

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND FAMILY CONTACTS OF OLDER CANADIANS

by Susan McDaniel

Elderly people can no longer expect to spend their senior years living with their families. This is particularly true for older women, who as widows are more and more likely to be living alone. With more seniors living on their own, emotional support from family may not be as easy to come by as in the past. It takes some effort by the individual, as well as by family and friends, to maintain the social contact they want.

Family ties contribute to an individual's well-being. Whom one calls on for help is an indication of how important family members and others are to a person's emotional well-being, and also reveals the social networks that exist. How often people interact with their family is an important factor in maintaining these ties.

Emotional support

According to the General Social Survey, spouses and children were the main sources of emotional support for most of the three million Canadians aged 65 and over in 1990. When asked who they would turn to first when they were a bit down or depressed, older women tended to report a larger variety of sources of support than did men. It is not surprising, therefore, that while a relatively large proportion of married (including common-law) seniors reported that they would turn to their spouse for support, it was more common for men this age (45%) to do so than it was among women (37%). Married women were more likely to seek support from one of their children (25%) or from a friend (10%) than were men (15% and 4%, respectively). This relative isolation of married men when it comes to emotional support is further illustrated by their



greater tendency not to seek support from anyone. More than twice the proportion of men (12%) as women (5%) reported they would not seek support from anyone.

Women aged 65 and over not living with a spouse were most likely to say they would turn to a daughter for emotional support (28%), while only 16% of the

men without spouses would do so. Both women and men were less likely to turn to a son than to a daughter (12% and 7%, respectively). The lesser tendency for men to turn to a child, whether a son or a daughter, is somewhat underestimated by these percentages, since only 5% of men said they had never had children, compared

with 12% of the women. Men, on the other hand, would most likely turn to a friend (24%), whereas this was the case for only 16% of women.

When upset with a spouse or partner, many older Canadians (26%) said they would turn to one of their children, their daughters in particular, for support. More women (31%) than men (21%) would turn to a child for support in these circumstances. A slightly higher proportion of women (8%) said they would seek support from a friend than did men (5%). About 15% of both men and women would seek help from a professional when upset with their spouse or partner. However, many older Canadians (27%) reported that they didn't know to whom they would turn for support and 21% said they would not seek support from anyone. A larger proportion of men (24%) than women (16%) reported they would not talk to anyone when upset.

Distance and contacts with children

The personal contact elderly parents had with their grown children who had left home was certainly influenced by how far away they lived, and also likely depended on the quality of the relationship. As the distance from the child increased, the frequency of contact fell. No matter how far parents lived from their child, however, few said they had not seen the child at all in the previous 12 months.

In 1990, older Canadians tended to live close to the child with whom they had the most contact, with about one-half living within 10 kilometres. Among parents living this close to the child with whom they had the most contact, 26% saw their child on a daily basis and 60% saw them at least once a week. Another 22% of the parents lived within 11 to 50 kilometres.

Reference child

The "child" referred to in the discussion of distance and contacts with children, is the "reference child" defined by the 1990 General Social Survey. This is the child with whom the respondent reported having the most contact. Only adult children who did not live with the respondent were eligible to be selected as the reference child. In addition, only people who had children (i.e., natural, step, adopted) still alive at the time of the survey were asked to select a reference child and answer questions about this child and their relationship with the child.

More than one-half (53%) of the elderly visited weekly with the child in question. Another 36% had monthly visits. When parents lived over 50 kilometres away, visits were mainly monthly or at longer intervals.

