

Introduction to Building a Support Network

Having a well-rounded support network, filled with people we consider as “safe” to be involved in our journey of behaviour change, is a vital component for dealing with many of the emotionally activating experiences we are going to face along the way. It is important to build an understanding for the different aspects of that old recovery cliché of, “people, places and things,” as this is definitely something we need to pay attention to in the early stages of this work. In terms of building my own personal network of support, this revolved around identifying the people that I wanted to keep close to me, those people I thought would support me in the way I wanted and needed them too. At the same time, identifying the people I needed to avoid, those people that triggered me into unhealthy and ineffective coping mechanisms, pushing me back to old behaviours.

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Inside of our support network, family can be a really important part of the healing process, as they are often involved in many aspects of our addictive, compulsive, and obsessive coping mechanisms. However, it is absolutely essential to understand that if family is the only support that we have around us, then it’s highly probable that we’re going to run into additional problems further down the road. Family often finds it hard to disconnect from their own emotional experiences, and this can activate judgemental responses to our behaviours, when judgement is the last thing we need to hear at that point in time. Family can also be involved in enabling behaviours. However, in most circumstances, this isn’t something that’s done deliberately. In fact, it’s usually an act of love or affection driven by not wanting to see us struggle or suffer, and giving in to our old behaviours because they can’t cope with their own emotional experience.

This is why it is incredibly important to develop support in multiple areas of life. Not only does this give us a wide variety of different people we can reach out to, should the need arise for us to do so, it also helps develop the balanced, harmonious approach we are trying to create to all of life’s problems. When we look at our own individual support from this perspective, it makes sense

to build this network around a number of possible outlets. These outlets can definitely involve family to some degree, especially if this is something that's available to you. At the same time, we need a healthy smattering of friends to hang out with socially, along with a section of people who understand recovery, holding us accountable and calling us out on our justifications from time to time. Keep in mind, establishing these relationships with clearly defined boundaries, not only for other people but also for ourselves, will only benefit us in the long run.

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Peer support groups and meetings are often an important part of a behaviour change program. In fact, this is something I recommend to everyone I work with, or even just speak to about making changes in life. These days, with the virtual world so easily accessible, anonymity in a group environment has never been so readily available. Meetings and groups offer an outlet for our thoughts and feelings, along with the opportunity to hear the stories of other people who have experienced similar things to us. This can meet the need for social connection and provide us with a sense of belonging to a community of people who understand exactly what we are going through. The only thing we need is an open mind and a willingness to change.

For me personally though, I actually found groups really difficult to be involved with at the start of my journey. It was only when I began to listen for the similarities in the stories I was hearing and stopped looking for the differences between myself and those I was surrounded by that I began to see the benefits of the group experience. If you are ready, and open to the possibilities, come join our live, online meetings every week to see if they're a good fit for you and your needs.

Next let's spend some time understanding what it means to develop your support network, and what this might look like for you personally. On the following page there is a worksheet that is designed to help you reflect on the people you currently have in your life. Take the time to complete it, then reflect on the people you have around you, the relationships you want to make stronger, and the ones you need to set boundaries in.

First, let's build a list of all the people in your life, and when I say all, I mean all!! This is the time to be specific, don't leave anyone out, make sure you take your time and write them all down. It is important to list everyone, from people you work with, casual acquaintances, friends, family, and intimate partners. If you do a thorough job with this now, it will also help you when we get into boundaries and communication later in the process of Living the Life you Want to Live.

List the people in your life, if you need more space use an additional piece of paper.

Next, let's categorise the people you have in your life. These people can be either helpful or harmful for the way you want to be in your new lifestyle. For the purpose of this exercise, the different people you see throughout your day fall into three categories. We will use this information in a number of ways in the future. The four categories are as follows:

1. **Safe** – These are people who you want in your life, they are not encouraging you to go into old behaviours or pushing you to compromise your values and beliefs. These people offer supportive conversation, or conversation that is healthy and distracting from the stressors of life. They are open to talking about your feelings, and they have NEVER pressured you into participating in the behaviour patterns you are trying to change.

2. **Maybe** – These are the people that you're not sure about when it comes to your support network. You know them, but they aren't someone you connect with on a regular basis. They might be someone who you could hang out with and there is a possibility they would support you when you talk about important things in your life without a negative response from them. Maybe they could be safe.

3. **Hell No!** – These are people that you either participated in your addictive, compulsive, or obsessive coping mechanisms with on a regular basis, or those that enabled these behaviours. This includes those that introduced you to the behaviours, those that you only associate with when participating in the behaviours, and those that trigger you into using those behaviours to cope. These are the people we need to set boundaries with both internally and externally as they will only contribute to staying stuck in, or returning to, old behaviour patterns.

In the space below list the people consider to be "Safe" it is important to be honest with yourself at this point as it will be beneficial further down the road, and it may be hard for you to do at this time.

In the space below list the people you think might be ok to hang out with but you're really not sure at this point in time. These are the "Maybe" people that you can test the waters with moving forward.

In the space below list the people you consider to be "HELL NO!" hanging out with these people would lead to a relapse in behaviour that could be catastrophic for your recovery.

Building a Support Network

When we build our supportive network, it is important to understand the different things that people can do to support our needs. When we understand the limitations people may, or may not have, we can reduce the possibility of asking someone for support who is simply not capable of supporting us in the manner we are looking for. This can be a frustrating experience for everyone involved, and often leads to harbouring resentment, or angry confrontations as a result of the interaction.

Segregating the people in our life into three further categories to highlight the way we approach support is also a useful exercise to complete. The 3 categories are as follows:

1. **Friends** – these are the safe and maybe people, you documented previously, that you consider your friends. There is no need to remove these people from your recovery lifestyle as they are not triggering for you in any way. At the same time, these are not your closest friends, nor are they people you discuss your problems with.
2. **Family** – This category may seem to be obvious, but we want to be sure to remove any family members that may be in the “hell no” category we created earlier. Family support is extremely important if family is present in your life. However, we cannot get into the depths of recovery with our immediate family, as this can create a new problem all of its own.
3. **Support** – These are the people you placed in your “safe” list earlier that you can really talk to about the problems you are experiencing. They understand how addictive, obsessive, and compulsive coping mechanisms can impact our mental health, and they can conduct conversations about this subject without judgement or expectation on those involved.

Take some time to place the people in your life into the appropriate category box provided below, if you need more space, use a separate piece of paper.

Friends

Family

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Support

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Now that you have completed this exercise you have a good idea of what your current support network looks like, who the people are you need to build stronger connections with, and those that you need to set boundaries with. Remember, boundaries are not only set with others, they are also set with ourselves. In fact, most of the time, we are the ones that must resist the urge to rekindle old relationships in order to keep us in line with Living the Life we Want to Live, being the person we want to be, in areas of life that are important to us.