

Family and friends who are supportive provide many benefits for a person's mental, emotional, physical, and social well-being. A strong social support system is critical as one grows older, especially in these times of economic and social stress, and for those who live with a chronic illness or disability.

What is a social support network? "A social support network is different from a support group. A social support network is made up of friends, family and peers, while a support group is generally a structured meeting run by a mental health professional. Although both can play an important role in times of stress, a social support network is something you can develop when you're not under stress, providing the comfort of knowing that your friends are there for you if you need them" (Mayo Clinic Staff, July, 2008). "Social support includes real or perceived resources provided by others that enable a person to feel cared for, valued, and part of a network of communication and mutual obligation" (CDC, MMWR, May 6, 2005). A social support network provides a sense of belonging in which spending time with friends lessens feelings of loneliness. It provides an increased sense of self-worth because people who call you a friend reinforce your self-worth. Reaching out to friends and family when you encounter compromising health issues allays feelings of angst.

Maintaining your social support network. Your relationship with friends and family is a two-way street. What goes down the street, so to speak, also comes back up the street. Health Educators and behavioral scientists suggest the following ideas for nurturing a support network:

- **Stay in touch.** Respond to phone calls, return e-mails, and reciprocate invitations to let people know you care.
- **Be proactive.** Make the first move rather than wait for someone else to contact you. Be the one to strike up a conversation (talk to people in elevators or when waiting in line at a store). If you are taking a class (e.g., Academy for Lifelong Learning), chat with the people sitting next to you.
- **Know when to say "no" and when to say "yes."** Spending time with people who are not supportive can add stress and weaken the network support. Be adventuresome and accept an invitation even though you may feel insecure.
- **Don't compete.** Be happy when friends succeed or receive kudos. Celebrate friends and family accomplishments; they in turn will celebrate yours.
- **Be a good listener.** Be cognizant of what is important to your friends. Listen to them rather than turning the conversation around to you.
- **Challenge yourself.** Keep looking for ways to involve yourself in community and personal activities. Try to complain less about whatever it is you complain about! We all have our foibles.
- **Appreciate friends and family.** Take time to say thank you and express how important they are to you.

The goal of maintaining and extending a social support network is to enhance a person's overall well being. Feelings of obligatory social relationships can create negative consequences and become stressors. Friends who persist in exhibiting negative attitudes about daily events or news items can add unnecessary strain to daily living. The best social support systems have no strings attached. If pressured to conform to another person's beliefs or activities, it is time to make a change in your network. Carefully choose who you want as a support person when experiencing a difficult time.

Friendships improve quality of life and health. Try this at home or at a get together. Make a list of your top favorite activities and the number of times you have done them in the past couple of weeks. Share this list with those in your support network.

***"The more you celebrate
LIFE
The more there is to celebrate!"***