

## Chapter 9

# How to Get More Support

**N**o one can heal all alone. This may seem like an obvious thing to say, but it's particularly important to remember and to think about in relation to living with PTSD. When you have experienced a traumatic event, your assumptions about how the world works are challenged on a very basic level. Often, a lot of your challenges have to do with how much you can trust other people and how much other people can relate to your emotional pain. Developing a good social support system is hard for many people. We live in a culture that values individualism and stresses independence. Although these are important values, it is equally important to have at least a few people in your life who you value and trust.

The first step in figuring out if you need to develop more social support is to examine the level of support you have now. The following worksheet (worksheet 31) can help you explore this issue.

## Worksheet 31: Types of Support

**Purpose:** To identify areas where you have good social support, and areas where you may want to expand your support network.

**Instructions:** Based on your experiences, answer the questions below. Use the answers to help you think about whether you would like to increase your support in various areas.

Do you have friends whom you socialize with regularly (at least once a month)?

None      Very few (1 or 2)      Some (3 to 5)      A lot (more than 5)

How satisfied are you with this area of support? (Circle one)

Not at all satisfied      Somewhat satisfied      Very satisfied

Do you have family members who you socialize or interact with regularly (at least once a month)?

None      Very few (1 or 2)      Some (3 to 5)      A lot (more than 5)

How satisfied are you with this area of support? (Circle one)

Not at all satisfied      Somewhat satisfied      Very satisfied

Do you attend activities at least once a month (for example, church, clubs, other hobbies in a social setting) where you interact with other people?

None      Very few (1 or 2)      Some (3 to 5)      A lot (more than 5)

How satisfied are you with this area of support? (Circle one)

Not at all satisfied      Somewhat satisfied      Very satisfied

Do you have people you can rely on when you need things (for example, for money, shelter, help around the house, babysitting)?

None      Very few (1 or 2)      Some (3 to 5)      A lot (more than 5)

How satisfied are you with this area of support? (Circle one)

Not at all satisfied      Somewhat satisfied      Very satisfied

Do you have people you can rely on emotionally (for example, to listen to you when you have a problem, to give you advice when you want it, to tell you they care about you)?

None      Very few (1 or 2)      Some (3 to 5)      A lot (more than 5)

How satisfied are you with this area of support? (Circle one)

Not at all satisfied      Somewhat satisfied      Very satisfied

The next step is to use the information you gathered from worksheet 31 to think about where you would like to expand your social support network. Basically, if you have a few friends you socialize with and you feel very satisfied with that arrangement, then you do not need to think about changing this area. However, if you feel you do not have anyone to provide you with emotional support and you are not satisfied with that, you may want to think about some of the techniques we are going to discuss.

It is helpful to think about social support on a continuum (see figure 5). On one end, you have acquaintances, who are people we see from time to time. They may share a few of your interests, but in general, they don't know you (and you don't know them) very well. On the other end are people whom you feel very close to. These are people you can rely on if you need help or emotional support. They are also people you enjoy being around (for the most part) and people who share some of your interests and values. All points of the social support continuum are valuable, and a strong social support system often contains acquaintances and casual friends as well as closer relationships.

There are three key points to remember about getting social support. First of all, you don't need the same person or people to meet all of your needs. For example, it's great if you have a friend who will give you a ride when you need one and another person who will listen to you if you have a bad day. The same person doesn't need to fulfill all those functions—in fact, it sometimes works best for everyone if one person is not the go-to for another person's every need. The second point is that though you may have many acquaintances, it's fine to have far fewer close friends. In fact, most people don't have more than a handful of people on the bottom end of the continuum, and that is perfectly healthy. The third point is that it is very common for people with PTSD to have difficulty with many types of relationships. You may find it difficult to connect with acquaintances, feeling that the relationship has no real depth or meaning (based on what you've lived through), and you may find that you don't have a lot of close relationships (due to issues with trust, anger, irritability, anxiety, or depression). Don't be too hard on yourself. Use the exercises from chapters 4 and 5 to take a look at some of your thoughts and feelings. When you are ready to start working on these issues, you can begin to make some changes to strengthen and deepen your social support system.

