

Support Groups and Social Support

Health problems like cancer or heart disease and mental health problems like substance use disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have an emotional side. And the same is true for certain life events, like being a parent or caring for someone who has a chronic illness. 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 problem, 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.

Support groups and peer support

Self-help and support groups can be very helpful for some people. These groups usually consist of people with similar problems who meet to give support, practical advice, and encouragement to the people who participate in the group.

Self-help and support groups are different from counseling sessions. These groups may last for only a few sessions or they may be ongoing.

Self-help and support groups:

- Are run by members of the group. Group members help each other solve problems.
- Meet regularly, usually once a week. Some groups may meet only as needed.
- Can be attended by both the person who has the condition and his or her family and friends. Membership may vary. Talk with someone in the group before attending for the first time.

- Usually work best if all members participate. It is not important to talk in the group, especially if it is your first time. Listening (and offering silent encouragement by smiling and paying attention) is also a way of taking part.

Joining a self-help or support group does not take the place of counseling. Some people who attend these groups also need to participate in regular counseling sessions with a health professional.

Self-help or support groups are not for everyone. Some people feel uncomfortable talking in a group. Attend a group meeting at least three times before you choose not to go back. Then you can make a better decision about whether taking part in a self-help or support group is good for you.

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 groups.
- 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, email 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. But these websites are often not monitored by professionals, so you may find inaccurate information, which can increase your anxiety.

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. This may be because:

- You may feel ashamed of having your problem 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.

Help is available. For additional information, visit [MagellanHealth.com/MYMH](https://www.MagellanHealth.com/MYMH)