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Building support II

While the need for social support varies from person to person, everyone benefits from social contact. We live our lives in a virtual web of social connections, which can influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with eating, physical activity, and weight management. Your personal relationships represent a potentially untapped source of support for your weight loss efforts, as well as a source of obstacles. This module reviews ways in which your social world may be helping or hindering your weight management efforts and suggests ways to change your social environment to become more supportive.

Social Support Promotes Health

Medical research has found that both the quantity and quality of your relationships with others are closely related to your health status. Similar findings have also been observed in animal studies. For example, animals that are stressed while they are surrounded by their mothers or littermates develop fewer health problems than those stressed while in isolation.

Quality Counts More Than Quantity

Some people have many “acquaintances” but very few close friends. Research shows that men tend to have fewer close friends than do women, perhaps because men are less likely to engage in a level of emotional disclosure that promotes intimate bonds. It appears that the quality of relationships may be more crucial to your well being than the number of relationships you have. Consider the following. Happily married people generally have fewer illnesses and lower mortality rates than single people (i.e., divorced, widowed, never-married), but unhappily married people have even poorer health than singles. Similarly, loneliness is less related to the number of relationships people report than it is to their perceived satisfaction with and closeness of those relationships.

How might the quality of your relationships affect your health? There are a lot of ways to think about the

tools for success

- Appreciate the relationship between social support, health, and weight management.
- Understand the role of assertiveness in gaining support for your weight loss efforts.
- Assess your social support system and, if desired, determine ways to enhance it.

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relationship between social support and physical health. One undeniably important link involves psychosocial stress:

- Increased social support reduces stress, which, in turn, improves both psychological and physical health.
- Lack of social support increases stress, which, in turn, causes deterioration in psychological and physical health.

people **power**

Regular social contact with people we trust and feel connected to is an asset to our psychological and physical well-being.

Assertiveness & Weight Control

Social support can play a crucial role in promoting or hindering your weight control efforts. For example, the presence of desirable foods (i.e., the sight and smell of food) can make a big difference in what, when, and how much you eat. When you live or work with other people you will not be entirely in control of the foods that you encounter on a day-to-day basis.

If your spouse or significant other likes ice cream, then you are likely to be confronted by a carton of ice cream each time you open the freezer door. Similarly, if your coworkers enjoy celebrations, you may be tempted by cake every time someone's birthday rolls around. True, you could try to avoid opening the freezer door, or steer clear of the lunchroom where the leftover cake is deposited, but such attempts to exert "will power", particularly in your home environment are difficult to maintain over the long-term.

Another potential solution would be to negotiate with your significant other or your coworkers about the foods they serve and/or where they store them. You may be able to ask your spouse to buy single serving ice cream and

hide them in the back of the freezer or agree to frozen treats that both of you can enjoy. It is unfair to ask your coworkers to stop celebrating. You could, however suggest they serve healthier treats (other co-workers may also appreciate this). Another approach would be to ask them to store the cake out of site.

Ask for the Support You Need

It is important to decide who you want to support you and, more importantly, what type of support you want. For example, some people want their spouses to ignore what they eat and whether they exercise. They prefer to hear no comments about their weight loss efforts. Others wish to be praised every time they do well, and ignored when they have a dietary slip. Some want their close friends and immediate family to monitor their behavior and tell them outright that they shouldn't order something on the menu or that they need to get off the couch and exercise. Social support is a subjective matter that can only be defined by the one receiving it, rather than the one giving it.

Set Limits on Unwanted Supporters

It's your responsibility to identify the type of support you want and to explicitly ask for it. It's also up to you to point out to well-meaning (but misguided) people that although you may appreciate their (inappropriate) efforts to help you, their approach is not what you really need. Start by clarifying what type of help and support you would like, if any.

Think about your weight loss efforts and consider what type of support has worked in the past, as well as what might work best for you in the future. Complete the following Support Style checklist to identify the people who will be part of your support system and the types of support you would like from each individual. Place the initials of each person listed (at the top of the checklist) next to the type of support you want from that individual. You may put as many initials next to each type of support as you wish, or leave items blank if you don't want support in that area.