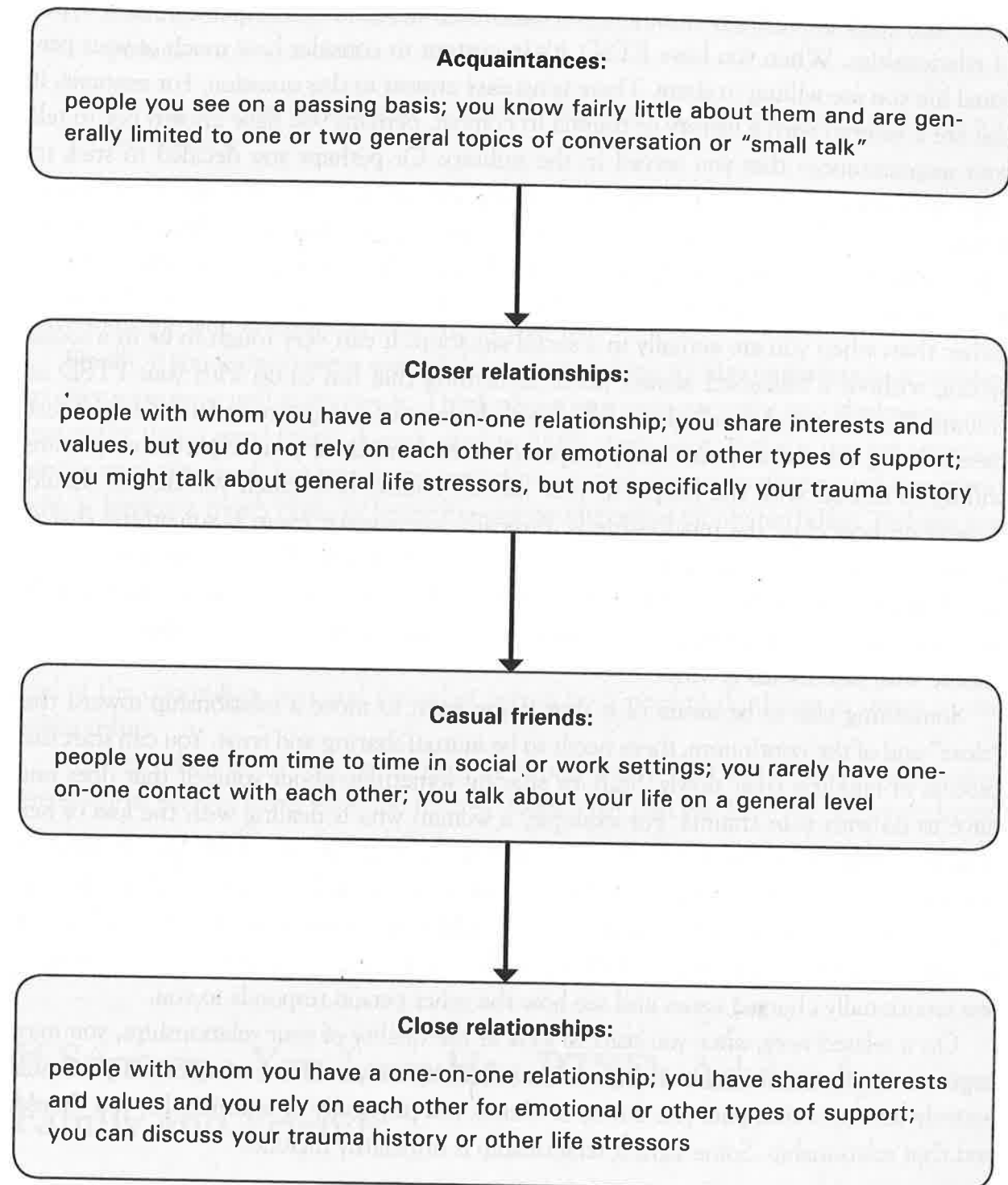


Figure 5: The Continuum of Support

When you look at this continuum, you may find that you are lacking one or more types of relationships. When you have PTSD, it's important to consider how much of your personal life you are willing to share. There is no easy answer to this question. For example, if you are a veteran with a history of trauma in combat, perhaps you have chosen not to tell your acquaintances that you served in the military. Or perhaps you decided to stick to some very brief, nonrevealing information about yourself. In casual settings, trauma does not have to define you. For example, a veteran might say, "Yes, I served in Afghanistan, but I don't talk about it much. Tell me about you." The key thing to consider is what and how much about yourself you want to share. It's better if you think about this ahead of time, rather than when you are actually in a social situation. It can be very tough to be in a social setting without a rehearsed answer about something that has to do with your PTSD or trauma. Keep in mind that "rehearsed" doesn't have to be a negative or false thing. It just means being somewhat emotionally prepared for how much of your experiences you are willing to discuss with the people in your life. Of course, how much you discuss should depend on how close the relationship is. Basically, a traumatic event is something that is personal—you do not need to discuss it in a casual setting. This doesn't mean you need to be ashamed of it, or that not talking about it in all settings means you are hiding it. It means you need to honor what you've been through enough to understand that you get to choose who you discuss it with.

