

Create a personal support team

Depression. Panic. Chronic illness. Bereavement. Sometimes having a good social life does not provide enough support for us. One option is to join an organized support group. You can often locate these by calling the business line of the Crisis Centre in your community, or asking your physician or therapist.

You can also create your own personal support team: a group of people who know you and agree to help out in specific ways. Your support team might be made up of some people who have been depressed, and others who haven't.

There is a common problem with involving people who haven't been through depression themselves. People who have never been depressed have a tendency to say silly or insensitive things around depressed people. *"I was depressed last Monday, then it got better by lunchtime."*

Recommendation: Keep these folks in your social network, try to educate them a bit about depression, but recognize that they will never entirely "get it" unless they go through depression themselves. Depression is as mysterious to those who have never experienced it as "violet" might be to someone who is color-blind. It's a bad idea to cut people out of your life just because they can't fully understand your depression.

It is an excellent idea, on the other hand, to have at least one person in your life who has been through depression. In fact, consider it mandatory. You need someone who gets it, and who you can talk to about your experience.

What are the other ones going to do – those who haven't had depression themselves? Chances are, they're sitting on the sidelines feeling helpless. They don't know what to do or how to help. They might be guessing that their job is to get you over your depression, and they haven't a clue how to accomplish that. It's your job to tell them that they don't have to cure you. But perhaps they can still be part of your support team. Here's how.

- **Identify candidates.** Identify close friends and relatives that you would like to have as supporters.
- **Define what you want.** Think about how you might like them to help. Some examples: regular baby-sitting to give you time to yourself, availability for emergency pet-sitting, weekly get-togethers to buy groceries and prepare food together, or Sunday morning walks.
- **Ask for assistance, not replacement.** It's best to ask for *help* doing something, rather than asking the other person to do it for you. If you can't face the grocery store, ask the person to accompany you rather than asking them to do your shopping.
- **Limit your request.** The temptation is to ask for a lot, particularly when you might be feeling helpless or inadequate. Set limits on the size of your request.

- **Give them permission to decline.** Before you ask, prepare to have them decline the request or suggest something different. Allow for the possibility, without feeling crushed.
- **Ask.** Be clear and be specific. Present your request as something you would like, but not as something you *need*. Implying need makes the request into a demand, and threatens to impose guilt on the person if they don't comply with your wishes.
- **Make it an exchange.** Some supporters are one-way, but often the agreement is mutual. *"If you take the kids on Tuesday, I'll take yours Thursday."*
- **Avoid relying on only one person for support.** You may need more than any one person can give. It helps to have a larger network and to limit your requests from each person.
- **Keep up your own efforts.** Remind yourself that your support network can provide help, but they cannot take on the problem for you. You will have to do what you can to help yourself as well (exercising, eating, setting goals for yourself, and so on). Supporters will drift away if they sense that they are working harder on your difficulty than you are.

Would you like to set up a support network for yourself? If so, which people in your life do you think might be open to a request?

What would you like from them? Be as specific as you can.
