



BUILDING PERSONAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS



full circle
CAPACITY BUILDING INITIATIVE

Connecting to
Create a Good Life



Full Circle is a capacity building initiative spearheaded by FIRST in Asheville, NC and the ABCD Institute of DePaul University and Plan Institute, a Canadian organization sharing the concepts and practices of Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network. This program, funded in 2018 by the North Carolina Council of Developmental Disabilities (NCCDD), was created with the ultimate goal of "connecting to create a good life" for those with disabilities.



introduction to personal support networks

We all have a network—a group of people we depend on for companionship and support. This typically includes our family, friends and neighbors, and also professionals such as counselors or financial advisors.

This group can be defined as, or considered, your personal support network, and it reflects your personal interests, gifts, abilities and needs. The individuals in a network will vary and they may change over time as you make new friends or you become interested in new things. Some networks will be large, while others may include only a few people.

Personal support networks are important because they keep us connected to our communities. Also, being in supportive relationships builds a strong foundation for a good life. A good life is usually seen as including the following:

- Opportunities to contribute to one's community
- A financial plan for the present and the future
- Empowered decision-making through collaboration with others
- A safe and comfortable home
- Companionship and a sense of belonging
- Independence and self-esteem
- Safety in your community

If you have a disability, creating or building a personal support network requires focused attention to identify support people to connect with you. Unfortunately, without the opportunity to collaborate with others, many people with disabilities live in social isolation. If you are someone with a disability, this may be your personal experience.

If you're a person with a disability, unfortunately you may sometimes be wrongly seen as 'less than' or 'different than' other people in the community. Being different is a good thing, but sometimes people don't understand that everyone is equal. If you have a disability, you may be at greater risk of being isolated, segregated from others or rejected, which can lead to a life on the margins of society. When cut off from others, you may become vulnerable or at risk of being harmed.

However, by being connected to a group of people who care, you are more likely to be safe and secure in your community. That's why everyone benefits from having a personal support network.

The best way to start building a personal support network is to focus on what you have to contribute to people around you. Relationships are not created by need; they are created based on sharing mutual skills, gifts, interests and experiences to create meaningful connections with others.



consider the benefits of having a personal support network

A network is a group of caring individuals working towards a common goal, and the benefits are many.

Imagine a spider web. The strands or threads extend from the center of the web to the edge. If there were nothing holding the strands together, they would flap in the wind. The strands need to be linked to each other to make a web. The web is strong when all the strands are connected. It is similar for a personal support network.

When a group of people are connected to each other, the power and potential of the group is increased. If you have a network, there are so many benefits to consider, including:

- Keeping track of programs and services
- Identifying government programs and how to actively pursue them
- Using connections in the community to help realize your dreams
- Providing help in decision-making about legal, medical, financial and personal matters
- Responding to emergencies
- Problem-solving and dealing with the unexpected
- Assistance in finding employment or volunteer work, and arranging job supports
- Helping to find a good place to live
- Celebrating birthdays of members and other festive occasions together as a group
- Helping to prevent abuse and neglect
- Ensuring that the wishes of parents and other loved ones are respected when planning for the future
- Providing support to trusts as executors and trustees or advisors

If you provide support to someone with a disability, you may be quite aware of the many things, small and large, you do each day. These can range from helping shop for the best-fitting underwear or connecting with health professionals about complex health issues. It is often these personal tasks families or other supporting persons are the most uncomfortable leaving to those who are paid to provide support.

The members of a personal support network can also step in when family members or caregivers are not available to help, or when they have passed away. Like family members, they also help with tasks from small to large, such as helping to clean an appliance or assisting to plan for (and follow) dietary restrictions. For this reason, having a personal support network is an important part of planning for a good life, both today and in the future.



learn the emotional, health and citizenship benefits

THEY PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

This is probably the area most people think of when it comes to friends and families. Most of us cannot imagine life without our friends to share our joys when times are good and to go to for support when times are hard. There is nothing like having a group of people who believe in you when you need the courage to take on a new challenge.

Having the support of network members can empower people to see themselves as competent and as capable of achieving their dreams. Networks also help us through difficult times such as personal loss, illness and periods of change. When there are people standing by us, confidently facing the future and moving forward is easier.