Something else to be aware of is that if you want to move a relationship toward the "close" end of the continuum, there needs to be mutual sharing and trust. You can start the process of building trust slowly. Start by sharing something about yourself that does not have to do with your trauma. For example, a woman who is dealing with the loss of her child in a sudden accident might choose to talk to an acquaintance about her job stress. If her acquaintance reacts with empathy and caring, it's a sign that the relationship may become closer. However, if the acquaintance seems overwhelmed and disinterested, it is a good sign that the relationship will remain in the current state. The key is to start out with less emotionally charged issues and see how the other person responds to you.

On a related note, once you start to look at the quality of your relationships, you may begin to see that some relationships are not healthy for you. For example, if a person is actively unsupportive, puts you down, or abuses you physically or emotionally, you should end that relationship. Some signs a relationship is unhealthy include:

- Feeling like you are always giving support, but do not receive any.

- Feeling emotionally drained after almost all of your encounters with the other person.
- Feeling that the other person constantly belittles you, puts you down, or makes you feel inferior.
- Being threatened by the other person with physical, emotional, or financial harm.

If this is happening to you, consider talking with a therapist to discuss ways to get more positive support in your life. It is very difficult to be able to heal from trauma when you have someone who is retraumatizing you in your life.

Finally, if you want to move toward closer relationships, it's also important to remember to offer support as well as receive it. Think about your own strengths and weaknesses and remember that a good friend doesn't need to fulfill every need. Perhaps you are someone who is very organized. For you, being a good friend could mean sending a card to a friend who is having a tough time, or being the one to remember family birthdays. Perhaps you are a great listener. In that case, you can be someone who can offer a sympathetic ear (in amounts of time that do not feel emotionally overwhelming) to a friend in need. Or perhaps you are good at fixing things, and don't mind helping out friends from time to time when they need a hand. The basic point is that if you want to have relationships on the "close" end of the continuum, you and the other person both need to do things to invest in the relationship.

Trusting others is not easy, particularly for people with PTSD. But trust and connection are essential parts of being alive and healing. Remember that you have the ability to decide how much of yourself you want to share in a relationship. If you are interested in creating closer relationships, consider seeing how the person reacts to less threatening information and decide if you think they will be supportive. Finally, remember that you can also be a friend and offer support. Indeed, helping other people can be an important part of healing.

## If Someone You Love Has PTSD: Advice for Family and Friends

The final section of this chapter is for friends and family members who want to support a loved one with PTSD. Helping someone deal with the aftermath of trauma can be

overwhelming on many levels. It is normal for you to have times when you feel angry, upset, frightened, and emotionally overwhelmed. This section has several suggestions for helping your loved one who has PTSD. First, though, there are a few important things to remember for yourself.

People with PTSD symptoms may experience intense periods of anger, and this can be extremely frightening—especially if you witness those periods of anger and rage, or you are a target of the anger. If you feel that your loved one is putting you or other people in danger, you need to seek help. Although you may really want to help them, it is not healthy for you to put yourself in harm's way. You should not sacrifice your own physical safety to help someone with PTSD. It is important for you to seek help from a specialist trained in PTSD to form a plan to protect your safety. The Resources section of this book contains information on where you can find help.

You need to take good care of yourself if you are going to help someone else, particularly someone who is dealing with an intense emotional issue like trauma. When you get on an airplane, you are advised that you need to put on your own oxygen mask before helping anyone else to put their mask on, even your children. This is a good metaphor for caregivers to remember. You can't be helpful to someone else if you are overly tired and stressed. It's important to focus on good nutrition, exercise, and your own social support as you help your loved one. Some people find issue-specific support helpful. For example, some spouses of veterans have formed support groups. Other people prefer to stay involved in their existing community and participate in other types of social activities. It doesn't matter where you get your support, it just matters that you do. In fact, having a good mix of acquaintances and close friends (see figure 5) can definitely help.

