

Chapter 12

Let's Celebrate Social Support and Service

S is for the social side of our health.

BY KATHLEEN KUNTARAF

Julia Neuberger, a rabbi of South London Liberal Synagogue and one of the first two female rabbis in the United Kingdom, was also chair of the Commission on the Future of Volunteering (2006-2008) and the prime minister's Champion for Volunteering (2007-2009). Communicating well with others is a vital part of her work and ministry. In the January 1, 2010, issue of *The Guardian*, however, she wrote, "One change I'd like to see in the coming year is a move away from social networking sites. The rise of MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn et al. has been an important cultural shift of the last decade, with many of us now using the web to make 'friends' and meet possible partners. There is nothing wrong with that in principle, provided they realize that the internet, however much it has transformed our lives for the better, is no substitute for meeting people, getting out there and making friends. . . . Those sites can only make initial connections; they cannot begin to develop the depth of real friendships, of real connectedness."¹

Social support is a vital factor in the health of individuals and society. Selfishness and pride have separated nations, kingdoms, tribes, communities, and families. Selfish interests drive wedges between us. True religion teaches that all nations are one in the eyes of God and that there is unity in the family of humankind. Regardless of our diversity, we are all one by creation, and we should respect the dignity of others in all societies. Such

unity encourages a willingness to provide service to one another.

Why are support and willingness to provide service to others so vital to our daily living? As psychologist Abraham Maslow observed, love is as essential to the growth of a human being as is food.²

According to psychologists Sheldon Cohen and S. Leonard Syme,³ social support has direct and indirect effects. Direct effects benefit both the giver and the recipient of social support and can be measured by comparing groups that receive and do not receive such support.

Supporting one another helps us cope with stress. It's important to realize that we can be our own worst enemies by refusing the support of others. Our attitudes may influence how we respond to the efforts of others to support us.

Psychologists L. F. Berkman and T. Glass stated that social support affects a person's health through pathways such as mental outlook, health habits, and the way the body works:⁴

- Our friends may have a positive or negative influence on us. Supportive friends build self-esteem and self-efficacy. Some friends subtly undermine and depreciate us.
- Friends who themselves have unhealthy habits or even a lack of friends may lead us to seek comfort in unhealthy activities such as smoking, drinking, and overeating.
- Support from friends strengthens our coping abilities and reduces our stress.

Criticism and negative attitudes affect our health possibly through the effect on the immune or cardiovascular system.

Support of Family and Friends

According to E. Stice, J. Ragan, and P. Randall, family support is the most important factor in the lives of adolescents. Many have experienced the support of family and friends as a commitment on their part to love, nurture, and help them. Adolescents have high expectations of parents, and inadequate parental support increases the risk of adolescent depression. They become disappointed and confused when the anticipated help and positive reinforcement from parents are missing. The support of friends is also very important for adolescents.⁵

Support in the School

School occupies a considerable amount of time in a youngster's life, so it's not surprising that the experience of young people in school will play an enormous role in their development. Such influence is probably second only to that of the home.

Psychologists V. Battistich and A. Horn studied an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample of 1,434 fifth- and sixth-grade students from 24 elementary schools throughout the United States.⁶ They found that students in supportive settings enjoyed school more, were more academically motivated, and were far less involved in disruptive and delinquent behaviors and drug use. If students sensed "community"—opportunities to engage with others in school and other social groups, and participate in community activities—they flourished. It's important that our youth do more than merely survive adolescence, but blossom into wholesome adults.

