Social Fitness Across Life Stages: A Key to Mental Health and Well-being

สมรรถภาพทางสังคมตลอดช่วงชีวิต: กุญแจสำคัญสู่การมีสุขภาพจิตและสุขภาวะที่ดี

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Abstract

Social fitness, the ability to cultivate and maintain meaningful social connections across various life stages, is pivotal in promoting mental health and overall well-being. This concept encompasses key components, including social connections and support networks, social skills and competence, social engagement and inclusion, and social resilience and satisfaction, which play integral roles in shaping individuals' mental health trajectories across different life stages. This article aims to explore the profound impact of social fitness on mental health and well-being across various life stages. Moreover, it provides insights into understanding the role of social fitness in mental health through its multifaceted components. Social connections and support networks offer emotional support and a sense of belonging that are vital for coping with stress and adversity across all ages. Developing social skills and competence from childhood enables effective communication and relationship-building skills, contributing to better mental health outcomes in adolescence and adulthood. Social engagement and inclusion foster community integration and reduce feelings of isolation, enhancing psychological resilience and overall life satisfaction. Recognizing the diversity of populations and contextual variables is essential for understanding how social fitness influences mental well-being, guiding effective interventions and policies that enhance social connectivity and satisfaction, thereby contributing to healthier and more resilient societies.

Keywords: mental health, social fitness, support networks, social interaction, wellbeing

บทคัดย่อ

สมรรถภาพทางสังคม (Social fitness) คือความสามารถในการสร้างและรักษาความสัมพันธ์ทางสังคมที่มีความหมายตลอดช่วงชีวิต ซึ่งเป็นปัจจัยสำคัญในการส่งเสริมสุขภาพจิตและการมีสุขภาวะที่ดีโดยรวม แนวคิดนี้ประกอบด้วยองค์ประกอบหลักที่สำคัญ ได้แก่ การเชื่อมโยงทางสังคมและเครือข่ายสนับสนุน ทักษะและความสามารถทางสังคม การมีส่วนร่วมและการเป็นส่วนหนึ่งในสังคม ความเข้มแข็งและความพึงพอใจทางสังคม ซึ่งปัจจัยเหล่านี้มีบทบาทสำคัญต่อการปรับเปลี่ยนแปลงทางสุขภาพจิตของแต่ละบุคคลในแต่ละช่วงวัยของชีวิต บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อทบทวนองค์ความรู้เกี่ยวกับผลกระทบของสมรรถภาพทางสังคมต่อสุขภาพจิตและการมีสุขภาวะที่ดีในแต่ละช่วงวัยของชีวิต และนำเสนอเผยแพร่ข้อมูลที่สำคัญเพื่อการเข้าใจบทบาทของสมรรถภาพทางสังคมในด้านสุขภาพจิตผ่านองค์ประกอบที่หลากหลาย การมีความเชื่อมโยงทางสังคมและเครือข่ายสนับสนุนทำให้รู้สึกมั่นคงทางอารมณ์และมีความรู้สึกเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของสังคม ซึ่งเป็นสิ่งที่สำคัญในการจัดการกับความเครียดและการรับมือกับอุปสรรคปัญหาในทุกช่วงวัย การพัฒนาทักษะและความสามารถทางสังคมตั้งแต่วัยเด็กช่วยให้มีทักษะในการสื่อสารที่มีประสิทธิภาพและการสร้างความสัมพันธ์ที่ดี ซึ่งทำให้มีผลลัพธ์ทางสุขภาพจิตที่ดีในวัยรุ่นและวัยผู้ใหญ่ การมีส่วนร่วมและการเป็นส่วนหนึ่งในสังคมช่วยผลักดันให้เกิดการอยู่ร่วมกันในชุมชนและลดความรู้สึกโดดเดี่ยว ซึ่งทำให้เกิดการเสริมสร้างความเข้มแข็งทางจิตใจและความพึงพอใจในชีวิตโดยรวม การตระหนักถึงความหลากหลายของประชากรและตัวแปรในบริบทด้านต่าง ๆ เป็นสิ่งสำคัญในการเข้าใจถึงอิทธิพลของสมรรถภาพทางสังคมต่อสุขภาพจิต เพื่อช่วยในการหาแนวทางในการกำหนดมาตราการและนโยบายที่มีประสิทธิภาพ ส่งเสริมการเชื่อมโยงและความพึงพอใจทางสังคม และส่งผลให้เกิดสุขภาพและความเข้มแข็งทางสังคมที่ดีขึ้น

