

Who needs social support? We all do!



Someone to help when your basement is flooded or you need someone to watch the kids?

Are there people in your life you can turn to when you just need someone to talk to?

Or maybe just someone you can call when something really great happens and you want to share the news?

SOCIAL SUPPORT is the physical and emotional comfort given to us by our family, friends, co-workers and others. It's knowing that we are part of a community of people who love and care for us, and value and think well of us.

We all need people we can depend on during both the good times and the bad. Maintaining a healthy social support network is hard work and something that requires ongoing effort over time. Read on for more info about social support; how it can enhance your life, how to give and receive it, how to enhance your support network and more.

Types of Social Support

Support can come in many different forms. Experts who study human relationships have identified four main types of social support:

Emotional support: This is what people most often think of when they talk about social support. People are emotionally supportive when they tell us that they care about us and think well of us. For example, if you separated from your partner or lost your job, a close friend might call every day for the first few weeks afterwards just to see how you are doing and to let you know that he or she cares.

Practical help: People who care about us give us practical help such as gifts of money or food, assistance with cooking, child care, or help moving house. This kind of support helps us complete the basic tasks of day-to-day life.

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Types of Social Support

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Sharing points of view: Another way for people to help is to offer their opinion about how they view a particular situation, or how they would choose to handle it. In sharing points of view, we can develop a better understanding of our situation and the best way to handle it. For example, if you tell a friend about difficulties you are having with your teenage son, she may offer a point of view you hadn't considered, and this may help you to better address the situation with your child.

Sharing information: It can be very helpful when family, friends or even experts give us factual information about a particular stressful event. For example, a friend who recently married might provide information about the cost of various components of their wedding, or a cancer survivor might provide information about what to expect from different types of cancer treatment.

Getting your support needs met

Many of the people who are a part of our lives can provide social support. These can include our parents, spouse or partner, children, siblings, other family members, friends, co-workers, neighbours, health professionals and sometimes even strangers. We are unlikely to have all of our support needs met by just one person. Also, different people may be able to provide different types of support (e.g., our mother may be great at helping with child care, and our best friend might give great advice).

In general, the best support comes from the people we are closest to. Research has shown that receiving support from people we have close emotional ties to does more for our emotional and physical health than support provided by people we are not particularly close to. For example, having close friends listen and care for you during a stressful time will likely do more for you than receiving the same support from someone whom you don't know very well.

What is so important about social support?

Social support provides us with important benefits in terms of both our physical and our emotional health. There are now many research studies showing a significant relationship between social support and psychological well-being. For example, during times of stress, social support helps people feel less upset. There is also evidence that workplace stress is lower when people receive support from their co-workers or the company they work for. Some of the other benefits of social support include improved marital and job satisfaction, and lower stress and less postpartum depression in new mothers.

THE PROS: Research tells us that it is important to have at least one close friend. Having many close friends may not do us any more good than having only two or three close friends. Research also tells us that social support does the best job of protecting us from the effects of stress when we believe that emotional support is easy to come by, and we have at least one person we can confide in.

The greatest benefit of social support may come from the protection from unhealthy relationships that it provides.

PROS & CONS of support

THE CONS: On the other hand, unhappy or poor quality relationships with other people have been shown to have a negative impact on mental health and well-being. Conflictual, distressing relationships may do us more psychological harm than positive social relationships can do us good. For example, compared with people who are single, separated or divorced, people who are married and can talk with their partners are less likely to have problems with depression. However, people who are married but cannot talk with their spouse are at much greater risk of clinical depression compared with others. It may be that poor quality relationships impair our ability to cope with stress much more than good quality relationships protect us.

When might I want to change my social support network?

Some people maintain the same set of friends, co-workers and contact with family members over their entire adult lifespan. However, many people make small and sometimes large shifts to their support networks. Here are some of the reasons why.

- ❑ **Not enough support:** You may wish to incorporate new people into your support network if you have completed the online support survey accompanying this module and found that you are either short on the number of people in your life who can provide you with support, or if you are missing people in key areas (i.e., you have good emotional support, but no-one to go golfing or fishing with).
- ❑ **Change in lifestyle:** People often need to make changes to their support network when they experience important life changes. Here are just a few examples of the kinds of life changes that may require a shift in support.
 - **Parenthood:** People often change their social life significantly when they become parents, gradually spending more and more of their time with other parents, and sometimes less time with their friends who do not have kids.
 - **Divorce or death of a spouse:** Married people often socialize with other married people. Following divorce or the death of a spouse, one's usual social network may no longer be a good fit for all our needs. New, single friends may need to be made.
 - **Behavioural problems:** People who smoke, drink heavily, or use recreational drugs on a routine basis may be in the habit of socializing with others who do the same. When we abandon these habits, we may need to make a new set of friends in order to maintain our substance-free life.
 - **New hobby/activity:** When we take up a new activity (running, dancing, painting), we will often want to find others who share our interests.
 - **Sexual orientation:** When a person comes out as a lesbian, bisexual or gay person, he/she may want to make friends with people who are of the same sexual orientation as themselves or friends who are sensitive and open to the issues.
- ❑ **Need for specialized knowledge or expert opinion:** If we undergo a distressing life experience or stressful event that has not been experienced by anyone in our existing support network, we may wish to seek out someone who has. We will be able to share and learn from someone who has walked a mile in our shoes. This person will likely provide better empathy, emotional support and understanding than people who have not experienced this event or circumstance. He or she may also be better able to understand and accept how distressed we are by the experience. Knowing we are not alone and that these things happen to other good people can also help reduce our sense of shame or self-blame.