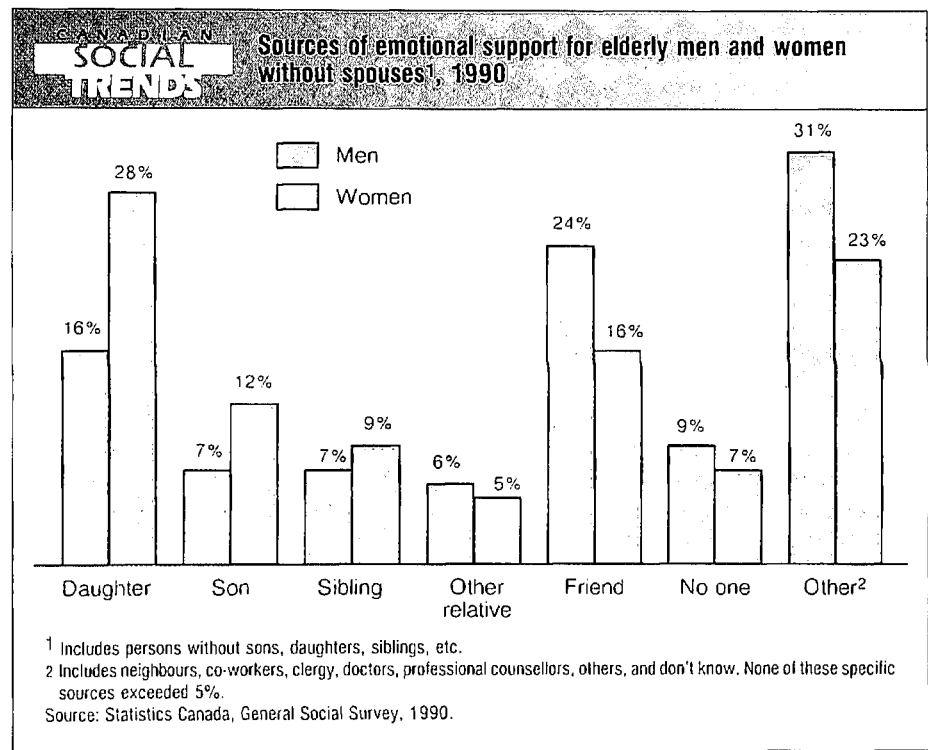
In 1990, just 7% of elderly parents lived over 1,000 kilometres away from the child with whom they had the most contact. Visits over this distance require time, money and motivation. It is therefore not surprising that over two-thirds (69%) reported seeing their child less than once a month, and 23% reported no personal contact at all in the previous 12 months.

Older women, regardless of distance, tended to see their child more often than did men. Men were more likely than women to have had no personal contact at all over the year preceding the survey.

Most men (74%) and women (68%) aged 65 and over thought that the amount of personal contact they had with their adult children was just right. Men were slightly happier than women with the frequency of contact. About one-quarter of married men and one-third of married women said they saw their child less often than they would like. More widowed men (33%) than widowed women (27%) were unhappy about the amount of contact they had. Very few seniors, regardless of gender or marital status, expressed concern about seeing their child more often than they would like.

Contact with sisters and brothers

Most older Canadians with brothers and sisters still alive had relatively little personal



Personal contacts of seniors with their reference child¹, by distance away, 1990

Distance	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Not at all ²	Total
0-10 Km	23	64	10	3	0	100
11-50 Km	5	52	36	5	1	100
51-100 Km	2	21	55	21	1	100
101-200 Km	0	8	49	40	2	100
201-400 Km	0	4	25	71	—	100
401-1000 Km	0	—	6	89	2	100
More than 1000 Km	0	—	2	64	29	100

¹ Child with whom they had the most contact.
² No personal contact in the previous 12 months.
 Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1990.

contact with their siblings in 1990. That year, 40% saw them less than once a month and another 18% had not seen their siblings at all. On the other hand, 18% reported monthly contact, 17% reported weekly contact, and 5% saw one of their siblings every day.

Older men and women maintained the same frequency of contact with their sisters and brothers overall. More women (43%) than men (36%) saw them less than once a month. However, more men (22%) than women (15%) reported they had not seen them at all during the previous 12 months.

Older women who had never married reported the most personal contact with their sisters and brothers. As many as 15% saw them daily and another 30% saw their siblings at least once a week. Never-married men were the next most frequent visitors of their siblings: 12% saw their siblings daily and 23% on a weekly basis.