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Introduction

The intricate relationship between social fitness and mental health and well-being has garnered significant attention in recent literature. Social fitness, though a relatively modern concept, has been defined and interpreted in various ways across disciplines and contexts. As a measure of relational wellbeing, social fitness refers to an individual's ability to build, maintain, and effectively navigate interpersonal relationships, contributing to overall emotional and psychological resilience. [1] In military contexts, social fitness is defined as the resources derived from one's social world, including emotional, instrumental, and informational support. It involves building strong networks that bolster resilience, enabling individuals to recover from stressors, perform effectively, and grow from adversity. [2] Social fitness in workplace dynamics refers to fostering authentic connections and collaboration among team members. This involves creating environments that prevent isolation, build trust, and support collective problem-solving. Such fitness is seen as crucial for team resilience and long-term success. [3]

Building upon these perspectives, we define social fitness as a multidimensional construct that plays a vital role in promoting mental health and overall well-being. It involves building and maintaining strong social networks, engaging in social activities, and developing key interpersonal skills that facilitate meaningful and supportive relationships. [4] The evidence suggest that engaging in social activities, participating in group sports, and fostering supportive relationships are pivotal for enhancing mental well-being. For example, studies indicate that individuals with robust social networks exhibit lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, and higher levels of life satisfaction and self-esteem. [5-8]

The significance of social fitness extends beyond mere social interactions to encompass a wide array of activities that promote mental health. Participation in team sports is a prime example, as it not only enhances physical health but also fosters a sense of community and belonging, which are critical for psychological well-being. [5-7] Research shows that individuals engaged in team sports report higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction compared to non-participants. [5] Moreover, the support derived from social relationships acts as a buffer against mental health challenges, mitigating symptoms of depression and anxiety through emotional support and practical assistance. [5-6] A study by Ishihara and colleagues[9] revealed that engaging in certain sports can contribute significantly to enhance the academic performance of adolescents. Social fitness is a vital component of mental health and well-being across all stages of life. From childhood through older adulthood, the ability to form and maintain meaningful social connections provides emotional support, enhances mental and physical health, and contributes to overall life satisfaction. [4] The influence of social fitness on mental health varies across different age groups, each facing unique challenges and benefits from social interactions. For instance, during childhood and adolescence, social fitness is crucial for developing social skills, self-esteem, and emotional regulation. Positive peer interactions and supportive friendships contribute significantly to psychological development and academic performance. [4,10] Among the aging population, maintaining social fitness through community engagement and social networks is vital for mental health. Regular social interaction in this demographic is linked to lower rates of cognitive decline and higher quality of life. [11]

Despite the extensive research highlighting the positive impact of social fitness on mental health and well-being across various life stages, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific mechanisms and contextual factors that modulate this relationship across distinct demographic groups and life stages. This article aims to provide insights into understanding the role of social fitness in mental health, considering diverse populations and contextual variables. Such insights are crucial for developing targeted, effective interventions that can be tailored to specific needs, ultimately enhancing mental health and well-being more comprehensively and inclusively.

Social Fitness and Its Key Components

The concept of social fitness has gained prominence in psychological and public health research as a crucial determinant of mental health and wellbeing. Unlike physical fitness, which focuses on bodily health, social fitness encompasses the ability to effectively navigate and thrive in social environments, such as addressing and resolving interpersonal conflicts constructively, recognizing and managing one's emotions and those of others to foster positive interactions, and developing deep, meaningful connections that provide emotional, instrumental, and informational support.[4] It encompasses a complex interplay of social connections and support networks, social skills and competence, social engagement and inclusion, and social resilience and satisfaction that contribute significantly to individuals' psychological resilience and overall quality of life.

Social Connections and Support Networks

Social fitness involves the ability to create and maintain quality and supportive social networks. These networks provide emotional, informational, and practical support, which are crucial for coping with stress and enhancing mental health. Strong social connections and support system have been consistently linked to better health outcomes, including reduced risk of depression and anxiety [12], improved focus and concentration [10], decreased risk for morbidity and mortality [13], and improved cognitive functions. [11,14]

Social Skills and Competence

Social skills refer to the abilities that enable individuals to interact effectively with others in various social situations. [15] These skills are learned and developed over time through experiences, observations, and socialization processes. Competence in social skills encompasses a range of abilities, including verbal and nonverbal communication, emotional regulation, empathy, and conflict resolution. [16] A recent study found that individuals with good social skills can build

and maintain positive relationships, which contribute to emotional support, companionship, and a sense of belonging. [14]

