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Building a Strong Support System

I know of others who have done research similar to yours. I believe they found from respondents that the most common reason for recovery is that someone believed in them. This is most often the catalyst in recovery.

All people need at least five good friends or supporters they can call on when they need someone to talk to—people who can count on you when they need a friend as well. Family members and partners are also candidates for your support network. Choose people whom you love and trust. They should be people who can

- *Empathize with you*, be able to say, "I understand what you are going through," and "I can see that this is a really difficult time for you."
- *Affirm your individuality and your strengths*; treat you with love, humor, and honesty; validate and encourage your dreams.
- *Play with you*—sing, dance, join you in whatever fun activity you both enjoy!
- *Be open-minded*, let you describe how you are, what you feel, and what you want.
- *Accept your ups and downs* without being judgmental, who can help you as well as ask for your help.

- *Work with you* as you decide on your next best step, and support you as you carry through.

List five people on whom you can count in these ways. (These may or may not include the four proxies you named in Chapter 4.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

This is a very hard exercise for many people. When they realize that they have no one, or only one or two people, it makes them feel very bad and increases their feelings of loneliness and isolation. If this is your reaction, don't give up. There is a lot you can do to change the situation. Changing this situation is very important to your wellness.

- I wish I had more friends and a stronger support system.*

Many people in the study expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation. They feel deserted by family and friends; often these feelings are based in reality. The resulting social isolation further exacerbates their mood disorder.

These are some of the reasons that people in the study gave for the fact that they have a hard time making and keeping friends. **Which attributes apply to you?**

- low self-esteem
- tend to be very needy and draining
- unreliable
- unpredictable
- have a hard time reaching out
- become overly dependent on one or a few people, wearing them down
- inappropriate behavior embarrasses and turns off others
- lack of social skills

The kind of support people in the study said they wanted from their support system varies. **What do you want from your support system?**

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> mutual support | <input type="checkbox"/> companionship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> someone to talk to | <input type="checkbox"/> someone who will listen |
| <input type="checkbox"/> understanding | <input type="checkbox"/> caring |
| <input type="checkbox"/> counsel | <input type="checkbox"/> empathy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> acceptance | <input type="checkbox"/> sharing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> advocacy | <input type="checkbox"/> monitoring |

- diversion
- time
- phone calls
- activities
- correspondence

Other ways you would like a friend to be, and things you would like a friend to do: _____

Keys To Building and Keeping a Strong Support System

Use all the techniques described in this book to keep your moods as stable as possible. Enhance your wellness every way you know how.

I use the following techniques to keep my moods as stable as possible: _____

Work with a counselor on development of appropriate social skills.

- I am going to work with my counselor on developing appropriate social skills so that I can build a stronger support system.

Use peer counseling techniques to work on the development of appropriate social skills and to build close relationships with other people (see the chapter entitled "How About Counseling?").

I am going to peer counsel with _____ to work on the development of my social skills.

Become an active member of a support group for people with mood disorders (see "Support Groups"). Check your newspaper, call your mental health center, or ask your counselor for information on support groups. This is the key vehicle by which people in the study found friends and established new family-type groups to replace those that had been lost. Some people even found appropriate partners in these groups.

- I already belong to a support group.
- I'm going to join a support group for people with mood disorders.
- There is no support group in my area so I'm going to start one.

You can do this by finding a place to gather and putting a notice in the newspaper. A community mental health center or your counselor could assist you in doing this (see "Support Groups").

Participate in community activities and special interest groups. Use your local newspaper to keep current with what is going on and then participate in those activities that interest you.

Community activities and special interest groups that I would like to check out include: _____

Do volunteer work. There are many agencies that could use your help. Inquire at churches, schools, hospitals, youth agencies, soup kitchens, the Red Cross, and so on. Some communities have organizations that organize volunteers: these are an excellent resource when you are looking for just the right place to become a volunteer.

I am going to explore volunteering in the following places: _____

This is what people in the study had to say about volunteer work:

"When you give of yourself to others, your own problems have a way of solving themselves."

"I volunteer in a local high school filling out financial aid forms—I do a good job for the students, and it makes me feel worthwhile. My experiences have given inspiration to others who are temporarily down. I get and give tremendous support from and to loyal friends and family, and I have never given up on life."

"I feel much better when I'm doing something for others or that I enjoy. I like to do things for others and not always let them know it was me."

Be mutually supportive. This means being there for others when they need you, as well as expecting them to be there for you when you need them.

I am going to pay more attention to the needs of my friends.

Keep in touch with friends and acquaintances. Many of us lose contact with people we enjoy simply because we don't keep in touch. When you meet someone you like, invite him or her out for tea, lunch, or to share an activity. When you're parting, make a plan for the next time you'll get together. Renew acquaintances with old friends by inviting

them for tea or lunch, or to share an activity with you. I have several close friends with whom I have a set time every week when we get together for an hour.

I am going to renew contact with the following friends and acquaintances: _____

I am going to schedule regular times to get together with: _____

It's important that you have several friends so you don't put an undue strain on any one of them. Paying attention to their needs is important for you as well as for them. I can't emphasize this too much.

Now, try it again! **List five supportive or potentially supportive friends.**

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____