RESOURCE MATERIAL

BUILDING SOCIAL SUPPORT
US Center for Mental Health Services

Explore your community resources. Is there a support group for your problem? Most local newspapers, radio and TV stations issue a calendar of events for community resources. Do you know what your local hospitals, social service agencies, or health department offer that may be beneficial to you? Perhaps the local library has books on your medical condition; request the librarian to help you find the information.

The U.S. Center for Mental Health Services has created an "Illness Management and Recovery Workbook" which includes a handout on "Building Social Support" which is excerpted below. The handout focuses on ways to increase social support in one's life. Please visit the website listed for the entire handout and workbook.

"Social support" refers to having relationships that are rewarding, enriching and helpful. Relationships can be considered "supportive" when they are positively focused and have a minimum of conflict and strife. Differences in opinions are natural in any relationship, and a supportive relationship can involve disagreements from time to time. Disagreements in a supportive relationship, however, can usually be resolved in a peaceful and effective manner.

Social support can come from relationships with a variety of different people, including family members, friends, peers, spouses, boyfriends/girlfriends, co-workers, members of religious or other spiritual groups, classmates, mental health practitioners, and members of peer support groups. Social support systems vary widely from culture to culture.

People have their own individual opinions about what makes a relationship supportive. They also have their own perspectives about what they want from their relationships and whether they are satisfied with the number and quality of their relationships. The following questions may help you evaluate what social support means to you.

- Who are the people your life that support you?

- What kinds of things do people do that you find supportive?

- Which aspects of your relationships are you satisfied with?

- Which aspects of your relationships would you like to change?

- In what ways are you supportive of other people?

- Are you satisfied with the way that you are supportive of other people?

- Would you like to have more social support in your life?

Increasing social support

People are often interested in increasing their social support and improving their relationships with others. Two general strategies can be used:

- You can increase the number of people with whom you have contact.

- You can improve the quality of your relationships with people with whom you have regular contact.

For many people a combination of both strategies is most helpful.

Good places to meet people

You can meet people in all kinds of places. It is helpful to always be on the alert for the possibility of meeting someone, no matter where you are. While it is possible to meet people in many different places, there are some places to go where meeting people may be easier. These tend to be public places where people naturally gather for recreation, to pursue an interest or to take care of business. Some examples include:

- Community organizations such as libraries or civic associations
- School or class
- Support groups
- Workplace
- Places where people gather for religious or spiritual activities (churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, etc)
- Peer drop-in centers
- Health or exercise clubs such as the YMCA or YWCA
- Parks
- Museums
- Concerts
- Special interest groups such as those related to politics, hobbies, sports, conservation or recreation
- Bookstores, coffee shops
- Volunteer programs

Tips for starting conversations

In order to get to know someone or to get to know someone better, it is helpful to be able to start conversations. Starting and maintaining enjoyable conversations involves a combination of skills. These skills include choosing someone who might be receptive to a conversation, having something interesting to say, and showing interest in the other person.

Some specific tips for conversation are provided below:

- **Find someone who isn't occupied.**
  Choose someone who isn't obviously occupied. If the person is in the middle of doing something, they may not want to stop what they are doing in order to talk to you.

- **Choose an interesting topic.**
  The topic you choose could be related to something that you are doing when you are starting the conversation. For example, if you are in an art gallery, you could start a conversation about the paintings you are looking at. You could also choose another topic, such as the weather, recent events, or sports. If you don't know the person, you can start by introducing yourself. But as you do so, you should also be thinking of a topic to follow the introduction.

- **Look at the person.**
  Eye contact is important when you are talking to people because it shows them that you are interested

in what they have to say. If you feel uncomfortable looking into someone's eyes, you can look somewhere close to their eyes, such as their forehead or nose.

- **Smile and nod your head to show you are listening.**
  It can be helpful to let the person know that you are listening and are interested in what he or she has to say. Showing an interest in the other person indicates that you don't want to dominate the conversation by doing all the talking and that you are receptive to their ideas and point-of-view.

- **Tune in to what the other person is saying.**
  Asking questions about what the other person says and responding to their comments lets them know that you are interested in their perspective. If the person seems uninterested, consider changing topics or politely ending the conversation.

- **Avoid telling very personal things about yourself.**
  When you are just getting to know someone, avoid telling the person very private information about yourself. Such information too early in a conversation sometimes makes the person feel uncomfortable and can make it harder to make a connection with him or her. When you get to know the person better, he or she will feel more comfortable with conversations about more personal topics.

Strategies for getting closer to people

Getting closer to people, including developing friendships and intimate relationships, is an important goal for many people. The most rewarding close relationships are ones in which each person cares about the other person's perspective and well being. In order to be close to other people, it is important to be able to share more personal things about yourself and to be open to them sharing more personal things about themselves with you. It is also important to be willing to do things to help the other person.

Summary of the main points about building social support

- Social support means having relationships that are positive, rewarding and helpful.

- Relationships are an important part of people's lives.

- Supportive relationships can help people reduce stress and reduce relapses.

- Social support can be increased by connecting with more people and improving the quality of existing relationships.

- There are many different places to meet new people.

- To start a conversation: find someone who isn't occupied, choose an interesting topic, and show an interest in what the other person has to say.

- Showing the other person that you care about him or her is part of being in a close relationship.

- To develop closer relationships, it helps to express positive feelings, ask people questions about themselves, and gradually tell them more about yourself.

- To develop closer relationships with people, it helps to try to understand their point of view, to do things together, to compromise, and to be there for them when they need you.

- Close relationships involve gradually increasing the levels of disclosure between people.

- It is important to develop a support system that works for you as an individual

Reference:
Center for Mental Health Services.
http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/communitysupport/toolkits/illness/workbook/handout4.asp