

Research on Optimization Strategies for Psychological Comfort Services for the Elderly under the Social Support Theory

Fangfang Xin^{1*}, Tao Zheng¹

¹ Taizhou Polytechnic College, Taizhou, China

*Correspondence: Fangfang Xin

Received: 12 April 2026; Accepted: 6 May 2026; Published: 23 May 2026

Abstract:

Against the backdrop of accelerating population aging, the quality of spiritual comfort services for the elderly has become a core issue in the construction of the elderly care service system. This article takes social support theory as the analytical framework, and systematically examines the current reality of elderly mental comfort services from four dimensions: weakened emotional function of families, insufficient integration of community resources, lack of professional capabilities of institutions, and gaps in institutional supply. Based on this, optimization strategies are proposed, including activating family companionship responsibilities, building community mutual aid networks, promoting standardized service processes, and improving diversified security mechanisms, in order to promote the substantial transformation of mental comfort services from resource input oriented to demand response oriented.

Keywords:

Social Support Theory, Aged, Spiritual Comfort, Elderly Care Services

1. Introduction

The spiritual needs of the elderly are defined as a subjective psychological imbalance arising from individual aging and changes in social environmental conditions. It is a state of craving triggered by the elderly to maintain and restore subjective psychological balance, achieve fulfillment, satisfaction, and dignity. It mainly includes emotional needs, entertainment needs, knowledge needs, social needs, and value needs. The satisfaction of the mental needs of the elderly has a significant impact on their physical and mental health. The satisfaction of mental needs can significantly prolong the life expectancy of the elderly and reduce the risk of suicide. It can be seen that the satisfaction of the spiritual needs of the elderly is directly related to their quality of life and sense of happiness. Therefore, this article introduces social support theory as an analytical framework to systematically examine the multidimensional challenges of current elderly mental comfort services, and conducts in-depth discussions on optimization strategies, in order to provide actionable reference paths for relevant practices.

2. Overview of Social Support Theory

2.1. The Evolution and Core Connotation of Social Support Theory

The academic context of social support theory began in the 1970s when the field of medical sociology systematically explored the mechanisms of social and health relationships. Early research had already shown the buffering and protective effects of social connections on individuals' resistance to stress, and established the basic proposition that "social environment determines health outcomes" [1]. With the interdisciplinary development of research paradigms, this theory has gradually expanded from the initial focus on health protection to community psychology and social resource allocation. Its theoretical connotation has also changed from descriptive analysis to an explanatory tool - the introduction of the stress buffering hypothesis, which systematically elucidates the impact mechanism of social support on negative outcomes in coping with stressful situations. The difference between instrumental support and expressive support further demonstrates the different nature and structure of support resources.

2.2. Demonstration of the appropriateness of theoretical framework intervention in the study of spiritual comfort

The issue of spiritual comfort for the elderly belongs to the loss of psychological meaning caused by individuals' role withdrawal, shrinking relationship networks, and irreversible decline in physical function in the later stages of life. The internal mechanism is in line with the core logic chain of the social support theory of "stress resource adaptation", which gives this theory a natural legal status for research in this field [2]. The theoretical framework distinguishes between perceived support and actual support, accurately explaining the long-standing structural difference between subjective loneliness and objective support resources among the elderly. Specifically, the subjective feelings of the elderly about whether they are accepted and valued often have a much greater impact on their mental health than the amount of support, fundamentally changing the traditional logic of measuring service quality based on resource investment in comfort services.

3. Multidimensional Examination of Elderly Spiritual Comfort Services

3.1. Weakened emotional function of family support

The family is the initial place of spiritual comfort for the elderly, and in the context of profound changes in intergenerational structure, its emotional support function is showing significant structural looseness. The continuous advancement of urbanization has greatly reduced the degree of spatial aggregation among family members, shifting from the traditional "one bowl of soup distance" living mode to a migratory bird mode across cities or even provinces. The physical time spent with children has shortened, and the daily density of emotional connections has also decreased. The 4-2-1 family structure caused by the one-child policy has resulted in a serious imbalance in intergenerational distribution of family care resources. Adult children have to face competition in the workplace and support the next generation, but due to objective reasons, they cannot meet their parents' spiritual needs. Some family members' attention to the mental state of the elderly is still limited to material satisfaction, and they do not have sufficient understanding and practice of non-material companionship

methods such as emotional recognition and psychological listening. As a result, even in the family environment, the elderly often find themselves in a state of implicit loneliness due to a lack of emotional response. The phenomenon of emotional disconnection caused by “absence and presence” is currently the most typical manifestation of weakened family comfort function.

