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Social Support

Social support is an asset for one's health. This conclusion is well established in the field of health psychology, although the more specific finding is that social support benefits people who are experiencing significant stress or adversity, because social support effectively lowers the impact of stress.

What is meant by social support? Three types are often described:

Instrumental social support involves specifically doing something for another person, such as providing transportation, giving money, or doing chores.

Informational social support refers to the provision of advice, guidance, or other information to another person.

Emotional social support consists of listening to a person's story and their feelings, and/or the expression of encouragement, caring, or empathy.

Occasionally I will have a person tell me that a significant other person in her/his life "isn't being supportive." This often means that the person isn't receiving the type of social support that he/she desires, even though the significant other may be providing one of the other types of social support. It can be useful to recognize that a person may be supportive in one area but not another, because the perception that support is available is a key component of the stress-reducing benefit of social support.

It is also helpful to think of the specific types of social support that one can provide to others. You may not be good at

or able to provide all three types. When you want to support another person, consider which type(s) you are in the best position to provide, and proceed accordingly.

By the way, negative social interactions appear to harm health by increasing stress. In fact, the harm of negative social interaction may be greater than the benefit of social support. Therefore it is wise to try to minimize negative interactions in one's social network when possible.

Sheldon Cohen, a Carnegie Mellon University psychologist who has conducted extensive research on social relationships and health, suggests that developing natural social networks (i.e., being involved in a broad range of social relationships) typically leads to more useful social support than does involvement in support groups (although such groups can be helpful). To this, I would add that one of the ways to increase the availability of social support in one's own life is to provide support to others. People tend to feel most comfortable in relationships when there is reciprocity, so that persons are inclined to support those who support them.

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