Dear Alice,

Why is social support important to an individual's health and wellness?

Answer

Dear Reader,

To answer this question, first imagine your happiest memory. For many people, this may involve friends, family, or other members of their "social support network." The happiness that comes out of the connections within this network are the result of the body releasing endorphins and other happiness-inducing hormones that not only improve mental well-being but play a role in improving physical well-being, too. Being part of a team, community (religious, residential, job- or volunteer-based, etc.), and even caring for pets may fall under the category of being part of a social support network. Membership in these networks may help fight feelings of loneliness and insecurity while helping you feel appreciated, valued, and as though you're contributing to something greater than yourself.

Behaviors that express social support are usually split into four categories, which work together to keep your mental and physical health in top form.

- **Emotional support**: This usually manifests as expressions of love and caring, oftentimes from family and close friends, which contribute to your sense of self-worth. Whether it's a hug or an "I love you," this type of support is the most intimate.
- **Instrumental support**: Offering a helping hand or any other sort of tangible aid falls into the category of instrumental support. Examples of this may include giving a friend a ride to work if her car breaks down or taking care of a neighbor's pets while he's on vacation.
- **Informational support**: As the name implies, this includes the provision of beneficial information, advice, or suggestions on how to address certain issues. Although this could come from a variety of people, a typical example would be a health care provider offering information on how best to address a medical concern.
- **Appraisal support**: The most vaguely defined of the four types, appraisal support occurs when someone offers information that allows someone to make an informed decision on their own. For instance, comments like "I trust your judgment" or "you're doing the right thing" may constitute appraisal support. These comments allow a person to appraise their current situation but don't tell them outright what should be done.

Please note that each member of your social support network usually does not provide all four
types of support to you at all times. For example, your handy carpenter friend may provide
great instrumental support for your breaking table, but not be the one you turn for relationship
advice. Together, these types of support may contribute to a sense of mental well-being. This
may help people ward off stress, sadness, and other negative emotions. However, if social
support is lacking, staying calm through difficult times may be harder. For instance, when a
person feels under pressure, the body often responds with a spike in blood pressure and
other chemicals that produce anxious thoughts, muscle tension, and other telltale signs of
stress. Having emotional support triggers the release of hormones that prevent or reduce
these reactions, lessening their toll on the body. Over time, the reduction in stress's impact on
the body may lead to better physical health.

Social support may be found just about anywhere, so if you feel like you're lacking, consider
asking yourself which of the four types of support needs some bolstering. If you've lost touch
with significant members of your social support network, try sending a message or making a
phone call reminding them how important they are to you. Giving support is a great way to get
support in return. If you're looking for new social connections, check out common interest
groups in your community, city, or school (see the Related Q&As below for additional ideas).
You may even want to reach out to colleagues or mentors in a work environment. Some
people find that speaking with a mental health professional also helps.

However you find your sources of emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal
support, they may help improve your mental and physical health as well as add to your cache
of happy memories.

Alice!
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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [11]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [12]
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