Social Engagement and Inclusion

Social engagement involves active participation in social activities, such as team sports, social clubs, and community groups. These activities foster a sense of belonging, improve self-esteem, and provide opportunities for social interaction and connection. [4,14] According to World Bank [17], social inclusion refers to feeling accepted and valued by others within social contexts, allowing individuals and groups to participate fully in society. This involvement fosters a sense of belonging and empowers individuals to contribute to and benefit from societal progress, while also combating social exclusion and discrimination. [14,17]

Social Resilience and Satisfaction

Social resilience and social satisfaction are closely intertwined. Social resilience refers to the capacity of individuals, communities, and societies to withstand, adapt to, and recover from social adversities and challenges. [18,19] This concept encompasses the ability to maintain positive relationships, access social support, and sustain a sense of community and belonging in the face of difficulties. [18] Studies suggest that individuals with high resilience are less likely to experience depression, anxiety and stress. [19-21]

Social satisfaction is the degree of contentment and fulfillment individuals feel in their social interactions and relationships. [22] It encompasses the quality of social experiences and the extent to which personal social needs are met. [22-23] High social resilience can lead to increased social satisfaction by enabling individuals to better cope with social stressors and maintain positive relationships. [19-20] Conversely, high social satisfaction can enhance social resilience by providing a strong foundation of support and fulfillment that bolsters psychological well-being and adaptability. [22-23]

In summary, social fitness encompasses the ability to build and maintain supportive social networks, develop and utilize social skills, actively engage in social activities, and foster resilience and satisfaction in relationships. Quality social connections provide emotional, informational, and practical support, contributing to mental well-being and improved health outcomes, including reduced depression, enhanced cognitive function, and decreased morbidity and mortality risks. Social competence, characterized by effective communication, empathy, and conflict resolution, facilitates the creation of positive relationships that nurture emotional support and a sense of belonging. Active social engagement and inclusion in community activities foster acceptance and

empowerment, combating exclusion and enhancing societal participation. Furthermore, social resilience—the capacity to adapt and recover from adversities—interacts with social satisfaction, as both reinforce psychological well-being. High resilience enables individuals to navigate social challenges effectively, while fulfilling social interactions provide a foundation of support and belonging, amplifying overall life satisfaction.

Social Fitness Across Different Life Stages

Social fitness, encompassing the ability to interact effectively and form meaningful relationships, plays a critical role in mental health and well-being throughout different life stages. The components and importance of social fitness evolve from childhood through older adulthood, impacting individual development and societal cohesion and emphasizing the importance of fostering strong social connections throughout life.

Childhood and Adolescence

Social fitness during childhood and adolescence is crucial for the development of effective interpersonal skills and emotional well-being which has related health implications in adulthood. [13] In early childhood, social fitness involves forming secure attachments with caregivers, which sets the foundation for trust and emotional regulation. [24] Children learn social norms and behaviors through play and interaction with family members and peers, developing basic skills in communication and empathy. [13] Children develop relationships with peers, and friendships are beneficial for their social and emotional development. These friendships can also help buffer against negative life events. [24] Middle childhood sees an expansion of social networks as children form friendships and engage in group activities. These interactions help children learn cooperation, enhance academic performance, teamwork, and conflict resolution, which are essential for building social competence and self-esteem. [10]

Adolescence brings about significant changes as individuals seek independence and identity, primarily through peer relationships. During this stage, social fitness involves navigating complex social dynamics, including peer pressure, romantic relationships, and a deeper understanding of social roles and responsibilities. [14] Adolescents develop a sense of identity and self-concept, influenced heavily by their social interactions and the need for acceptance within their peer groups. [25] In addition, at the onset of adolescence, individuals develop sophistication in their interpersonal behaviors and experience increased neurological sensitivity to social influence. [26] Successfully managing these relationships and developing strong social skills during adolescence is critical for mental health and lays the groundwork for healthy adult relationships.