Married men aged 65 and over maintained about the same amount of contact with their siblings as did married women aged 65 and over, with one in five seeing them daily or weekly. Divorced men were more likely to have daily contact than were divorced women. Widowed men and women saw their siblings less frequently than did others.

Women had contact with sisters and brothers by telephone or letter more often than did men. Daily and weekly contact with brothers or sisters by phone or mail was maintained by 39% of women, compared with 25% of men.

Distance and contact with parents

In 1990, approximately one-half of middle-aged Canadians (aged 45-64) reported that at least one of their parents was still alive. This is no surprise in light of the dramatic increase in the odds of living well into old age. Personal contacts with elderly parents reported from the middle-aged child's point of view provides an additional perspective on family ties.

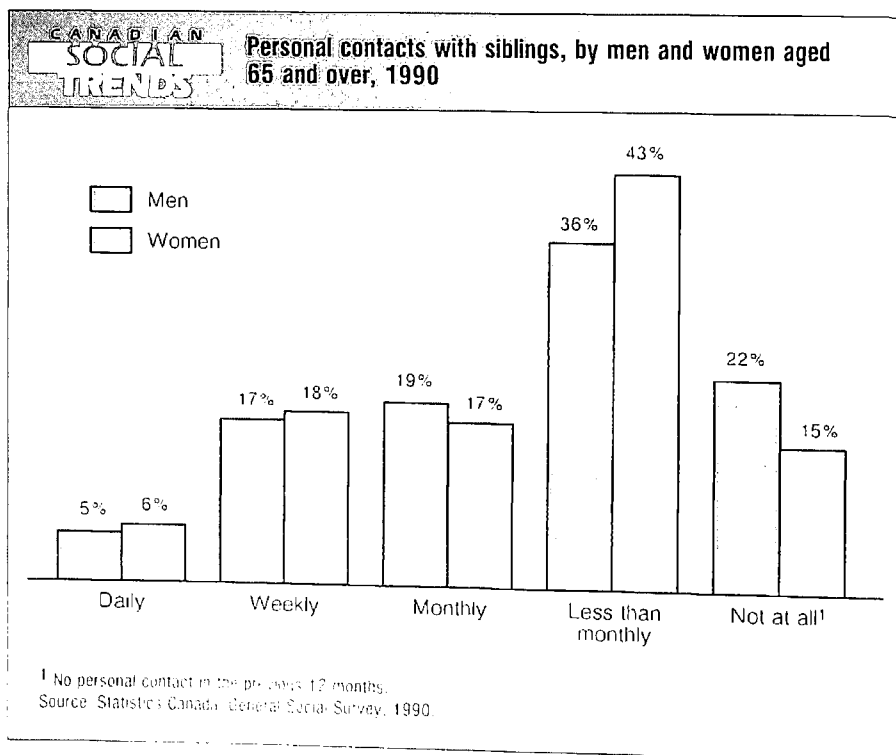
Most middle-aged Canadians (57%) whose mothers were still alive saw their mothers at least once a month. Personal contact declined, however, as distance from mothers increased. About 80% who lived within 10 kilometres of their mothers saw them weekly or daily. The proportion who saw their mothers at least weekly dropped to about one-half (52%) for those living from 11 to 50 kilometres away.

Daughters tended to see their mothers more often than did sons. Middle-aged women (86%) had a greater tendency than men (73%) to visit with their mothers daily or weekly if they lived within 10 kilometres. Men, although frequent weekly visitors of mothers, tended more toward monthly visits. For example, among men who lived 11-50 kilometres from their mothers, 43% saw their mothers weekly and another 43% saw them monthly. Among women living the same distance away, 56% saw their mothers weekly and 35% saw them monthly. With increased distance from mothers, women still saw them more often than men did. For men living 51-100 kilometres away, 14% saw

their mother weekly and 63% monthly. However, 39% of the women living this distance away had weekly visits, while 49% had monthly visits.