Support in the Faith-based Community

The Commission on Children at Risk, a group of 33 children's doctors, research scientists, and mental health and youth service professionals, found considerable support for the role played by authoritative communities in health. These are communities that have a firm basis for belief in their sacred scriptures and from which they derive a value base. For adults, religious faith and practice appear to have a sizable and consistent relationship with improved health and longevity, including less hypertension and depression, a lower risk of suicide, less criminal activity, and less use and abuse of drugs and alcohol.⁷

Social Support and the Recovery of Disease

A study that is part of an eight-year investigative partnership between Vanderbilt University Medical Center and the Shanghai Institute of Preventive Medicine, beginning in 2002, was published in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology*. Meira Epplein et al. found that among 2,230 breast cancer survivors, women who scored highest on the social well-being quality-of-life scale had a 48-percent reduction in their risk of dying from cancer or having a cancer recurrence. Specifically, women reporting the highest satisfaction with marriage and family had a 43-percent risk reduction, and those with favorable interpersonal relationships had a 35-percent risk reduction.⁸

Social well-being in the first year after cancer diagnosis is an important prognostic factor for breast cancer recurrence or death, and some health professionals support the concept of designing breast cancer treatment to maintain or enhance social support soon

after diagnosis is made in order to improve the outcome of the disease.⁹

There is plenty of research to convince us that surrounding ourselves with people who genuinely care about us can have a positive effect on our mental well-being. A strong social support network can be critical in helping us through the stress of tough times, whether we've had a bad day at work or a year filled with loss or chronic illness. Supportive family, friends, and coworkers are a very important part of our lives.

Cardiac Arrhythmia Suppression Trial

Social support definitely benefits the receiver, but what about the giver? More than 150 years ago Ellen G. White wrote that "doing good is a work that benefits both giver and receiver."¹⁰ Science today agrees. Several studies by Drs. Siegel, Friedmann, Allen, and others, for example, printed in scientific journals, show that when a person provides love to their pets, they are healthier.

Back in the 1990s *The American Journal of Cardiology* published an interesting study conducted by Drs. Friedmann and Thomas known as the Cardiac Arrhythmia Suppression Trial (CAST).¹¹ The doctors studied men and women who had sustained a heart attack and had irregular heartbeats. Here are the surprising results:

- Only one of the 87 people (1.1 percent) who owned dogs died during the study.
- Nineteen of the 282 people (6.7 percent) who did not own dogs died.

- More than six times as many non-dog owners died compared to dog owners, which seems to indicate that dog owners benefit from providing loving support to their pets.

Ironically, the drugs tested in the study—encainide and flecainide—actually caused an increase in cardiac deaths and had to be stopped prematurely. If these drugs had shown a sixfold decrease in deaths, you can be pretty sure that just about every doctor in the country would be prescribing them for patients with heart problems. When was the last time that your doctor gave you a prescription to improve your health by providing loving support to others or to a pet?

Social Support at Work

Ideally, social support should come from family, friends, and church members, but there also is a growing need for additional support from the workplace.

On average, adults spend one third of their day (a 24-hour period) sleeping and relaxing, one third with family and home responsibilities, and another one third with colleagues at work. With such a large time investment in work, individuals need social support in the workplace. As colleagues notice changes in personality and behavior or discover needs of coworkers—they may be struggling with family problems, school conflicts, or personal issues such as addictions to harmful substances, gambling, or pornography—they can offer support. Friends at work sometimes can bridge the gap between employee and employer in tense situations or organize support teams. You can help to build a warm and caring climate by being genuinely interested in your coworkers'

well-being.

Elizabeth Brondolo, Ph.D., a psychology professor at St. John's University in Stony Brook, New York, and her colleagues conducted an interesting study that discovered clear and measurable effects on blood pressure when people care for one another in the workplace. The study was conducted with 70 agents in New York City who issue parking violations and traffic tickets. This can be a stressful job as motorists often insult, threaten, or curse agents. During the study the agents wore a small monitor that recorded heart rate and blood pressure throughout the day. They also kept a journal of their workday whereabouts and activities. At the day's end the agents completed a questionnaire that measured the emotional support they received from coworkers, immediate supervisors, and unit supervisors. "The more people felt supported by their co-workers, the smaller the increases in their blood pressure in the work environment." In fact, they had lower blood pressure during the most stressful times as well as throughout the workday.¹² This study definitely shows the importance of having social support at work.