THEY HELP US STAY HEALTHY

An issue that people with disabilities and their families and others are concerned about is health. Family members and others often assist the individual to make sure all the details of medical treatment are followed, documented and shared as necessary for continuity of care. Having a network involved is important to the communication needed with medical professionals so that best health outcomes are achieved.

An often overlooked role networks play in safeguarding health is supporting mental wellness. Networks support mental wellness by creating a sense of belonging. When people have a network of caring relationships, they tend to get sick less often, heal more quickly and live longer. The old saying is true: A good friend is the medicine of life. A network helps make sure friends and loved ones are involved in supporting one's mental wellness as well as physical health.

THEY HELP TO STRENGTHEN CITIZENSHIP

Being involved in purposeful activities and being valued by one's community are part of citizenship. People with disabilities have made huge advances in securing their rights in the past few decades. The laws passed and the policies formed have all been very important to the goal of citizenship. Often, however, ensuring the opportunity to contribute to our communities is missing from the work done towards changing laws and policies, and this is another reason why having a network is important.

Personal support networks provide opportunities for people with disabilities to contribute to the people and the life of their communities. Being able to contribute to the lives of others and to one's community, and being appreciated for what one gives and for one's gifts, provides meaning to one's life.



DISCOVER WHO BENEFITS FROM HAVING A NETWORK

Personal support networks include anyone who cares for a person with a disability and expresses an interest in being involved in their life as a friend. This may be your siblings, parents, extended family members, friends, neighbors, people of faith, co-workers, employers, former caregivers and many others.

In developing a personal support network, it is important to focus on your skills, interests and experiences. From that starting point, it's possible to invite people in who share similar interests and activities to connect with you. Once connection is established, relationships grow and friendships flourish.

Everyone benefits from being part of a personal support network, not just the person at the center. Having a personal support network gives people from different communities the opportunity to participate with you in a reciprocal relationship.

Personal support networks have proven to be helpful for many people, including:

- Elderly parents worried as to who will replace their dedication to the well-being of their child with a disability
- Parents of a person with a disability wanting more active involvement of others, such as siblings, aunts, uncles and/or cousins, in their child's life
- Parents struggling with how to help their child with a disability become more independent
- Families whose relative is moving from the family home or from a formal support setting to live in the community



identify the priorities for your personal support network

You can build a personal support network independently or by collaborating with someone called a Connector to help you make community connections.

There are organizations that offer the services of a Connector, but the work can also be done by volunteers, friends, family members or anyone who can help make community connections. It does not have to be a paid position.

The first stage of building your personal support network is a time of exploration, both as individuals and as a family or circle of supporting people. Most of the time of this stage is spent in one-on-one or small group discussions. These discussions are opportunities for those involved to learn about your individual interests, relationships, capacities, gifts and priorities for the future. Whether you are building a network yourself or working in collaboration with a Connector, start by asking the following questions:

- What gifts and interests do you want to contribute to your community?
- What relationships already exist and what are some opportunities to deepen and strengthen these relationships?
- What programs, educational facilities, training, etc., are you already connected to or have been connected to in the past?
- Are there opportunities in your immediate community or neighborhood to make new connections?
- Do you have any important considerations such as mobility requirements, safety issues, or preferred ways to communicate?
- What are your dreams, goals, and priorities for the future?



make a plan for your personal network

Once you have identified the priorities for your personal support network, the second step is to make an intentional plan to connect with people and start building relationships. By taking time to make a plan, it will be much easier for you to follow it through.

Start by making plans for activities to do, month by month. Be sure to identify opportunities to connect with people who share your similar interests, experiences and other personal gifts. Opportunities could include playing bingo, attending a neighborhood event, or going to a poetry reading. The opportunities are nearly limitless.

Then comes the most important part: You need to show up at the activities you identified, and be open to the possibility of connecting with others.

Your first interaction might be a smile or quick “Hello”. Next time you may strike up a conversation and make a connection with someone. Gradually, these connections will solidify and friendships will be made. You do need to be patient though, as making new connections won’t happen overnight.

Reminder: *You can complete this step independently or by collaborating with someone called a Connector to help you make community connections.*

invite people to join your personal support network

After spending time in your community building relationships, your next step is to bring people together into a group. The focus of this step is to encourage potential members of your personal support network to become intentionally involved in achieving your goals, dreams and priorities.