[14,27] Furthermore, strong social skills during adolescence are crucial for successful functioning in life. Learning these skills helps individuals make good decisions and behave appropriately in diverse situations. [28] Promoting social fitness at this stage involves building foundational skills, emotional intelligence, and social connections through different strategies such as play-based learning (e.g., team sports, group projects, and playdates), integrating emotional regulation and empathy-building exercises into school curricula, participation in clubs or after-school programs, and parental support (e.g., positive role modeling). These can contribute to improve emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and interpersonal skills. [13, 24-25]

Adulthood

Social fitness in adulthood encompasses the ability to build, maintain, and navigate complex social relationships across various life domains, including career, family, and community. [29] In young adulthood, individuals often focus on establishing their careers, forming intimate partnerships, and possibly starting families. Social fitness at this stage involves balancing professional aspirations with personal relationships, developing strong communication and networking skills, and creating supportive social circles. The ability to form stable and nurturing relationships is crucial for emotional support and mental well-being. [30-31]

Middle adulthood presents new social challenges as individuals juggle career advancement, family responsibilities, and the care of aging parents. Social fitness during this stage includes maintaining long-term friendships, managing family dynamics, and participating in community activities. [32] This period often requires adapting to changing social roles and responsibilities, such as becoming a mentor at work or a caregiver at home. Strong social networks and the ability to foster community connections can provide crucial support and resilience during these transitions, enhancing overall life satisfaction and mental health. [31-33] In addition, strong social connection provides emotional support, enhance resilience to stress, contributing to a positive outlook on life and improved mental health. [34] Evidence suggests that socially active adults report lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to those who are socially isolated. [12] In adulthood, maintaining relationships, work-life balance, and adapting to life transitions are key needs. Strategies to promote social fitness include fostering workplace social support (e.g., team-building activities, mentorship programs, and workplace wellness initiatives), participation in volunteering, cultural events, or neighborhood associations, offering counseling services or workshops on conflict resolution and effective communication to strengthen marital and family ties, and leveraging technology positively. [30-34]

Aging

Aging brings unique challenges and opportunities for social fitness, influencing well-being and quality of life in older adults. As individuals enter late adulthood, maintaining social connections becomes increasingly vital for mental and physical health. [13, 23, 32] Social fitness is linked to better cognitive function and mental health in older adults. Studies have revealed that maintaining social relationships can help reduce the risk of cognitive decline, and socially active individuals report lower levels of depression in older adults. [35-38] Social fitness in this stage involves adapting to retirement, coping with potential loss of loved ones, and finding new roles within family and community settings. [23,32] Active engagement in social activities, such as volunteering, religious participation, and community groups, supports ongoing social integration and provides opportunities for meaningful interaction. [37-38]

Intergenerational relationships play a significant role in social fitness during aging, bridging connections between older adults and younger generations. [39] These relationships contribute to a sense of purpose and continuity, fostering mutual support and understanding across different life stages. [39] Maintaining cognitive health through social engagement is also crucial, as it stimulates mental acuity and reduces the risk of isolation-related health issues. [11, 32] Additionally, social engagement provides emotional support, prevents loneliness, and promotes positive mental health among older adults. [40] Promoting social fitness in aging involves creating inclusive environments that value older adults' contributions and support their continued participation in social and community life. Combating loneliness, staying socially active, and maintaining cognitive function through participation in community and religious activities, facilitating intergenerational connections, promoting lifelong learning, and utilizing technology for connectivity, are critical in fostering social fitness at this stage of life. [37-40]

The Dynamics of Social Fitness in Thailand

Social fitness in Thailand is deeply rooted in cultural values, family structures, and community norms that emphasize respect, hierarchy, and collectivism. [38,41] From an early age, Thai children learn the importance of social harmony and respect for older people, which are fundamental to their social development. Schools and family units play a crucial role in imparting these values, fostering an environment where social skills such as cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution are nurtured. [42] Thai cultural practices, particularly those influenced by Buddhism, encourage individuals to engage in community activities and religious ceremonies, which strengthen social bonds and provide a sense of belonging. [38,43] The collectivist nature of

Thai society means that social support networks, primarily family and close community ties, are integral to an individual's social fitness. These networks offer emotional, financial, and practical support, which is essential for navigating life's challenges and maintaining mental health and well-being. [38,41-42]

As Thailand modernizes and urbanizes, the dynamics of social fitness are evolving. Urbanization has led to more diverse social interactions but also presents challenges such as weakened traditional family ties and increased social isolation. Urbanization introduces diverse social opportunities, such as increased interactions across different cultural and economic groups, fostering inclusivity and innovation. However, it also disrupts traditional family structures that historically served as primary sources of social support. Extended families are often replaced by nuclear families or solitary living arrangements, particularly in urban areas, leading to increased social isolation for both younger and older generations.