3.2. The network system supported by the community needs to be integrated

Community is an important spatial carrier for the daily life of the elderly, and should play an irreplaceable role in providing spiritual comfort services. However, in reality, there is still a significant gap between the integration level and service effectiveness within the community support system. At present, most urban communities have established basic service facilities such as day care centers and elderly activity stations. However, most of the service facilities have a fragmented and independent operation mode, and there is no stable cooperative relationship between volunteer service organizations, professional social work institutions, and neighborhood committees, resulting in the phenomenon of repeated registration and inability to share demand information for the same elderly group at different service nodes. There is also another side to the problem in rural communities, which is the limited number and low utilization rate of service facilities. Some elderly people are actually outside the service coverage due to limited access to information or inconvenient mobility. The supply of community spiritual comfort services mostly consists of shallow collective activities such as chess and card entertainment, square dancing, etc. There are few personalized psychological support projects for high-risk subgroups such as widows, disabled, and elderly. The depth of services is structurally misaligned with the hierarchical spiritual needs of the elderly population.

3.3. Professional capabilities of institutional services still need to be improved

Elderly care institutions are the main service places for disabled, semi disabled, and elderly populations, and the contradiction between the professionalization of mental comfort services and actual needs is becoming increasingly prominent. In terms of personnel composition, currently most elderly care institutions still have nursing staff as the main staff, and there is a serious shortage of full-time personnel with psychological counseling qualifications or social work professional backgrounds. Mental comfort services are often simply understood as routine arrangements such as holiday condolences and collective entertainment activities in practical operation, lacking systematic evaluation and intervention plans for the individual life history, personality traits, and current psychological state of the elderly. Although some institutions have introduced psychological service programs, due to high personnel turnover and lack of professional supervision, the quality of services is difficult to sustain and uninterrupted, and the trust relationship between the elderly and service providers cannot be well formed. From the perspective of service philosophy, the habitual understanding of “emphasizing physical care over psychological support” still holds a certain market share among institutional management, and spiritual comfort services have not been included in the main indicators of institutional service quality evaluation, objectively limiting the internal driving force for institutions to enhance their professional capabilities.

3.4. The institutional supply of policy guarantees still needs to be improved

In recent years, many policy documents have been issued at the national level regarding the mental health issues of the elderly, including psychological care services in the list of basic elderly care services. The increase in policy attention has provided key institutional opportunities for the comprehensive creation of a spiritual comfort service system. However, there are still practical obstacles to the implementation direction of policy text principles and grassroots execution. Important institutional elements such as spiritual comfort service content standards, quality evaluation indicators, and qualification recognition of practitioners have not yet formed unified norms, and the implementation scales vary greatly in different regions, resulting in a significant imbalance in service supply quality among regions. Spiritual comfort services have always relied on the overall financial system of elderly care services, lacking independent special funding channels. The current long-term care insurance system mainly covers disabled care, and the coverage of psychological support and emotional companionship services is still blank.

4. Optimization Strategies for Spiritual Comfort Services for the Elderly Under the Theory of Social Support

4.1. Deepen emotional connection and strengthen the function of family companionship

Transforming family emotional companionship from moral appeals to institutionalized behavioral norms is the main way to mobilize family support functions. At the level of employers, the implementation of paid family leave can be included in the scope of labor employment supervision, reducing the institutional cost of accompanying working children. At the community level, a dynamic recording mechanism for the emotional status of the elderly can be created through a grid management system. Grid staff can implement a regular reporting system for the mental status of elderly people living alone or empty nesters, and use information sharing to mobilize family care responsibilities.

Training family caregivers in communication skills and emotion recognition can effectively improve the quality of emotional communication within limited companionship time [3]. Guiding children to actively ask their parents about specific activities, dietary details, and even neighborhood situations during video calls can effectively stimulate the desire of elderly people to express themselves and create two-way emotional communication between both parties. For elderly people whose children are not around for a long time and who live alone at an advanced age, the community can contact selected neighborhood volunteers to undertake daily emotional companionship work, and use points to exchange for life services to ensure the continuity of companionship behavior. "Neighborhood compensation" can fill the structural gap of family support.

4.2. Integrating local resources to build a mutual support network

Establishing a resource coordination system at the street or township level that focuses on the needs of the elderly is a key measure to improve the effectiveness of community spiritual comfort services. Taking the street social affairs department as the leading unit, the daytime care centers, social workstations, volunteer service organizations, grassroots health service centers and other entities within the jurisdiction will be incorporated into a unified service information platform to achieve cross subject sharing of basic information, needs assessment results and service

records of the elderly, fundamentally eliminating the situation of repeated interventions and service blind spots coexisting.

