



Developing a Support System: How to Cultivate a Network to Help You Through Rough Times

Family, friends, and becoming socially active can help guard against stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental and physical health issues.

Cultivating a support system can take some effort. But here are a few tips on how to develop and maintain strong and healthy social ties.

The Importance of a Support System

A support system isn't the same as a support group. A support system is a network that can consist of family, friends, colleagues, a faith-based congregation, and other acquaintances you can turn to when you're in crisis or when you want to connect for fun, entertainment, or deep conversation. Support groups are usually more structured meetings or self-help groups, most often run by peers or mental health professionals.

Visiting with a relative, talking with a friend over lunch, or attending a community outing is good for your physical and mental wellness. If you have a mental health condition (bipolar, or depression etc.), these connections can help you get through your darker times. If you're dealing with unhealthy habits like binge drinking or drugging, a healthy support system can help encourage you to change those habits. They may even go with you to make a doctor's appointment or a therapist appointment when you feel depressed or manic, which can prevent problems from escalating.

A healthy support system can also increase your sense of self-worth and self-esteem—promoting positive mental wellness. It can help you get through trauma, loss, the death

of a loved one, or even the good times, like the birth of a baby. Knowing that your support system is there for you can keep you from unhealthy reactions to stressful life situations and keep you on the path to living mentally and physically well.

Developing a Healthy Support System

It's not the size that counts... it's how you use it—your support system, that is. Some people work well in a larger support system, while other folks do better with a smaller group of friends and acquaintances. Regardless, it always helps to have a healthy and diverse support system. That way, if one person is unavailable to you, you have someone else to help you. And there are lots of ways to build your support system. Here are a few:

- Volunteer. Losing yourself in the service of others, is a great way to meet like-minded people. Community coalitions, hospitals, senior centers, places of worship, and museums, are just a few places who often need volunteers.
- Get out with your pet. Seek out a dog park or make conversation with those who stop to talk.
- Work out. Join a class through a local gym, senior center or community fitness facility. Or start a lunchtime walking group at work.
- Do lunch or coffee. Invite an acquaintance or someone you want to get to know out for coffee, lunch, dinner, brunch, I-inner... you get the idea.
- Take up a cause. Get together with a group of people working toward a common goal you believe in, such as animal welfare, a presidential candidate, or erasing mental health stigma.
- Take up a social hobby. Find groups of people (such as Meetups) who have similar interests as you: music, sports, gardening, book clubs, pet grooming, or knitting.
- Go back to school. Take a course to meet people with similar interests.

Having a variety of interests can create new opportunities to meet people. And it may also help make you more interesting to others.

Maintaining a Healthy Support System

Developing and maintaining healthy social ties involves give and take. Sometimes you're the one giving support and other times you're on the receiving end. Recognize who is able to provide you with the most support. Letting family and friends know you love and appreciate them will help ensure that their support remains strong when times are rough.

Your social support system will help you if you take time to nurture friendships and family relationships. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Go easy. Don't overwhelm friends and family with phone calls or e-mails. Communication can be brief — 5 minutes on the phone or several sentences in an e-mail. Find out how late or early you can call and respect those boundaries. Do have a plan for crisis situations, when you may need to temporarily set aside such restrictions.
- Be aware of how others perceive you. Ask a friend for an honest evaluation of how you come across to others. Take note of any areas for improvement and work on them.
- Don't compete with others. This will turn potential rivals into potential friends.
- Adopt a healthy, realistic self-image. Both vanity and rampant self-criticism can be unattractive to potential friends.
- Resolve to improve yourself. Cultivating your own honesty, generosity and humility will enhance your self-esteem and make you a more compassionate and appealing friend.
- Avoid relentless complaining. Nonstop complaining is tiresome and can be draining on support systems. Talk to your family and friends about how you can change those parts of your life that you're unhappy about.
- Adopt a positive outlook. Try to find the humor in things.
- Listen up. Make a point to remember what's going on in the lives of others. Then relate any interests or experiences you have in common. Sharing details about yourself and your life can also help establish rapport.

Be Careful of Those Who are Extra “Needy”

Some friends, acquaintances, and other people you interact with regularly can sometimes be a drain on your mental or physical health—a sign that the relationship could be more harmful than supportive. It's okay to set boundaries with these relationships and it's always okay to say “no” to them. You can limit your interaction with those people to protect your own mental and physical health.

For instance, if your social ties consist of people engaged in unhealthy behaviors that you're trying to overcome—perhaps gambling, infidelity, or food addiction—you may need to sever those connections to help protect yourself and promote your own recovery.

As your support system grows, be cautious of people who are unhealthy, oppressive, or demand that you conform to their habits or personal beliefs. These relationships can be just as harmful, if not more so, than having no support system at all.

Often if people in your support system are continually stressed, ill, or emotionally unwell you may suffer some of their same symptoms. If the people in your support system make heavy demands on your time and resources, your mental state could deteriorate, causing anxiety and depression.

You can practice self-care by setting boundaries, saying “no,” or telling people to “wait.” Taking care of others can sometimes take a toll on your brain and you can’t be good for other people if you aren’t taking care of yourself and your emotional and physical well-being first.

A Support System Has Great Benefits

A support system provides a security blanket and a sense of purpose and connects you to the idea of community. It helps to have a group of warm and encouraging people with whom you can share your concerns, thoughts, and needs. And it’s a great feeling when you are the source of advice, comfort, and companionship within your friendships and support systems.

Relationships morph and change with the passing of time, but it’s never too late to build friendships, support systems, or choose to become involved in your community. Investing in a support system will undoubtedly help your physical and mental health and create a more positive outlook on life for years to come.