Some of the most helpful support skills are very simple: listen to colleagues carefully and attentively, respect the other person's privacy and dignity, choose words wisely, be gentle and kind, keep a positive attitude, and avoid criticism. Treat the other person as you would want to be treated.¹³

What Is a Social Support Network?

A social support network comprises friends, family, and peers. It differs from other types of support groups in that it is not led by a mental health professional. Although both

types of support groups can play important roles in times of stress, a social support network can be developed under conditions that are not stressful, thereby providing the comfort of knowing that our friends are there for us if we need them. Rather than formal meetings with an official leader, a social support group can simply be friends eating lunch together, neighbors chatting together, close relatives having a phone conversation, and even church fellowships. These all are ways to develop and foster lasting relationships with the people close to us.

Let's not wait for someone else to make the first move. If you meet a person who you think might become a good friend, invite that individual to join you for lunch or other casual activities. These activities can include volunteer groups in causes of mutual interest, or even exercising together at a gym or with a walking group.

The Importance of Give and Take

A successful relationship is a two-way street. The better a friend we are, the better our friends will be. Here are some suggestions for nurturing relationships:

- **Stay in touch.** Answering phone calls, returning e-mails, and reciprocating invitations let people know we care.
- **Don't compete.** Be happy instead of envious when friends succeed, and they'll celebrate our accomplishments in return.
- **Be a good listener.** Find out what's important to our friends.
- **Don't overdo it.** In our zeal to extend our social network, be careful not to

overwhelm friends and family with phone calls and e-mails.

- **Appreciate friends and family.** Take time to say thank you and to express how important they are to us. Be there for them when they need support.

The Bottom Line

The purpose of building a social support network is to reduce stress levels, not add to them, so watch for situations that seem to drain our energy. For example, avoid spending too much time with someone who is constantly negative and critical. Similarly, steer clear of people involved in unhealthy behaviors such as alcohol or substance abuse, especially if you've struggled with these addictions yourself.

Taking the time to build a social support network is a wise investment not only in our mental well-being but also in our physical health and longevity. Those who enjoy high levels of social support stay healthier and live longer than those who don't. Let's start making more friends or improving the relationships we already have. Whether you are the one receiving the support or the one providing encouragement, you will reap a plethora of rewards.

A Biblical Approach

In light of the benefits of social support, this statement makes much sense: "Christian kindness and earnest consecration are constantly to be manifest in the life."¹⁴ There also are many Bible verses that provide specific instruction on how to practice kindness and to express loving social support to one another. Here are some examples:

New Testament

- Love one another (John 13:35).
- Forgive one another (Col. 3:13).
- Accept/receive one another (Rom. 15:7).
- Pray for one another (James 5:16).
- Comfort one another (1 Thess. 4:18).
- Fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7).
- Be kind to one another (Eph. 4:32).
- Show compassion to one another (1 Pet. 3:8).
- Be hospitable to one another (1 Pet. 4:9).

Old Testament

- Be hospitable to strangers (Gen. 18:2-5).
- Do not pass along false reports (Exod. 23:1).
- Do what is right (Mic. 6:8).
- Honor your parents (Exod. 20:12).
- Respect your neighbors (Exod. 20:15).
- Love your neighbors (Lev. 19:18).
- Real friends stick closer than a brother (Prov. 18:24).

Having a meaningful relationship with the Lord will produce loving relationships with others and a desire to give them genuine support. We will appreciate one another as

children of God, regardless of our backgrounds. We will not have to worry about what to say or do, because as we have a relationship with God, we truly will love one another, serve one another, strengthen and encourage one another, forgive one another, and pray for one another.

The social support we give and receive is very important to our overall health and well-being. Let us therefore live a life of praise to God by genuinely caring about the welfare of others and giving thanks for all things to Him who made us.