Support Style Checklist

✓	Relationship	Initials
	Spouse/significant other	
	Coworkers/boss	
	Friends	
	Children	
	Parents	
	Siblings	
	Other	
	Ignore my weight management efforts completely (never mention it)	
	Praise successes, ignore setbacks	
	Avoid leaving snacks in plain sight	
	Observe my eating and activity and prompt me when I'm about to slip	
	Avoid bringing high calorie snacks into the house/office	
	Offer me whatever the family (or group) is having but don't pressure me to accept a serving or to "have just a little taste"	
	Don't order dessert when we go out to eat	
	Consider becoming my walking partner	
	Tell me when you notice a change in my appearance	
	Ask me how my diet and exercise program is going	
	Let me decide what I want to eat and respect my choices	
	Don't try to make me feel guilty when I take time out to exercise	
	Allow some flexibility in my work hours to accommodate my exercise program	

Assessing & Enhancing Social Support

Social support can be beneficial to your physical and psychological health overall, and to your weight management efforts in particular. People overeat for a variety of reasons; loneliness, boredom, and stress are common contributors. To

help you determine if there are voids in your life that you try to fill with food, it is helpful to examine whether your current social support system is adequate to meet your needs. Your answers to the following questions may help you decide.

Social Support Evaluation

Y/N	
	Do you have neighbors with whom you sometimes socialize?
	Do you have several very close friends in whom you confide your concerns, worries, and emotions?
	Are you married or involved in another intimate primary relationship?
	If you answered "Yes" to the question above, is this relationship healthy, supportive, and characterized by a sense of being on the same team, rather than by frequent conflict?
	Do you maintain regular contact with your extended family?
	Do you have several people you could turn to for help in a time of crisis?
	Are you rarely if ever lonely?
	Do you have several people whom you would feel comfortable asking to watch your pet or collect your mail while you are away?
	Do you have several people at work whom you trust and would consider your friends?
	Do you have several non-relatives who would likely visit you in the hospital if you were ill or injured?
	Do you have one or more individuals with whom you feel comfortable sharing your feelings about your weight and your weight loss efforts?
	Do you have several people who tell you they love you, appreciate you, or otherwise show their affection for you on a regular basis?

Building Strong Relationships

Strong supportive relationships don't just happen they require mutual respect and ongoing nurturing. Support is a two way street. If you want people to be understanding and supportive, you need to demonstrate the same traits towards them. To be a good source of support requires good listening skills, the ability to take responsibility for your own feelings and behaviors, and a willingness to adjust your behavior to accommodate others' needs.

Review the Social Support Evaluation questions to which you responded “No”. You may wish to develop an “action plan” for opportunities in your social support system these “No” responses may represent. The following are some additional suggestions for increasing and deepening your social support system:

Social Support Networking Tips

- Call, e-mail, or write letters to long-distance friends you have known for a long time. There is no substitute for the kind of support and caring that develops between friends who share a long and positive relationship history.
- Keep in close touch with physically distant extended family members (and with those who are physically close, for that matter).
- Join a religious or spiritual fellowship that agrees with your values and aspirations, and become an active member.
- Be a good neighbor. Offer to do neighborly tasks (such as watching their pet or collecting their mail when they’re away).
- Don’t wait for people to come knocking at your door. Make an effort to do things with others or to just spend time together.
- Take an interest in others, be a good listener, and be willing to share your thoughts and feelings. Good communication builds good friendships.

- If you have the time and an area of interest, become a volunteer—formally or informally.
- If you’re up for the responsibilities involved, consider adopting a pet. There is abundant evidence that the companionship of a pet soothes a variety of ailments—physical and psychological. Just remember that pets thrive when they’re lean and suffer when overweight, just like us!

Putting Plans Into Action

So where do you stand with respect to social support? Do you have a large enough social support network? How does your social support system measure up to the task of providing you with what you need? Are there people in your life who might be more supportive of your weight loss efforts if you were more candid about how they could help? Your answers to these questions should guide your efforts in developing relationships to support your weight management goals.

The next steps are to build a larger social support network if need be, and discuss your support needs with the people closest to you. Once family, friends, and co-workers have a clear understanding of what you need, you may find they are more than willing to support your goals.

key goals

Using the tips in this module, develop 2 – 3 goals to work towards.

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2	
3	

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OPTI-10089-0608