For fathers, the pattern was different. Fewer respondents had fathers who were still alive because of men's lower life expectancies. Also, men tend to be older than their wives. It was principally the middle-aged children living within 10 kilometres of their fathers who maintained daily or weekly contact (76%). Among children living 11-50 kilometres away from their fathers, 3% saw them daily. Another 19% said they saw them at least once a week and another 47% said at least monthly. For those living 51-100 kilometres away, none saw their fathers daily. However, 3% had weekly contact, and another 69% had monthly contact.

The most frequent of these parent-child contacts were between daughters and mothers (41% of daughters saw their mothers daily or weekly). Ten percent of daughters had not seen their mother in the past year, and the same percentage had not seen their fathers. Personal contact between sons and their fathers occurred the least frequently. Only 20% of sons saw their fathers daily or weekly, 40% saw them less often than monthly, and another 18% did not see them at all. This is consistent with men's greater emotional distance from family members alluded to by the information on elderly men's sources of emotional support, as well as by how often sons and husbands are the first choice for that support. However, one



Sisters and brothers

Older Canadians reported large numbers of sisters and brothers relative to younger Canadians. This is not surprising in view of the large family sizes of the older generation. In 1990, more than one-half (54%) of people aged 65 or over reported coming from families where they had five or more siblings. Only 4% of men, and 5% of women reported having no siblings, while 8% of men and 10% of women had only one.

More seniors reported having sisters who were still living than brothers. This is expected given that women generally live longer than men. Among those aged 80 or over, about 60% of both men and women reported having a living sister. In contrast, 33% of men and 38% of women in this age group reported having a living brother.

should also consider differences between middle-aged men and women when it comes to how flexible their time is, with more sons than daughters in the labour force. How old or dependent the parent is could also be a factor, since elderly fathers are on average younger and less apt to be alone than elderly mothers.

Contacts with grandparents

Grandchildren are an important part of the elderly's family environment. In 1990, over one-third of Canadians with a grandparent still living saw at least one of their grandparents once a month or more: 3% had daily contact, another 14% had weekly, and another 22% saw their grand-

parents at least once a month. It was common, however, to see a grandparent less frequently than once a month (41%). Another 20% had not seen their grandparents in over 12 months.

Young adults aged 15-24 saw their grandparents more often than did people aged 25-44. People who had never married reported more frequent contact with their grandparents than others. This may in part be a reflection of age.

The contacts by telephone or by letter that persons aged 15 and over had with their grandparents were quite similar in frequency to personal contacts. As many as 3% had daily contact by letter or phone. Another 13% talked or wrote to their grandparents weekly. Another 22% had this type of contact on a monthly basis, while 33% were in contact by phone or mail less than once a month. However, 29% of Canadians aged 15 or over had no contact with one of their grandparents by letter or phone in the year before the survey.

It is difficult to compare the level of personal contact between those aged 15 years and over and their grandparents with the level of contact middle-aged children have with their parents. The frequency of personal contact between middle-aged sons and their fathers ranks low compared to the other parent-child relationships, but it closely resembles the frequency of contact between grandchildren and grandparents. Given the greater distance in terms of kinship, grandchildren appear to be doing their part.

Canadians are living longer. With access to pensions and increased mobility, more older Canadians are living alone or living with their spouses and no children. Women continue, on average, to outlive their spouses. With the growth in the elderly population, this means an increasing number of older women are living alone. The extended family household is becoming a thing of the past. Consequently, contacts with family members can no longer be taken for granted as the result of living together. For older Canadians to hold onto the feeling of security that family represents, someone must make the effort to maintain contact.

• The number of seniors surveyed in the 1990 GSS was doubled with the support of the *Seniors Secretariat*, Health and Welfare Canada.

Susan McDaniel is a Professor at the University of Alberta.



1992 International Year of the Family
Année internationale de la famille

