Support Groups and Social Support - Overview

Health problems like cancer or heart disease and mental health problems like substance abuse, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have an emotional side. Your life changes. And you may need a shoulder to cry on or someone to talk to. You may need a ride to the doctor or a night out. You need support.

Support takes many forms. You can find support in seminars and groups led by professionals, in groups of others who have the same condition, and in your relationships with family and friends.

If you have a support network, you will not feel as alone. You'll learn new ways to deal with your problem, and you may try harder to overcome it. Social support can play an important role in recovery. For example, in both PTSD and substance abuse, support can strengthen the benefits of the treatment program.\(^1,2,3\)

Support groups and peer support

You may want help only from your doctor, friends, and family. But sometimes other people also are good for you. In support groups, you find other people with long-term diseases and their loved ones.

Some support groups focus on education. These groups often are led by a professional, such as a teacher or a doctor who shares information about the problem. Other groups focus on support. They often include only people who have the health problem. These are called peer groups.

In a peer group, you'll find people who are going through the same things you are. You'll see that you're not the only one and that others have the same feelings and challenges as you. Group members can give you support, advice, and encouragement. You can see what is working for others and decide if it might work for you.

You can help others in the group by paying attention and letting them know you are listening and by sharing your thoughts. Your experiences and ideas may be new to them. Being able to help others is rewarding and helps you gain self-confidence.

Peer support may include consumer providers and consumer-run services.

- A consumer provider is someone with the same condition who has been trained to help others with the same type of problems. You can find consumer providers in clinics. Because they know what you have gone through, they can be good role models and coaches.
- A consumer-run service is an organization, or part of an organization, in which people with the condition provide services. These services include support groups, peer counseling, telephone helplines, and drop-in centers.

How to find a support group

Here are some ways to find support groups.

- Ask your doctor, counselor, or other health professional for suggestions.
- Ask your religious leader. You can contact churches, mosques, synagogues, or other religious organizations.
- Ask your family and friends.
- Ask people who have the same condition.
- Contact a city, state, or national group for the condition. Your library, community center, or phone book may have a list of these groups.
• Search the Internet. Forums, e-mail lists, and chat rooms let you read messages from others and leave your own messages. You can exchange stories, let off steam, and ask and answer questions.

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Look for a support group that works for you. Ask yourself if you prefer structure and would like a group leader, or if you'd like a less formal group. Do you prefer face-to-face meetings, or do you feel more secure in Internet chat rooms or forums?

Social support

Social support includes emotional support such as love, trust, and understanding, as well as advice and concrete help, such as help managing your time. Your family, friends, and community all can do this. They can make you feel cared about and feel good about yourself, and can give you hope.

You may get your social support from many people. You may play sports with one group of people, go to movies with another, and turn to family or friends to talk over problems.

You can look for support from:

• Your spouse or partner and your children.
• Your parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents, and anyone who is like family to you.
• Friends, coworkers, members of your religious and/or spiritual groups, neighbors, and classmates.
• Support groups, consumer drop-in centers, and online support groups.
• Doctors, therapists, nurses, and other professionals.

Ask yourself where you get your social support. You may be able to forge a closer relationship with family members or friends. Maybe you know someone who you'd like to know better. You can join a club, or find a group of people with the same interests you have.

Improving social support

You may not have good social support. You may avoid other people, or other people may find you hard to get along with. This may be because:

• You may feel ashamed of having your condition and not want to talk to anyone.
• Your condition may make other people wary of you. For example, if you have PTSD and are often angry, people may avoid you.
• You may feel too sad to want to talk to people.
• You may have no family and few friends where you live.

If you can improve your social support, it can help you deal with your condition. Here are some ways you can make your social support stronger:

• Know that social support is a two-way street. You count on your social network for support, but its members also count on you. Ask them about their families, jobs, and interests and help them when you can.
• Know your friends' limits. You don't have to see or call your friends every day. If you're going through a rough patch, ask friends if it's okay to contact them outside of the usual boundaries.
• Don't always complain or talk about yourself. Know when it's time to stop talking and listen or to just enjoy your friend's company.
• Be clear when communicating. Ask questions to be sure you know what people want. If you ask for something, be sure you make yourself understood. Listen to what your friends have to say, and don't judge them.
• Know that good friends can be bad friends. If your buddy keeps you drinking when you shouldn't be, you may want to end the friendship. A social network lifts you up. It shouldn't drag you down.

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