

Social Support

Source: [Canadian Mental Health Association](#)

We all need to feel like we belong and that others care about our well-being. Social support is exactly that: the belonging and care we receive from other people. Those people – our social support network – can include many different groups of people, including partners, friends, family members, co-workers, neighbours or even professionals like doctors, counsellors, or peer support workers.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

People need other people. It's common for people to underestimate how much they might benefit from the support of people. Social support can help us cope with setbacks, solve problems, improve self-esteem and even manage health problems and stress. People who feel like they have the social support they need tend to have lower stress levels. Stress affects the entire body – from mental well-being to heart health to the immune system – so finding a way to manage and reduce stress is incredibly good for us. The benefits of social support can be felt by those providing the support, too. Social support is even more important when you feel unwell. Yet despite the benefits, people who experience mental health or physical health problems may find themselves pulling away from their support networks. They may feel ashamed or uncomfortable talking about their experiences, fear that others won't understand, wonder how others could even help, or think that they are burdening others. Their existing support networks might not give them the right support they need in their current situation. Unsure of how to help, friends or family may reach out less. Losing those important connections not only means that you have to deal with a lot on your own, it may also validate difficult feelings like feeling unloved or unimportant. One thing is clear: no matter what is going on in your life, there are people who can help.

WHAT DOES SOCIAL SUPPORT LOOK LIKE?

People can offer many different kinds of support:

- Emotional support – someone you contact when you just need to talk about a problem and share your thoughts and feelings. Emotional support isn't necessarily about finding solutions. It's really about empathy, knowing that someone else cares about you and feeling like you aren't dealing with everything on your own.
- Knowledgeable advice – someone you talk to when you need more information. For example, you might call a friend for advice about accessing a service or ask a co-worker how they dealt with a similar situation.
- New perspectives – someone you call when you need to look at a problem from different points of view – something that's hard to do yourself when you are right in the middle of a situation. Other people, however, can offer great insights that you might not have considered on your own. These perspectives can be powerful tools

when you want to solve problems or understand something that's happening in your life.

- Practical help – someone you can call when your childcare provider calls in sick, someone who drops off a meal when you are sick, or someone who can help with your workload. Sometimes, even small tasks or chores can feel overwhelming. Practical help can make a big difference.

Be mindful of your expectations of others. For example, a friend may be an excellent person to talk to when you need another perspective, but they may not be able to offer a lot of practical help. A family member may be able to offer a lot of practical help around the house, but may not have the knowledge to share a lot of information with you. If you aren't realistic when you ask for support, you may not get the support you need and everyone involved can feel upset or hurt.

HOW CAN I BUILD MY OWN SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS?

Social support networks usually change over time. Life situations can change, people can change, and some people lose an important person in their lives. Sometimes a person has a lot of people in their support network, but those people can't provide the support that is most needed. Others may find that they simply need more support than they currently receive. In any situation, you can take action to build a stronger support network.

Building existing networks:

- Connect with your networks and ask for help. Remember that reaching out takes strength!
- Take care of important relationships you already have. You need to contribute to relationships, too – you can't only ask for help or assistance. Offer support to others in your networks.
- Be clear about the kind of help you need. Tell people what you need – they may be able to offer better help when they know what you're looking for.
- Seek specialized support, like counselling, when it's needed. Make sure that you're asking for help in the right places.
- If you put work into a relationship but don't see the improvements you need, it may be time to let go of that relationship. People change and situations change. Sometimes it's best to go your separate ways and put your energy into healthier relationships.

Building new networks:

- Make opportunities to meet new people. Join social activities, take classes or courses, volunteer, or get involved in an organization or group. You can also ask friends to introduce you to other people.

PEOPLE RESOURCES

- Give relationships time. It takes a bit of work to build relationships. You won't be friends with everyone you meet, and when you do make a new friend, it will take time to strengthen your relationship.
- Reach out in person. If you're dealing with a specific problem like an illness, join a support group or try one-on-one peer support. A support group or peer support worker can be a great way to connect with others who can understand some of your experiences and can share hope, good information, and resources.
- Look online. If you don't have a lot of opportunities to find people in person, consider looking online for a community to join. (Just use your good judgement to choose options that are safe and helpful.)

Measures put in place to help contain the spread of COVID-19 are gradually changing. Please remember to follow public health directives for gathering and social distancing in your region.