Formal support (education group or professional) may be helpful when you need highly specialized or technical information that will not be available to you, or well understood by the average person. This may be true if you or a family member has been diagnosed with a serious physical or mental illness, if a family member is coping with substance use problems, or if you are the parent of a disabled child.

Social Support and Mental Illness

There is good evidence that social support plays an important role in mental health or substance use problems. For example, people who are clinically depressed report lower levels of social support than people who are not currently depressed. Specifically, people coping with depression tend to report fewer supportive friends, less contact with their friends, less satisfaction with their friends and relatives, lower marital satisfaction, and confide less in their partners. It is likely that lack of social support and feelings of loneliness can make us more vulnerable to the onset of mental health or substance use problems like depression. However many of us will pull back from other people when we are experiencing mental health or substance use problems. In this way, mental health or substance use problems can lead to problems with social support and aggravate our feelings of loneliness. For these reasons, reconnecting with others in healthy, supportive ways is often an important component of managing most mental health or substance use problems.

Intimate relationships with a spouse or partner are particularly important when it comes to well-being. For example, not having a close intimate relationship (i.e., a spousal type relationship) puts us at risk for depression. However, it isn't being unmarried (single, widowed, divorced, etc.) that makes us vulnerable to depression, it's having a bad marriage! This is particularly true for women. Unsupportive relationships with our family (e.g., negative or overbearing attitudes and behaviours) have also been related to the relapse of symptoms in both schizophrenia and depression.

How do I improve my social support network?

- 1 **Don't be afraid to take social risks** Making new friends and acquaintances means that you will have to take some risks. You will need to seek out and introduce yourself to new people. Ask a friend to help you if this is hard for you (e.g., come to a party or event with you). If you have always been shy, and this has got in the way of you finding the support you need, consider gaining the help of a professional. Of course, parties and events aren't the only social venues at which to meet people; informal gatherings, community centres, recreational courses or clubs, volunteer positions, schools and workplaces are also common places to meet people.
- 2 **Get more from the support you have** While being careful not to overwhelm support providers, ask for what you need from others and be as specific as possible in your requests. It's a mistake to think that people will automatically know what you need—you will have to tell them.
- 3 **Ask for help** Ask the people you know to help you broaden the network you have. If you have recently become single, ask your friends to introduce you to other single people your age. If you have recently come out, ask people you know who have gay friends to introduce you to them.
- 4 **Make a plan** Figure out what kind of new support you need and brainstorm different ways you might be able to find it.
- 5 **Create new opportunities** Take a cooking class or join a hiking club. To meet new people, you will have to step outside your usual activities and lifestyle. If you just keep on doing what you always do, hoping to meet new people, you probably will fail.
- 6 **Let go of unhealthy ties** This can be very difficult. Walking away from any relationship is painful. This is no less true because the relationship is doing you harm. But sometimes this is what we need to do. If all of your friends are involved in activities you want to avoid (e.g., using recreational drugs or shoplifting), you will need to let go of these friendships or risk getting back into your old habits. Use your judgement—sometimes we can simply spend less time with certain people (e.g., friends who don't like to exercise or meet new people) without abandoning the friendship altogether.
- 7 **Protect your marriage** We know that a good marriage offers protection from depression and a bad marriage makes us vulnerable. If your marriage is faltering, do what you can to improve it. Don't be afraid to seek professional help when you need it.
- 8 **Be a joiner** Sometimes the best way to find the support you need is through a support group. If you need support for a highly specific problem (e.g., raising a child with Downs), you may only be able to find this support through a formal group setting. See our tips for finding and evaluating a support group at www.heretohelp.bc.ca/articles.
- 9 **Be patient** While very much worth the effort, making new friends is time-consuming. Recognize that you may need to meet many new people in order to make just one new friend. Building intimacy also takes time. It may be several months from the time that you meet someone before you feel really close to them and that you can count on their support.
- 10 **Avoid negative relationships** We know that negative, conflictual relationships are hard on our emotional health. The negative aspects may be obvious (e.g., abuse) but other times they can be more subtle (e.g., excessive dependence or over-controlling). Sometimes it may be the other person's behaviour that is the primary problem but more often we are also involved in some way—even if it is just the unhealthy ways we are responding to the negative person in our life. As much as possible, avoid long-term relationships that are more negative than positive. Sometimes this can be hard—especially when these relationships are with family members. In this case, try to limit the amount of contact with these people (or buffer that contact with other helpful supporters), and avoid relying on them for support.

Take our online quiz at
www.heretohelp.bc.ca

Select Sources

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You might also be interested in...

For more information about relationship issues, please contact the BC Council for Families: 1-800-663-5638 or www.bccf.bc.ca

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