

## **Social Support Systems and Maintaining Mental Health**

Social support systems are an important part of our lives. These systems include anyone we trust and can go to for help, advice, or any other type of emotional support. Your social support system may be made up of your friends and family members; the individuals you support each have their own social support systems that can include:

- You, their direct support professional
- Family members
- Friends
- Health care providers
- Co-workers
- Social workers
- Teachers
- Regional center staff
- Anyone else who they trust

### **Social Supports and Mental Health**

Having a strong social support system is vital to maintaining mental health. Mental health is how people feel, think, and act in life. For instance, mental health affects how people think about and deal with challenges and problems. Making decisions, relating to other people, and handling stress are all part of maintaining mental health.

Having a strong social support system is one of the best ways for you and the people you support to maintain and build positive mental health. More specifically, social supports can increase mental health by:

- Alleviating stress –
  - A strong social support system can alleviate stress by providing individuals with another person to share their problems with.
  - When individuals have someone to confide in who cares about what they are saying and listen to their problems, they may find it easier to deal with whatever challenges they are facing.
  - In addition, people in an individual's support system may be able to give ideas or recommendations for how to overcome life's challenges.
- Increasing a person's self confidence and feelings of value –
  - Being part of a strong social support system can make an individual feel loved and important.
  - Individuals can listen to the challenges of others in their support system and may even have ideas about how their friends can overcome these challenges.
  - Feeling valued by other people can increase an individual's self confidence and self esteem – this contributes to good mental health.
- Decreasing feelings of loneliness and isolation –
  - Social support systems can also be fun! Individuals can call on members of their social support system when they want to participate in an activity or just talk about what is going on in their lives.

- Without friends and other social supports many people are more likely to feel lonely, isolated, and bored – this can increase risk for developing mental health conditions such as depression.

A strong social support system can improve your mental health and the mental health of the individuals you support!

### **Developing a Strong Social Support System**

Some people with developmental disabilities may have a hard time building their social support systems and may need extra help from you. By assisting individuals as they build their social support systems, you are helping them maintain good mental health.

Part of your job as a direct support professional can be supporting people as they make new friends. Many friendships grow out of shared activities and interests, so encouraging individuals to try new activities can be one of the best ways to assist them in building their social support systems.

You can assist individuals in developing a list of hobbies they enjoy and finding local activities that they may want to join.

- For example, you can help the person you support locate a walking club in or near the neighborhood they live.
- As another example, if an individual enjoys singing along to the radio, you could look into local choirs that the individual might be able to join. Once again, this new activity will assist the person in meeting new people and building a strong support system.

Once individuals find activities that they would like to attend in their communities, you can support the individuals as they attend these activities. Some people may need assistance with transportation or may just want support and encouragement (from you or family members or friends) the first few times they attend.

Some individuals with developmental disabilities may lack the social skills needed to successfully make friends. As a direct support professional, you can work with individuals as they develop these skills. For instance, to form meaningful friendships individuals will need skills such as listening to other people and thinking about the needs of others. You can talk to individuals about the importance of being a good friend and practice these skills with them. By having meaningful conversations with the individuals who you support, you are teaching them friendship skills that will help each person to build a strong social support system.

Remember, even if they have good social skills, some of the individuals you support may not be used to making new friends or trying new activities. Meeting new people can be scary for all of us, and those with developmental disabilities may feel especially uncertain and fearful that others may not want to be their friends. As a direct support professional, you can help by sitting down with the individuals and talking about their strengths and the positive things they would bring to a friendship:

- What are their interests?
- Do they have a good sense of humor? Do they laugh at other people's jokes?
- What other things do they have to share?

### **Mental Health Professionals as Social Supports**

Mental health professionals can also be part of an individual's social support system, particularly for those with mental health conditions. If any of the individuals who you support have a mental health condition, they may have a psychiatrist or therapist who they see on a regular basis. Mental health professionals are some of the key people in these individuals' social support systems.

To maintain mental health and avoid psychiatric hospitalizations you can encourage individuals to make use of their relationships with their mental health professionals. For instance, you can encourage individuals to be honest with their mental health professionals about how they are feeling and what thoughts they are having as well as how these thoughts and feelings are changing over time. Let individuals know that even though sharing thoughts and feelings can be uncomfortable or embarrassing, it is the best way for their mental health professionals to treat their mental health diagnoses in the correct way.

You can also encourage individuals to let their mental health professionals know about how their medications are making them feel. Before their appointment, you can ask individuals questions about:

- Any side effects they are experiencing. For example, side effects for some medications can include trouble sleeping (insomnia), sleepiness, weight gain or loss, increased anxiety, headaches, dizziness, nausea or vomiting, diarrhea, and sexual problems.
- Any changes in their feelings or behaviors since their last appointment and whether they see these changes as positive or negative. For example, feeling deeply depressed for no apparent reason and not wanting to leave their room.

You can encourage the individuals to share this information with their mental health professionals. Each individual's mental health professional needs to know this information in order to move forward with the best course of treatment.

As a direct support professional, you can also keep track of changes you notice in an individual's behavior and moods. Since you spend a lot of time with the person, you may notice subtle changes that others, such as doctors, are not able to. It may be helpful if you or the individual keeps a written log that describes his or her feelings and thoughts, so that these can be shared with the mental health professional at the next appointment. By sharing their feelings with their mental health professional, individuals are making the best use of this very important part of their social support system!

As a direct support professional, you may notice symptoms that suggest a need for the person to be seen by his doctor or psychiatrist, right away. As a result of promptly needed treatment, such as a medication adjustment or additional sessions with his

therapist, the person whom you support is able to thrive. Thus, the person is supported by professionals familiar with their treatment needs. As a result, these actions may prevent future unplanned psychiatric hospitalizations or unplanned events.

### **Knowing Where to Go for Social Support**

In addition to supporting individuals as they make new friends, you can strengthen individuals' social support systems by helping them recognize all of the people that they can go to for help and support, such as friends, family members, and professionals who are waiting to support them! This worksheet may assist you in supporting individuals to recognize their social support systems:

<http://content.ddssafety.net/DisplayArticle.aspx?StoryID=293>

Remind individuals that their network of social supports can include friends, family members, co-workers, direct support professionals, teachers, social workers, medical professionals and anyone else they would trust to talk to about challenges in their lives or enjoy spending meaningful time with.

### **Resources**

For more information on social support systems and mental health, check out these resources:

- Canadian Mental Health Association - <http://www.vcn.bc.ca/rmdcmha/mhm.html>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness - [http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?section=Find\\_Support](http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?section=Find_Support)

This month's DDS Safety Net PowerPoint Presentations may help you talk with the individuals you support about social supports and mental health:

- This month's Feature Presentation on "Social Supports and Mental Health" – <http://content.ddssafety.net/DisplayArticle.aspx?StoryID=151>
- This month's Health Point Presentation on "Living with Your Mental Health Condition" – <http://content.ddssafety.net/DisplayArticle.aspx?StoryID=295>
- This month's Safety Point Presentation on "Handling Your Emotions" – <http://content.ddssafety.net/DisplayArticle.aspx?StoryID=294>