Life Application Questions

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1. Who are the members of my social support network from my family, school, work, church, and community? Thinking of each one of these people, whom should I look to and associate with most when I need encouragement and positive reinforcement? With whom should I spend less time because of the self-destructive behaviors they practice?
2. When do I feel happiest: when I am with people who are supporting and serving me, or when I am serving others? How can I balance my need for support from others and the goal of service that contributes to the well-being of others with my own sense of being valued? What specific activities can I become involved in that will widen my social support network and give me opportunities of service?
3. How can I develop deeper relationships with family and friends than is possible to attain through using the social networking sites on the Internet? How well do I listen to them? Do I remember the situations they are facing well enough to ask about how things are going? How often do I reach out to them compared to how often they contact me?
4. Harold has a coworker and good friend who does much the same work that he does. Recently his friend put forward an idea that earned the approval of top management and resulted in his being promoted. Some of his other colleagues are complaining that everyone in the department contributed to his success. How would I react in such a situation? Would I be jealous of his success, or would I rejoice with him?
5. Who in my family, school, work, church, and community requires emotional when they are coping with stressful situations? How do I coach them to see the opportunities rather than the difficulties? How can I develop confidence and hope in

my Savior and His working out everything for the good and share that optimism and trust?

¹ Julia Neuberger, "Face to faith," *The Guardian*, January 1, 2010; www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/jan/02/social-networking-real-world-online. Accessed April 5, 2010.

² Abraham Maslow, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: The Motivation Theory and Hierarchy of Needs From Abraham Maslow," March 3, 2011, www.maslowshierarchyofneeds.net/maslows-love-and-belonging-needs. Accessed April 12, 2012.

³ S. Cohen, S. L. Syme (eds.), *Social Support and Health* (Orlando, Fla.: Academic Press, 1985).

⁴ L. F. Berkman, T. Glass, "Social integration, social networks, social support, and health," *Social Epidemiology* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 137-173. See also L. F. Berkman, L. Syme, "Social networks, host resistance, and mortality: A nine-year follow-up study of Alameda County residents," *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 1979; 109: pp. 186-204.

⁵ E. Stice, J. Ragan, P. Randall (2004), "Prospective relations between social support and depression: Differential direction of effects for parent and peer support," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 113, pp.155-159.

⁶ V. Battistich, A. Horn, "The relationship between students' sense of their school as a community and their involvement in problem behaviors," *American Journal of Public Health*, December 1997; 87(12): 1997-2001.

⁷ See W. J. Strawbridge et al., "Frequent Attendance at Religious Services and Mortality over 28 Years," *American Journal of Public Health* 87, no. 6 (1997): pp. 957-961. See also H. G. Koenig et al., "Does Religious Attendance Prolong Survival? A Six Year Follow-Up Study of 3,968 Older Adults," *Journal of Gerontology* 54A (1999): M370-377.

⁸ Rick Nauert, PsychCentral, "Social Support Helps Women Beat Breast Cancer," January 21, 2011, <http://psychcentral.com/news/2011/01/21/social-support-helps-women-beat-breast-cancer>. Accessed April 13, 2012.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2 (Mountain View, Calif., Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), p. 534.

¹¹ E. Friedmann, S. A. Thomas, "Pet ownership, social support, and one-year survival after acute myocardial infarction in the Cardiac Arrhythmia Suppression Trial (CAST)," *American Journal of Cardiology*, 1995, 76: pp. 1213-1217.

¹² William A. Karlin, Elizabeth Brondolo, and Joseph Schwartz, *Psychosomatic Medicine* (2003), 65:167-176.

¹³ Adapted from "How to Improve Your Social Skills: 8 Tips From the Last 2500 Years," PositivityBlog; <http://www.positivityblog.com/index.php/2007/11/15/how-to-improve-your-social-skills-8-tips-from-the-last-2500-years/>.

¹⁴ Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1963), p. 204.