

Social Support and Networking

Thien had a leg amputated six months ago, and has spent a lot of time talking about her new struggles with a close friend. However, while her friend has said that she will always be willing to listen, she fears that she does not know how to help Thien adjust to the specific issues she faces.

Hank has been feeling lonely lately. He has support from his friends and family, but they do not completely understand his frustrations related to living with spina bifida and facing barriers in the community. He wishes he knew someone who could relate to his situation and with whom he could share experiences.

Please see page 4 to learn how Thien and Hank began to find social support by working with their local Center for Independent Living.

Social Support

We all struggle from time to time. It is nice to have someone to turn to who can understand and give guidance when things get frustrating. Research shows that having a good social support network helps people stay mentally and physically healthy. The three main types of social support are **emotional**, **instrumental**, and **informational**.

Emotional social support is when people are willing to *listen and encourage you* when you are stressed. People who provide emotional support include friends, family, mentors, etc. For example, a friend can provide emotional social support by listening to you describe a situation that made you upset without judging you.

Instrumental social support is when others provide *a service or material items* to help your situation. People who provide instrumental support include family, friends, counselors, Independent Living Specialists, doctors, and others. For example, a family member provides instrumental social support by changing a light bulb in your home that you can't reach; a doctor might prescribe medication to help you manage your chronic pain; a friend might provide support by bringing you a home cooked meal while you recover from an illness; and a Center for Independent Living staff member might help you learn skills such as self-advocacy and independent living to increase your independence and improve your quality of life.

Informational social support is when someone provides *information* that can help you. Counselors, Center for Independent Living staff, doctors, or



Photo: Healthy Community Living,
www.healthycommunityliving.com

peers can provide informational support. For example, a counselor can give you informational social support by giving you information on how to manage your stress; a peer with a disability might tell you what theaters are most accessible for people with mobility issues.

Networking: Build your social support network

People can provide more than one type of support in your life. It is important to make sure you have people in your life who can provide different types of support when you need them. Here are some different strategies you can use to strengthen or grow your current social support network.

Reaching out to others can be scary, but the people you already know can help you make new friends.

- **Be proactive.** Social support always goes both ways; don't always wait for others to reach out to you. Contact your family members or friends regularly and check in with them. Say "Hi" and introduce yourself to a new person you meet at a gathering if you find him or her interesting.
- **Think of people you've heard about or known with whom you may want to build a relationship.** This could be someone you have met or heard about in your community, someone you met at an event, or someone with whom you chatted online.
- **Ask your friends or family members if they can introduce you to their connections.** If your friends know people who might be able to relate to you or have experienced similar challenges, these might be great people to provide you with social support. For example, you can ask a friend to introduce you to her friend who drives a car with hand controls when you want to learn to drive again after a spinal cord injury.
- **Seek out social support from peers by joining a support group.** A support group is a community of people who have something in common, such as a disability. Support groups can be a place to turn to for care and encouragement. Support groups can be both in person and online (for example, chatrooms, websites, and video meetings). Your nearest Center for Independent Living may know social support groups where you can connect with others.
- **Create new opportunities to meet people.** What are your interests and hobbies? Do you like reading or getting involved in local politics? What religion do you practice, if any? You can find people who share the same interests with you by joining a book club, connecting with a gaming or hand cycling group, or volunteering for a campaign. Libraries are a great place to learn more about these activities. Faith communities are also a great place to meet new people.
- **Use technology to expand your network.** Technology has provided ways to connect people, no matter how far away they are from one another. Write an email, send a text message, make a phone call, or have a video chat to connect with people you know. You can also use social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram to expand your network. Here are some tips on how to use the Internet more safely.