The hierarchical setting of service content should be divided into two categories: inclusive collective activities and targeted case support. At the inclusive level, community activity venues can be used to regularly hold group activities with the theme of life review, with social workers serving as guides to awaken horizontal emotional support within the group through peer narratives. At the case level, targeted case interventions are carried out for life event nodes such as widowhood, chronic disease diagnosis, and relocation, with trained social workers providing one-on-one services. The first home interview is conducted within two weeks after the event occurs, and a phased companionship plan is formulated. Rural areas can rely on the existing organizational structure of village groups or elderly associations to cultivate mutual aid groups mainly composed of local elderly people. For example, young healthy elderly people and elderly disabled people can pair up with each other and regularly visit each other's homes to provide home companionship and life assistance, internalizing spiritual support into a network of relationships in the daily life of acquaintances in society.

4.3. Strengthening professional capabilities and improving precision service levels

The substantial improvement of professional competence among practitioners should replace traditional knowledge imparting training methods with situational skill training. Develop standardized scenario scripts for common depression signals, sadness reactions, and early manifestations of cognitive decline in elderly people. Front line caregivers and social workers simulate real nursing service scenarios through role-playing to train them to recognize implicit psychological signals such as the elderly repeatedly mentioning their deceased spouse and refusing to participate in activities they used to enjoy. Through case review, strengthen their mastery of response skills, so that the training effect can be transferred to daily service behavior [4].

From the perspective of the service process, after life history interviews become a necessary part of the service, detailed records of the elderly's professional experience, important interpersonal relationships, and personal interests and hobbies should be made. Based on this, personalized companionship plans can be developed. For example, for elderly people who have previously worked as teachers, role participation activities such as "teaching manual skills or knowledge" can be designed to enhance their sense of self-worth through the generation of professional identity. Synchronize the creation of service records and regular evaluation systems, track and compare changes in the emotional status of elderly people every quarter, and turn mental comfort services into traceable and evidence-based intervention processes. Advocate for institutions to hire external professional supervisors and use monthly case seminars to help frontline employees solve emotional exhaustion problems in their work, maintain the professionalism of the team, and prevent service quality from declining due to personnel turnover.

4.4. Establish a sound institutional system and improve diversified guarantee mechanisms

In terms of service standards, reference can be made to the explorations already conducted by some provinces and cities. An independent evaluation dimension for mental health support can be added to the quality evaluation system for elderly care

services, and quantifiable indicators such as emotional companionship frequency, psychological screening coverage, and crisis intervention response time can be added to the annual assessment. Elderly care institutions should conduct standardized emotional state screening for all residents at least once a month, and link the screening results with subsequent service records as a reference standard for institution rating, thereby creating an external constraint mechanism for improving service quality.

From the perspective of financial security, encourage local civil affairs departments to determine the proportion of funds for spiritual comfort services in the special fund for elderly care services, and include community emotional care public welfare projects in the government's purchase service list, thereby providing stable funding sources for social organizations to continue participating in service supply [5]. The long-term care insurance system can include psychological support services in the scope of coverage in pilot areas, and gradually promote it after accumulating operational data. The standardization of the multi-party collaboration mechanism cannot be ignored. By formulating a responsibility list and connection procedures for spiritual comfort services between families, communities, institutions, and governments, it is clear that families are responsible for daily emotional companionship tasks, communities are responsible for detecting needs and connecting relevant resources, and institutions are responsible for professional intervention, thus achieving a functional complementary and collaborative situation of various support resources in the process of responding to the needs of the same elderly person.

5. Conclusions

The optimization of spiritual comfort services for the elderly is a series of projects that involve reshaping family responsibilities, rational allocation of community resources, improvement of institutional capacity, and improvement of institutional supply. The inherent tension between “perceived support” and structural resources demonstrated by social support theory warns researchers and practitioners never to ignore service effectiveness simply because they value service investment. Only when the quality of emotional companionship, the precision of professional intervention, and the rigidity of institutional guarantees work together can spiritual comfort services overcome the structural dilemma of having resources but no response, and truly become a psychological support that the elderly can perceive and rely on.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This work was supported by 2024 Jiangsu Higher Education Institutions Philosophy and Social Science Research Project: A Study on the Impact of Spiritual Comfort Services on the Mental Health of Older Adults from the Perspective of Social Support Theory and Corresponding Countermeasures (2024SJYB1737).

References

- [1] Tang, D.Z. Analysis of Providing Spiritual Comfort for the Elderly. *China Civil Affairs*, 2024, 22, 37-38.

- [2] Zhang, Y. Case study on spiritual comfort for elderly people in rural areas. Northwest Normal University, 2024.
- [3] Wang, L.J.; Xiong, P. The impact of child support on the willingness of elderly people to seek spiritual comfort services. *Statistics and Counseling*, 2023, 04, 32-34.
- [4] Zhou, B.B. Empty nest is not hollow: the transformation of social support for rural elderly people. *Economic Research Guide*, 2022, 22, 30-32.
- [5] Liu, Q. Realizing spiritual comfort for rural elderly through social interaction: generating logic and path optimization. *Journal of Yunnan University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2022, 39(03), 59-69.



© 2026 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)