

Combating Stress with Social Support

By Maura Eze, Counselor Intern

Everyone's heard the cliché, "a friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out." And we've probably all heard the John Lennon lyrics, "I get by with a little help from my friends."

With thousands of friendship lyrics, sayings and clichés, one thing is evident, social support is vital in our lives. Whether emotional or practical, we can profit by relying on people to get through everyday life stressors. An individual's social support includes friends, family members, co-workers and others he/she feels comfortable turning to in a time of need or crisis. This support network ultimately exists to offer a broader view of situations to the individual while enhancing their self-image and providing a buffer during unfortunate life events.

Recent studies show 'it pays to have friends.' The benefits are said to have a positive impact on your overall health and well-being. The advantages include:

- A feeling of security - Reaching out to friends provides an added security of knowing those friends can alert you to certain problems and dangerous situations, actions or behaviors.



- A sense of belonging - Making time for interaction with friends allows you to fend off loneliness. Also knowing you are not alone can help cope with stress.
- Increased sense of self-worth - Having people in your life who accept you can reinforce a sense of worth.

Research has also linked social support with our general psychological (mental and emotional) well-being. For example, individuals with a strong social network are likely to have higher self-esteem, be more content with their lives and suffer from fewer depressive episodes. Those individuals are also more likely to have the ability to cope and manage stress. The support gained from a social network allows an outlet for expressing thoughts and feelings that may otherwise be bottled up.

Another form of social support people can utilize is counseling. Although a short term support mechanism, the counselor can also offer different perspectives on ways to better cope with life's struggles.

Forms of Support

There are three reported types of social support. Each form is beneficial and a combination of all is recommended at different levels.

1. Emotional Support
2. Instrumental Support
3. Informational Support

Emotional support refers to actions people take to feel that they are cared for. This support can be a friend asking why another friend looks sad. It could also be a friend reaching out to another friend for companionship in the form of a movie, dinner, or even a night in.

Instrumental support comes in the form of physical support such as babysitting, money, or housekeeping. We all get sick now and then and sometimes need people around us to carry out duties we usually take care of but now find difficult to do.

Finally, informational support means providing a friend with information or resources. For example, when an individual is in need of legal or financial help, social support enables the person to gain access to the information needed.

Social Support and Physical Health

Psychological (emotional) and physiological (physical) consequences of stress can significantly be reduced by an individual simply having social support. This support can be from a trusted group such as a book club, support group or a church group or it can be a valued individual. Although it is important for us to be able to lean on our significant others, it is just as important they are not the only set of shoulders that we have.

Creating a Support Network

So what are some ways to begin expanding or even creating a social support system? The good news is even the most introverted individuals can

and have been able to gain a sense of belonging by using their interests to connect with others in their communities.

For those who move to a new town and find it difficult to meet people, there are options. Maintaining a friendship is quite similar to forming one in that both processes must be nurtured in order to grow. Keeping in touch with long distant friends requires answering their calls, calling them occasionally to check-in, returning e-mails and sending the occasional e-mail just to say hello. This is also true for forming new friendships. Keeping in touch and reaching out to others makes the difference. Sometimes, we are approached by people who exchange numbers with us but because of various circumstances, we do not call or return their calls; this will not likely result in acquiring a new friend.

Other ways of socializing involve taking the initiative and stepping out into our communities. A few ways to meet new people include:

- Joining a gym
- Getting involved in a hobby
- Volunteering
- Getting a pet

If you are uncomfortable meeting new people, a gym can provide a setting more conducive to striking up conversation with others. Most gyms offer smaller classes such as yoga, aerobics, or martial arts. These are excellent settings for meeting new people.

Hobbies and volunteering help you connect with people with a shared interest. And while getting a pet is beneficial physically and emotionally, it is also a good way to meet new people. Your new friend can help you connect with others.

For more therapeutic ways to combat your daily stress, make an appointment with an EmployeeCare counselor today. Our counselors can help you discover stress management techniques to enable you to start living a better quality of life. As we all know, some stress is good. But understanding ways to reduce unneeded stress through strong social support can make a difference in your physical and emotional health.



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Healthy and Unhealthy Guilt

Most of us are familiar with the experience and phrase “guilt trip.” During this post holiday season, you may be “guilt tripping” yourself for eating or spending too much. On the other hand, you may be wrestling with anger or frustration in the aftermath of a family member(s) who managed to “guilt” you into adding stress-producing visits or activities to your already packed schedule.