Staying Safe on the Internet

- Do not befriend or share private information with people you meet online unless you are sure it's safe. People are not always who they say they are and can easily take advantage of others if they receive their personal information. Some people use "phishing" emails to gain sensitive information such as usernames, passwords and credit card details for malicious purposes.
- Make sure you go through a trustworthy site to prevent scamming or hacking. Stick with popular forms of online networking like using Facebook or LinkedIn.
- Keep your online profile private. You do not want strangers to find personal information about you such as your address.
- Be careful and smart about what you post online; once you put something on the Internet it cannot be permanently deleted.
- Be cautious when you bring an online relationship offline, or in person. Meet a new person in a public space like a library or community rec center for the first time before meeting with them in your home. Bring a friend along for safety with first time meetings.



Photo: Healthy Community Living, www.healthycommunityliving.com

Improve your social skills

Whether you can offer a friendly ear to a friend who had a bad day, a trip to the grocery store for someone suffering with the flu, or information on how to navigate the local transit system, you build friendships by being a friend! Here are tips for having a good first conversation.

- Find something you have in common and comment on it. Do you go to the same school, live in the same area, or have similar interests? Even talking about the weather can get a conversation going!
- Keep the conversation going by asking people questions and learning more about them first, before talking about yourself. Share relevant stories about common concerns and experiences.
- Don't over share personal information about yourself, family or friends with someone you are just getting to know.
- Talk, but also listen. Smile, nod, and make eye contact during the conversation so the person knows you are listening and you are interested. This will help them feel comfortable and want to continue to share and talk with you.
- Set a plan to talk again. Make plans to meet in person again, or exchange contact information such as your phone number, email address, or social media account for future contact.
- Be prepared to offer support to others in order to build strong friendships. Everyone has something valuable to give.
- Figure out what strengths you bring to a relationship, in terms of emotional, instrumental or informational support, and offer these to others.
- Remember: To have a friend, you must be a friend – it's a two-way street!

You might
want to join a
club or support
group where
people share
your interests or
experiences.

Resolution to Thien's and Hank's Stories

Thien's friend told her that people at a Center for Independent Living (CIL) can better help her address issues such as managing pain, maintaining mobility, and staying positive.

Thien went to her local CIL and met with a staff member. She helped Thien describe her frustration regarding the challenges she was facing, and to better understand how to cope with them. She also recommended that Thien seek support from other people experiencing amputation and gave her information about a group that meets at a local rehabilitation center.

Thien felt that she had made a connection with the staff member and that she could talk to her about her struggles. She also considered trying out the support group, or looking for one that offered online support.

Hank went to his Center for Independent Living, where he obtained information about a support group for wheelchair users that met there.

He attended a meeting, and met a man with spina bifida who is just a few years older than he is. Hank introduced himself after the meeting, and after talking for a while, the two found out they have a lot in common. They exchanged phone numbers and agreed to have lunch together later that week.

Hank was happy to find a friend who he can share experiences with and discuss ways to solve problems.



Photo: Yting.com

Resources to learn more about social support and networking:

Helpguide.org, Making Good Friends: Visit this website to learn what to look for in a friend, where to find potential friends, and how to make new friends.

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm>

Mental Health America, Social Support: Getting and Staying Connected: This website offers ways to maintain your relationships with people you already know.

<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/stay-connected>

Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation, Get Support:

This site offers an opportunity to gain support from a peer mentor for those who have some type of paralysis.

<https://www.christopherreeve.org/get-support>

Get Safe Online: Social Networking Sites: This website provides a list of tips on how to be safe in sharing information on the Internet.

<https://www.getsafeonline.org/social-networking/social-networking-sites/>

Volunteer Match: This website helps connect people to community volunteer opportunities.

<https://www.volunteermatch.org/>

United Way Organization: Offers help connecting people to community volunteer opportunities.

<https://www.unitedway.org/>

ILRU Directory of Centers for Independent Living and Associations – 2017 (Vol. 39): Provides a national directory of Centers for Independent Living in the United States and its territories.

<http://www.ilru.org/projects/cil-net/cil-center-and-association-directory>

NOTE: While people with all types of disabilities need social support, the RTC/PICL focuses mainly on the community participation and barriers of people who have mobility-related disabilities.

This fact sheet offers general information, not legal advice. The application of the law to individual circumstances can vary. For legal advice, you should consult an attorney.

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