Younger generations, especially, are navigating a blend of traditional values and modern influences, with technology and social media playing significant roles in their social lives. [44-45] While these platforms offer new avenues for socializing and expanding social networks, they also introduce issues related to privacy, mental health, and the quality of social interactions. [45] Despite these changes, the core aspects of social fitness—maintaining meaningful relationships and engaging in community life—remain critical. For older adults, participation in community and religious activities continues to be vital for social engagement and mental well-being, helping them to stay connected and active in their communities. [43,46]

Implications and Recommendations on Practice, Research and Policy

Social fitness, which encompasses the ability to build and maintain meaningful social connections, has significant implications for enhancing mental health and wellbeing. The measurement of social fitness involves assessing an individual's ability to build and maintain meaningful relationships, navigate social contexts, and leverage social networks for emotional and practical support. It encompasses several key components, such as social connection, communication skills, engagement in community activities, and resilience in the face of social challenges. Several established tools are widely used to assess social fitness such as Social Network Analysis (SNA), which examines the structure and quality of an individual's social connections, focusing on the number, diversity, and strength of relationships. [47] The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) assesses perceived emotional, informational, and practical support from different sources such as family, friends, and significant

others. [48] The UCLA Loneliness Scale measures feelings of isolation and the quality of social relationships, with high levels of loneliness correlating with poor social fitness. [49] Additionally, the Social Skills Inventory (SSI) evaluates interpersonal communication abilities, including emotional expressivity, empathy, and conflict resolution skills. [50] Together, these measurement tools offer a comprehensive assessment of an individual's social well-being, providing insight into their capacity to navigate social environments, form lasting connections, and access support networks—critical factors for mental health and resilience across the lifespan.

In clinical practice, integrating social fitness involves implementing interventions that strengthen interpersonal relationships and community connections among patients. Healthcare providers, including nurses, as frontline healthcare providers, play a crucial role in fostering social resilience by facilitating group therapy sessions, social skills training programs, and community-based support groups. These interventions not only reduce feelings of social isolation but also enhance emotional support networks, contributing to improved patient outcomes and overall quality of life. [51]

Research on social fitness contributes to advancing knowledge on effective strategies for promoting mental health and wellbeing. Longitudinal studies can investigate how social support networks impact psychological resilience, emotional regulation, and recovery from mental health challenges over time. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing evidence-based interventions that address the social determinants of health and promote holistic wellbeing. Additionally, research should emphasize cultural competence, exploring how social and cultural factors influence individuals' social integration and mental health outcomes across diverse populations. 6[52-53]

On a policy level, integrating social fitness considerations into healthcare policies is crucial for creating supportive environments that promote mental wellbeing. Policies advocating for mental health parity and equitable access to social services ensure that individuals have the resources needed to build and maintain social connections. Investments in community-based mental health infrastructure, peer support programs, and social inclusion initiatives are vital for reducing social disparities and enhancing community resilience. By advocating for policies that prioritize social integration and mental health promotion, healthcare providers, nurses, and policymakers collaborate to create environments that support the holistic needs of individuals affected by mental health challenges. [54]

Moreover, aligning with the World Happiness Report 2023 proposed by Helliwell and colleagues [55], policies can focus on enhancing happiness and wellbeing through social

connections, inclusion, and equity. By prioritizing policies that foster strong social networks and promote inclusivity across diverse communities, policymakers and stakeholders can create environments where individuals feel valued and supported. This includes investing in community infrastructure that facilitates social interactions, promoting initiatives that reduce social isolation, and ensuring equitable access to mental health services and resources. Emphasizing these aspects not only improves overall happiness and life satisfaction but also contributes to greater social cohesion and resilience in society.

Conclusion

Understanding and promoting social fitness across different life stages presents a comprehensive approach to enhancing mental health and overall wellbeing. From childhood through to aging, fostering social skills, resilience, and meaningful connections plays a pivotal role in mitigating the adverse effects of social isolation and loneliness. Recognizing the dynamic nature of social fitness, interventions tailored to each life stage—from early social skill development in childhood to community engagement opportunities in adulthood and support networks in aging—can significantly contribute to individuals' emotional health and quality of life. Recommendations for advancing social fitness encompass multidimensional strategies. Acknowledging the importance of social fitness across all life stages within different contexts can enhance individual happiness and quality of life, contributing to building resilient societies capable of addressing complex mental health challenges effectively.

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