

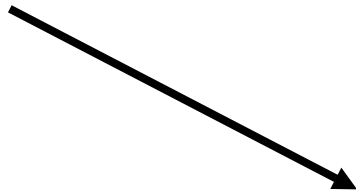
Multiple sclerosis and social networks research study

Social networks are the relationships we have with important people in our lives.

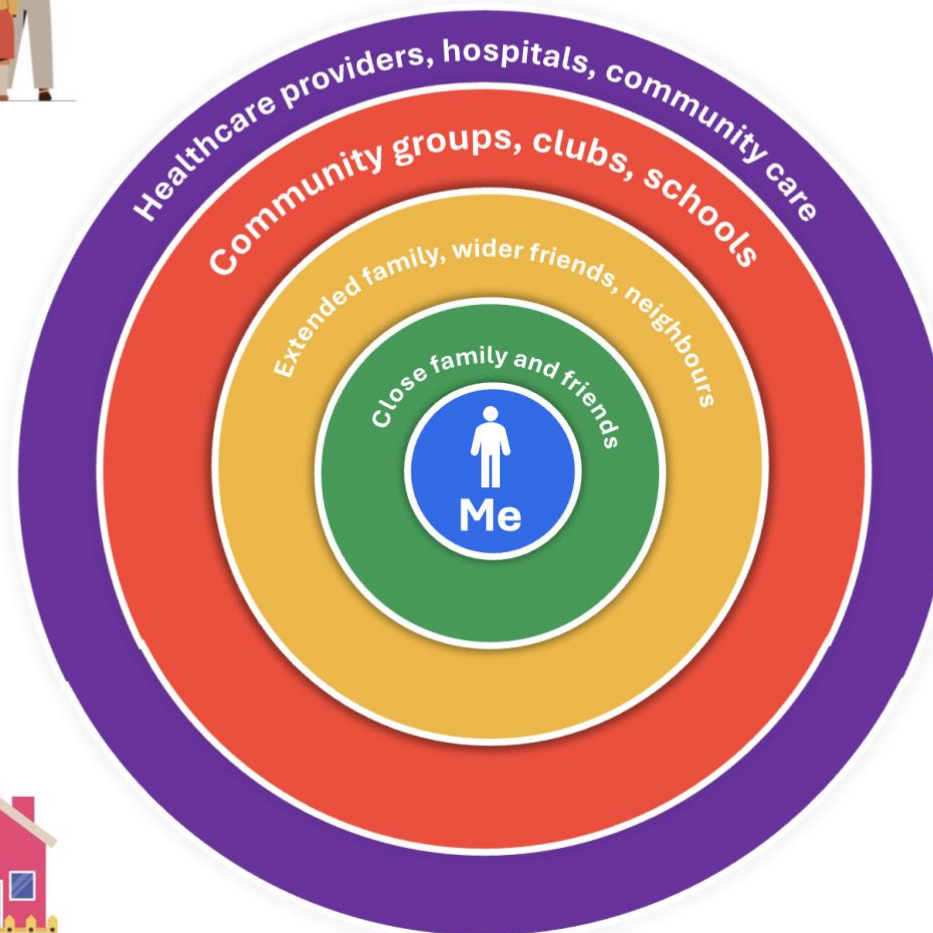
A social network looks like this:



You are in the middle.



Each circle contains different types of people in your life.



For people with MS, we know social networks are very important because they provide social support and social interaction. These are good for **mental health**.



Social networks also provide opportunities for different types of activity and movement. These can be good for **physical health and cognition (thinking skills)**.



Researchers are looking at how social networks could support physical health, mental health and cognition in people with MS. If we know how social networks positively influence health, we could help people to make changes to their relationships, social activities and routines which could help to maintain better health. These recommendations could form a part of **treatment or therapy**.



Research suggests that being socially connected is good for the health of people with MS. Some studies suggest that people with MS might have **fewer people** in their social networks compared with people without MS.

Research also suggests that, for people with MS, the persons in their social network might be likely to **know each other well** (i.e., they are mostly family or close friends – they are not strangers).

What did we do?

We recruited 20 people with MS from a London NHS Neurology clinic, charities and therapy centres across Southeast England. We also recruited 20 people without MS from the general population.



Everyone completed a face-to-face interview.

This included:



- A questionnaire about **depression and anxiety**
- A questionnaire about **fatigue**
- Three brief **cognitive tests**. These tests measured cognitive skills that can be affected in MS (information processing speed, visual memory, verbal memory)
- A questionnaire about **social networks** (who you speak to about personal matters)
- A questionnaire about **social support** and **social participation** (the activities you do)
- A questionnaire about **social media**



We asked questions about social media because we know that social media can be helpful for people with MS to meet new people, learn new information, find groups and access social activities in the local area.

What did we find?

People with MS scored higher on depression, anxiety, cognitive difficulties and fatigue compared to people without MS.

People with MS named **fewer people** in their social networks compared to people without MS. However, the people they named were equally like to know each other as the social networks of people without MS.

People with MS also reported **lower use of social media**.

We didn't find any relationships between social networks, social media and health in people with MS. This contradicted what we expected to find.



What does this mean?

It is difficult to draw confident conclusions from these findings because the study faced **challenges which affected the final results**.

We couldn't recruit all the participants we needed.

Recruiting more participants might have helped us to find what we expected.



In the future, the study could be repeated in a larger group of people with MS or using different questionnaires.



Ideas for the future

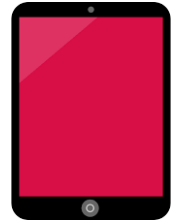
More research in social networks is important because it will help us to design **new social network therapies** which support the physical health, brain health (cognition) and mental health of people with to MS.

Social network therapies have been trialled with people with **diabetes, cancer and respiratory conditions** and have shown positive effects on people's wellbeing. We could use ideas from these therapies to design something similar specifically for people with neurological conditions.

Social media could also be used as a part of this type of therapy to increase people's social connections.



We could think about using **accessible technology or digital skills training** for people who do not feel confident to use the internet.



Thank you

Thank you so much for taking part in this research study. I really appreciate the time you gave to complete all of the questionnaires.

I wish you all the best for the future. If you have any further comments, questions or suggestions about the study, please don't hesitate to contact me:

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