

Build and Maintain Social Supports: an Antidote for Stress



Social supports play a significant part in enhancing or hindering health and performance and in contributing to our resilience in times of stress. Social supports or social support networks or systems, are made up of the people, activities, groups, and connections in our lives that give us support, encouragement, and/or enhance our lives.

One study that focused on patients with coronary heart disease found that individuals who were neither married, nor had close friends were more likely to die in a five year period than those who were married, had close friends, or both. It seems that having friends and family, and other worthwhile connections in our lives can reduce the destructive effects of stress on our bodies and minds.

By identifying the key supports in our work and personal lives and by being actively involved with them, we establish effective “buffers” that counter stress. Social supports also give some protection to our general health and help promote a sense of worth and well-being. It is helpful to become aware of our existing support systems, to use them in managing stress, and to develop new, worthwhile connections in our lives to build resilience and resources. Focus on the most important people in your life, and spend time with them – listening, talking, and having fun.

8 Ways to Strengthen Your Supports

1. Review important connections in your life

Think about your family, friends, and other contacts. If you have neglected some due to demands and stress, reestablish contact. Decide how you might be able to revive valued friendships and associations that may have weakened with time.

2. Connect with someone from your network

Pick up the phone or write an e-mail. Set a goal of maintaining (or re-initiating) contact with family and friends. It is okay to start small. Try to make one phone call or send one e-mail a week to someone whose friendship you value.

3. Provide support to others

Providing support to others is a give and take activity. Show your willingness to support others, when you are able. And, reach out to take support and care from others, when you need it.

4. Learn something new

If you are far away from your friends and family, learning something new can be a valuable way to connect with others who share your interests. Most cities and towns offer evening continuing education courses ranging from academic offerings to hobbies and skills development.

5. **Engage in structured physical activity**

Joining a sports team, or regular participation in sports, yoga, or an exercise program, can also provide a way to develop contacts with people who share your interests. Plus, your health and mood will benefit from the physical exercise.

6. **Volunteer**

Whether once a week, once a month, or just once in a while, volunteering for a charity project helps you focus outside yourself and your stress. You will also come in contact with others who share your desire to help out.

7. **Join a club, professional association, or other organization**

If the idea of a formal structure appeals to you, you can join a book club, religious organization, political club, or any other organized group that shares the same interests or passions that you have.

