelling adults aged 50 years and above (M=65.60 years old, SD=8.31). We also examine whether gender moderated these relationships. Volunteer status and hours in 2014 were positively associated with the number of close friends and contact frequency in 2018. Only those who volunteered 200 hours or more in