

Counselor's Corner, February 2014

"The need for social support" by Gail Schuster



Why is it that when we face difficult situations, oftentimes we deprive ourselves of the support and comfort from friends and community? We say we are "dealing with things on our own," we are protecting someone from the pain of our struggle, or that we want to maintain our privacy. Research has shown time and time again the value of reaching out to others during our time of need.

We know that depression is often associated with being alone and feeling disconnected from others. Withdrawal from everyday activities is a warning sign of depression. There is a body of literature that continues to suggest that social connectedness helps people deal with and overcome adversity in their lives.

A recent report posted on Cancer.net stated that "social support helps patients cope with and survive cancer." Caregivers dealing with a loved one with Alzheimer's or dementia are told to "Ask for help." Those with strong support systems, creative respite arrangements, and regular time away not only fare better, they also find more satisfaction in their caretaking roles. In an article reviewing the literature in *Psychiatry*, social isolation and low levels of social support have been shown to be associated with increased morbidity and mortality in a host of medical illnesses. And, MayoClinic.com states on its website, "A strong social support network can be critical to help you through the stress of tough times, whether you've had a bad day at work or a year filled with loss or chronic illness."

So, how do we build the kind of support network that can help us in both the good times and the bad? Here are some simple suggestions:

- Take a break with a friend or neighbor. Go for a walk or meet for a coffee. This doesn't have to be a formal meeting, but time shared with someone else.
- Call a family member or old friend and have a chat.
- Join activities that are related to your interests. For example, an exercise group, book club, arts and crafts like knitting, games such as bridge or mahjongg.
- Arrange a time to go out with co-workers to enjoy time together outside of the work environment.
- Participate in your religious community. Attend services or become active in learning opportunities.

There are many ways to connect to others. Whether it's done informally or formally, it will make you feel better. Social networks keep us connected and being connected to others improves our resiliency and helps us deal with the stressors that life throws our way.

Of course, if you think you could benefit from a more formal support group, you can contact CJFS and find out if such a group exists or if we can create one to meet community needs. Contact us at 205-879-3438.