Finally, if you yourself are a survivor of traumatic events, it's important that you seek help for your own trauma. Again, you cannot be supportive of someone else's journey if you are being triggered and experiencing your own difficult-to-manage symptoms. You may not realize when your own issues are being brought up, so it's important to start thinking about this issue.

It can be truly challenging to help someone with PTSD. You want to find the right balance between listening, encouragement, and acceptance of their feelings. It's important for family and friends to take a close look at their own attitudes about trauma. For example, maybe you wish your loved one could move on and "get over it." It is normal for family and friends to have thoughts like these. However, you need to be careful about what you say along these lines and how you say it. There is evidence that hearing these

kinds of sentiments expressed can actually make survivors experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms (Ullman and Filipas 2001). Survivors are often dealing with guilt and self-blame already. In addition, they are often hard on themselves about the time it takes to heal. It's not uncommon for people with PTSD to feel "crazy," expressing sentiments like "I should just be able to get over this." It's more useful to let them know that any normal person would have a reaction to what they have been through, and that healing takes time. Here are some suggestions for supportive responses you can use with a loved one who has PTSD:

- "I'm sorry you went through that."
- "Let me know what I can do. Or if I can just listen."
- "What happened was not your fault."
- "Anyone would have reactions to the things you've been through. It is understandable that this isn't easy for you."
- "I do not know all the answers, but I am here for you."

Survivors have reported that reactions that are stigmatizing and distracting tend to make them feel worse about themselves. For example, although a loved one might say "Get on with your life" or "You need to stop talking about this" in a well-intentioned way, a survivor might experience the remark very negatively. Be careful of messages that might make the survivor feel like you are blaming them or that you don't want them to talk about what they've been through. Remember, if they could move on easily, they certainly would. Recovery takes time, patience, and plenty of social support.

If you want to be supportive of someone with PTSD, here are some general tips:

- Correct misinformation and victim-blaming attitudes when you encounter them. You can be a great source of education to other people. It's important to try to correct people when you hear them downplay the seriousness or the effects of trauma. Standing up for your loved one is a great way to show support and start changing people's attitudes.
- Encourage your loved one to become more healthy, but don't push them. If they are making small changes, praise those. Try not to point out all of their shortcomings. They are likely already aware of all the things they are not doing to take care of

themselves. Consider joining your loved one in a small behavioral change—for example, daily exercise, meditation, or prayer. This is a great way to show support.

- Listen to your loved one, but remember you are not their therapist. If you feel overwhelmed and burnt out, gently suggest that your loved one seek treatment. It is perfectly okay to set limits around how much you can hear and how much advice you can give.
- Don't jump in with your own trauma story when your loved one is talking in depth about what happened. It's human nature to want to let a survivor know you understand them—and to perhaps give details of a traumatic event you've experienced or heard about. Resist this urge: a survivor doesn't need to deal with another traumatic event while their own memories are still fresh.
- Do not press your loved one for details of the traumatic event(s). Remember that good coping skills are needed before a person can handle all the difficult feelings that come up when talking about trauma. If your loved one feels strong enough to talk about the trauma, then by all means listen. You do not need to find out exactly what happened in order to be supportive of their current functioning and healing.
- Protect your own mental health. Remember that you cannot do any good for another person without taking care of yourself. This means getting rest and exercise, eating right, and dealing with your own emotional issues.
- Protect your own safety. Never put yourself in harm's way, even if your loved one's PTSD symptoms play a role. Seek professional help about ways to stay safe.
- Finally, be yourself. If you don't know what to say, just admit that. Give the survivor a chance to talk. Even therapists specializing in PTSD do not have all the answers about why certain things happen, and you do not need to have those answers either. Sometimes having the comfort of another person nearby who cares is enough.

## Conclusion

Although PTSD is about anxiety and fear, it is also about a lack of connection. Finding ways to develop friendships as well as acquaintances is a part of healing. Remember that your trauma history is one aspect of your life, and you do not need to share it with everyone. You can choose the people and settings in which you talk about trauma. It's important to give emotional support as well as let others know how they can support you. Family and friends need to engage in good self-care, encouragement, and listening to help loved ones with PTSD. The bottom line is that connection to others is an essential part of healing from trauma.