

Skill #6

Social Support

People need people. Although that statement seems obvious it is only in the last few years that we have come to learn just how important others are for our well being. For example, we know that people who have a close confidant(e), friend, or spouse live longer and are healthier than those who do not! People give social support to each other in ways that are both practical and emotional.

Social support includes giving and receiving encouragement, practical help, positive feedback and rewards, understanding and caring, and role modelling.

Another aspect of social support is knowing where to go to obtain the right type of social support. People's social support network usually extends to friends, family, health care workers and co-workers. It is not the number of people you know but the quality of care and support those people provide that matters.

Benefits Of Social Support

- Sociological studies show that as part of our involvement with others, we are more likely to engage in positive health behaviours such as exercise, medical check-ups, and health screening tests.
- In a study of older people, researchers found that having a confidant(e) significantly helped people avoid psychiatric symptoms.
- Two studies of women showed that having an intimate and confiding relationship significantly reduced the incidence of depression.
- In a study of 7000 adults, a strong correlation was shown between social involvement and length of life; it was shown to be more important to health than smoking, drinking, exercise, or diet.

From A Medical Perspective, Social Support Helps to:

- Maximize our resistance to disease.
- Give us the best fighting chance if we are ill.

From A Social Perspective, Other Benefits Emerge:

- Friends help us feel good about ourselves; they reassure us that we belong and that it's OK to be who we are.
- Friends provide emotional support — someone to talk to about our thoughts and feelings.
- Friends help us in tangible ways — help us solve problems, give us advice.
- Assist others in attaining the same benefits.

Sources of Social Support

Another important aspect of social support is knowing where to go to obtain the right type of social support. This exercise is to help you identify what type of support would be helpful and to know what resources are available.

List the people you would turn to for *emotional* support:

_____, _____, _____,
_____, _____, _____.

List the people you would turn to for *practical* help:

_____, _____, _____,
_____, _____, _____.

You may notice that your social network is not only comprised of your family and relatives. People's social support network usually extends to friends, health professionals, or whoever provides you with the particular type of support that you need.

This brings us to the idea of quantity versus quality of social support. As in many instances, it is not the number of people you know but the *quality* of care and support that people provide and that we come to rely on the most.

Risks Associated With Asking For Social Support

A common fear we all share is the risk associated with asking for support. “What is the risk involved if I ask person X to help me, or if I refuse to help?” Some of the risks involved in asking for support include the following:

- threat to self-esteem
- embarrassment
- fear of being seen as dependent on others
- possibility of rejection by others
- guilt
- possible loss of confidentiality
- lack of comfort in accepting support from others

Despite the risks associated with asking for or declining support, it is important to weigh the benefits that come from receiving the help of others. In order to weigh the pros and cons of asking for social support, you may use problem-solving to help you in your decision. The important thing to remember is that YOU alone have the control to ask for or refuse support.

Offering Social Support to Others

Another important tool for obtaining social support is by offering support to others. By making yourself available to others, you not only meet their needs but at the same time have the company and support of another person. Social support is reciprocal; i.e., both people involved in the interchange benefit from being with each other.

Receiving support from others

Accepting help and support can be a gift that you give. Friends and family are usually doing the best that they can.

S U M M A R Y

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1. People need _____.
2. Social support means help that is _____ and emotional.
3. It is not the _____ of people you know but the quality of support that matters.
4. Social support is reciprocal — that is, both people in the relationship _____.

My notes: