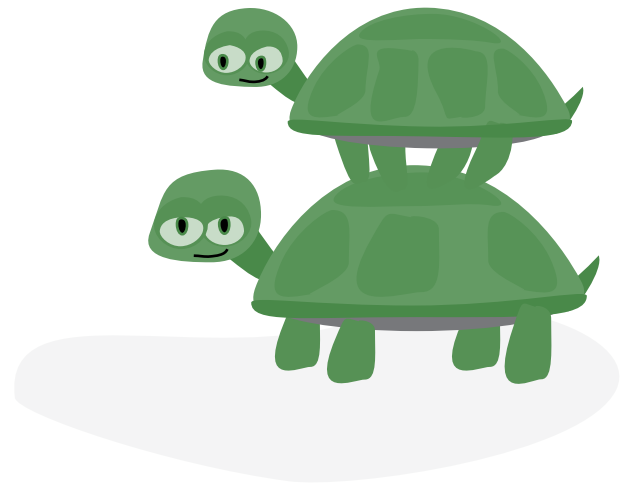


are there people in your life you can turn to when you need to talk to someone?

someone to help when your basement is flooded or when you need someone to watch the kids?

or maybe just someone you can call when something really great happens and you want to share the news?



**social support** is the physical and emotional comfort given to you by your family, friends, co-workers and others. It's knowing that you are part of a community of people who love and care for you, value you and think well of you.

## Types of social support

Support can come in many different forms. There are four main types of social support:

**Emotional support:** This is what people often think of when they talk about social support. People are emotionally supportive when they tell you that they care about you. For example, if you separated from your partner or lost your job, a close friend might call every day for the first few weeks afterwards just to see how you are doing and to let you know that they care.

**Practical help:** People who care about you might give you practical help such as gifts of money or food, help with cooking or child care, or help moving house. This kind of support helps you complete tasks in your daily life.





**Sharing points of view:** Some people help by sharing their point of view on a particular situation, or sharing how they might handle a situation. When you share points of view, you can develop a better understanding of a situation and the best way to handle it. For example, if you tell a friend about difficulties you are having with your teenage son, she may offer a point of view you hadn't considered. This may help you to better address the situation with your child.

**Sharing information:** It can be very helpful when family, friends or even experts give factual information about a particular situation. For example, a friend who recently married might provide information on the cost of their wedding, or a cancer survivor might provide information on different types of cancer treatments.

## Getting your support needs met

Many of the people in your life can provide social support. These can include your parents, spouse or partner, children, siblings, other family members, friends, co-workers, neighbours, health professionals and sometimes even strangers.

Different people in your life may provide different kinds of support, so it's unlikely that one person can provide all the support you need. For example, your parents may be great with childcare, and your best friend may give great relationship advice.

The best support often comes from the people you are closest to in your life. Receiving support from the people you are close to may be more beneficial to your physical and emotional health than support from people you don't know well.

## What is so important about social support?

Research shows that social support provides important benefits to our physical and emotional health. Stress may be related to a number of health concerns, from mental health problems to chronic health problems like heart disease and migraines. However, social support can help protect people from the harmful effects of stress. When dealing with a stressful situation, people are less likely to report stress-related health problems when they feel like they have support from others.



How much support do you have? Take our online quiz at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)

### Select sources and additional sources

- Visit [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca) to read the Social Support issue of *Visions: BC's Mental Health and Addictions Journal*.
- Visit [www.bccf.ca](http://www.bccf.ca) for information on healthy families from the BC Council for Families.
- Visit [www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu](http://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu) for the social support section of Taking Charge of Your Health, a project of the University of Minnesota.
- Cohen, S., Underwood, L.G. and Gottlieb, B.H. (2000). *Social Support Measurement and Intervention: A Guide for Health and Social Scientists*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Gottman, J. and DeClaire, J. (2001). *The Relationship Cure: A 5 Step Guide to Strengthening your Marriage, Family, and Friendships*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

# when might I want to change my social support network?

## social support and mental illness

While some people maintain the same set of friends, co-workers and contact with family members over their entire adult lives, many others make shifts to their support networks. Here are some of the reasons why.

- **Not enough support:** You may wish to bring new people into your support network if you find that you need more people in your life who can provide you with support, or if you're missing people in areas that are important to you. For example, you may have good emotional support, but you may want to meet more people who share your interests.
- **Change in lifestyle:** People often make changes to their support network when they experience important life changes. Here are just a few examples of changes that may require a shift in support:
  - **Parenthood:** People often change their social life significantly when they become parents. They may spend more of their time with other parents.
  - **Divorce or death of a spouse:** Married people often socialize with other married people. Following divorce or the death of a spouse, your usual social network may no longer be a good fit for your needs.
  - **Change in behaviour:** People who smoke, drink or use drugs on a regular basis may socialize with others who do the same. When you cut back or quit, you may decide to make a new friends to help you maintain your goals.
  - **New hobby or activity:** When you take up a new activity, like running or painting, you may want to find others who share your interests.
- **Need for a like-minded community:** You may wish to join a community or communities that you identify with, or make friends with people who share your values.
- **Need for specialized knowledge or expert opinion:** You may wish to seek out extra help when you experience something that your existing support network isn't familiar with. People with lived experience may be better able to provide empathy, support and understanding. The knowledge that we aren't alone can also help you cope with feeling of blame or shame.

Formal support, like an education group or professional, may be helpful when you need highly specialized or technical information. For example, you may need specialized information if you or a loved one is diagnosed with a health problem.

Social support plays an important role in mental health and substance use problems. For example, people living with depression report lower levels of social support than others. Specifically, people living with depression tend to report fewer supportive friends, less contact with their friends, less satisfaction with their friends and relatives, lower marital satisfaction and confide less in their partners.

It's likely that lack of social support and feelings of loneliness make people more vulnerable to mental health or substance use problems like depression. However, many people pull back from others when they're experiencing mental health or substance use problems. In this way, mental health or substance use problems can lead to problems with social support and aggravate feelings of loneliness.

Reconnecting with others in healthy, supportive ways is often an important component of managing most mental health or substance use problems.



# how do I improve my social support network?

## 1. Don't be afraid to take social risks

Seeking out new people and introducing yourself to them may be a useful way to meet others. For example, you may decide to go to a party, even though you won't know anyone else at the event. Informal gatherings, community centres, recreational courses or clubs, volunteer positions, schools and workplaces are also common places to meet people.

## 2. Get more from the support you have

It's easy to assume that other people know what you need, but this usually isn't true. You may need to tell others what you need. Be as specific as possible in your requests. However, be careful not to overwhelm your support providers.

## 3. Reach out

Ask the people you know to help you broaden your networks. If you have recently become single, ask your friends to introduce you to other single people your age. If you have recently come out, ask your friends to introduce you to others in the community.

## 4. Create new opportunities

You may create new opportunities to meet others when you step outside of your usual activities. For example, you may meet new people when you join a club or group or get involved in an organization.

## 5. Let go of unhealthy ties

Walking away from any relationship is painful—even when the relationship is causing harm—but it may be necessary. For example, if you're trying to quit drinking and your friends only ever want to spend time in bars and clubs, you may decide to let them go. Use your judgement, though. It may be possible to spend less time with certain people without fully abandoning the friendship.

## 6. Make a plan

Figure out what supports you need and figure out how you might find it.

## 7. Be a joiner

Sometimes, the best way to find the support you need is through a support group. If you need support for a highly specific problem, like managing a health problem, a formal support group may be the best option. See our fact sheets on finding help and support at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca).

## 8. Be patient

Making new friends can take time. You may need to meet many new people to make just one new friend. Building intimacy also takes time. It can take several months to feel close to someone and feel like you can count on their support.

## 9. Avoid negative relationships

Negative relationships are hard on your emotional health. Some negative aspects may be obvious, such as abuse. Other times, they may be more subtle, such as excessive dependence or control issues. You aren't responsible for the other person's behaviour, but it can still take a toll on your own well-being. You may find yourself dealing with the problems in unhealthy ways. It can be hard to avoid certain negative relationships, especially when these relationships are with family members. In this case, it may be best to limit the amount of contact with these people (or buffer that contact with other helpful supporters), and avoid relying on them for support.

## 10. Take care of your relationships

You're more likely to build strong friendships if you are a good friend, too. Keep in touch with your support network, offer support to others when they need it and let them know that you appreciate them.