The expression “guilt trip” was likely generated during the mid-to-late 1960s. During this time, many people in the Western culture were exploring alternative life styles, examining their inner conscience and emotions as well as advancing the psychological importance of individual responsibility for feelings, emotions and behaviors. The Merriam-Webster dictionary website indicates the first use of the term was in 1977 and defines it as “to cause feelings of guilt as in guilt tripping someone into helping.” Guilt trips can also be self-imposed, a learned response from being raised in an overly critical and controlling environment. Either way, it represents an unhealthy and stressful emotional state that many of us spend a life time trying to overcome. Excessive guilt can influence us to make poor decisions and cause depression, anxiety and low self esteem. The cumulative stresses of these are bound to impact us physically as well.

Guilt certainly is and can be a normal, healthy emotional response when we experience conflict after doing or saying something that violates our own or society’s values and standards. A moral society depends on people being motivated by conscience, empathy and responsible choices. A healthy experience of guilt results in us being accountable for our actions, making amends and engaging in problem solving/behavior change to prevent us from making the same mistake in the future. When someone demonstrates true remorse for something they did wrong, forgiveness is more likely to occur so it helps us build and maintain healthy, balanced relationships.

Other forms of somewhat normal and typical guilt can result after someone has survived a traumatic event or has had to make a difficult decision, like placing a parent in a skilled nursing facility. Guilt often surfaces during a grieving process, “if only I’d done or said this,” to possibly change the outcome

of an illness, or “I wish I was killed instead of my child.” These situations call for extensive support and sometimes counseling to help a person realize s(he) likely did their best given the circumstances and resources.

For the opposite end of the spectrum, the psychological profession has defined people who consistently lack any true sense of guilt or remorse for violating the rights of others as having “antisocial personalities.” These individuals resist conforming to social norms and lawful behaviors by rationalizing their behavior, blaming someone else or denying responsibility altogether. These people may engage in crime or dysfunctional lifestyles.

Because no one is perfect, most of us have used our defensive skills of rationalizing, denying and blaming others for something we did in order to avoid getting into trouble or because we feel so ashamed of our behavior. This is a self-defeating pattern and causes a great deal of conflict in our relationships. In healthy relationships, individuals admit mistakes or wrongdoings without trying to transfer the guilt from their lap to someone else. The act of taking responsibility, offering a sincere apology and then making conscious efforts to avoid hurtful behaviors, is a powerful process that strengthens and renews relationships.

Unfortunately, many of us were raised in families that trained us to believe we are responsible for others feelings. Some families have used religion or previous generations as tools in this process. For example, “Your mother is rolling in her grave” or she’s “having a word with God” are ways to overemphasize a wrongdoing. Some people react with hurt feelings or anger if someone close to them tries to care for themselves by spending time alone or making a choice that reflects individuality instead of agreeing with them. There are tough situations when the truth is likely to be difficult to hear, but you are not responsible for someone else’s hurt unless you have intentionally done or said something in a hurtful way.

So how do we resist taking on other’s guilt when, for whatever reasons, a friend or family member either consciously or unconsciously attempts “guilt tripping?” How do we combat our own tendencies

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to engage in irrational self blame or a sense we are not doing enough? Here are some helpful suggestions:

- **Rate how distressed you are by the guilt.** A quick “reality check” of rating your stress on 0-5 scale could help you decide if the situation is worth the time. It is not unusual to feel an awkward type of guilt when you begin to set limits until you become more confident. Address your guilt if it does not subside or is significantly distressing.
- **Avoid holding on to your feelings.** Start writing down or talking about your guilt to gain some perspective. What has happened that you feel this amount of guilt? What is the basis for the guilt? Given the situation could you realistically have done something differently? Was your behavior driven by anger, jealousy or revenge? Is the guilt based on irrational beliefs you are non-deserving or can never do/be enough? Narrow down what, if any, portion of your behavior was consciously or unconsciously hurtful.
- **Make a plan and put it into action.** If an apology is helpful to the situation or the relationship, take ownership for your part, not everyone else’s. If your guilt is about something for which you had no control like a death or someone’s anger when you set appropriate limits, then make an effort to let it go.
- **Learn to forgive, those who have hurt you as well as yourself.** Everyone makes mistakes which offer important life lessons. Holding onto anger over something someone did or continuously beating yourself up is more harmful in the long run.
- **Seek out personal or professional support** if your guilt becomes so draining it is interfering with your daily life and having a negative impact on relationships. Talking with someone you trust who has some objectivity can help you turn a corner to resolving your feelings of guilt.

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