At each network meeting, you should discuss your goals and review your progress since the last meeting. From there, you can develop practical strategies and invite members of your personal support network to help you achieve them in specific ways.

During this time, the commitment and strength of your personal support network will become clear, and long term members will be identified. In some cases, personal support networks can become self-sufficient at this point, while others may require help to develop.

The following checklist will guide you through the process:

- Call the people you identified as potential members
- Give clear instructions about time and place of the meeting
- Write an agenda



- Create a welcoming atmosphere
- Take notes of celebratory statements, commitments, and suggestions
- Watch your tone of voice and language; use humor and a hospitable approach
- Use the network as an opportunity to discuss, explore, and brainstorm ideas
- Before the meeting ends, set a date for the next one
- Gather addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses for future communication

organize regular meetings to keep your network strong

Once a network is formed, it needs to be maintained and strengthened in a very intentional way.

This is accomplished by having regular meetings with the members of your personal support network. Whether done independently or in collaboration with a volunteer or paid professional, it's important to establish a regular pattern of meetings to keep your network strong. There should also be other less formal gatherings such as doing art together, going to a game, or having dinner.

The specific activities will vary from network to network, but all activities are planned between you and the members of your network.

Here are some suggestions to keep your personal support network strong:

- Continue to research possibilities for the network
- Don't let the network become stale or inactive
- Ask, ask, ask: Be open to asking people to attend and to contribute
- Rely on network members to help solve problems and to contribute ideas for the network
- Keep in touch by telephone, email, and social media
- Continue to review priorities and to set new goals
- Request and be open to feedback from network members



frequently asked questions (FAQs)

Q: What is the purpose of a personal support network?

A: The purpose is to have a group of people who know and care about you, and are there in good times and in bad times. Some refer to this group as a “circle” and it is usually made up of family and friends. A network of family and friends is there to have fun with (celebrate the important things in life) and to grieve with (when sad times happen). A personal support network can also help you make decisions in your life, such as, “Should I move? Is this a good volunteer job for me? Who is a good dentist in my neighborhood?”

Q: Who is a Connector?

A: A Connector is a person who is trained to assist others to create, build and maintain a personal support network. There are organizations that offer the services of a Connector, but the work can also be done by volunteers, friends, family members or anyone else who can help make community connections. The role can be paid or unpaid.

Q: Do you need to hire someone to help build a network?

A: No you don't. The process of building a personal support network can be done independently or it can be done by collaborating with a Connector to help make community connections. There are organizations that offer this service, but it can also be done by volunteers, friends, family members or anyone who wants to actively take part. There are paid and unpaid Connectors.

Q: How is a personal support network built?

A: It takes opportunities, time and reaching out to build a network. The first thing to do is identify the people who are already in your life and see whether they want to be a part of your network. Choose only the people who you feel closest to and who you trust to be a part of this important group.

Next, if you want to make new friends, you need to go out and meet new people. When you meet someone you like and think that there may be a connection, then an invitation to meet again needs to happen. A Connector can help you make this invitation (see the definition of Connector below).

It is easiest to make a connection with someone you have something in common with. It is best to start with a list of things that you like to do, then go out and do them. You will meet people who enjoy the same thing and then connections will build naturally.

If you want to meet new people, you have to go out into the community. A Connector can help you feel more comfortable going to new places and can help you start up conversations with people you meet.



Q: How long does it take to build a personal support network?

A: It takes a lot of time to build a network, anywhere from one year to many years. Some people think having 4 or 5 people on their network is ideal, while others want a much larger group. Every network is different and your network has to be right for you.

Q: Who are the members of a personal support network?

A: Personal support networks include anyone who cares for and expresses an interest in the individual at the center. These may be siblings, parents, extended family members, friends, neighbors, people of faith, coworkers, employers – the list is almost endless.

Q: What commitment do members of a personal support network make?

A: Network members are not asked to make a commitment in a formal way. In time, as the group develops and people become close, members of a network begin to work together to help you realize your dreams and goals. When authentic friendship forms between people, mutual commitment is a natural result. Most friends will be there to support you through difficult times or to celebrate life's good moments.

The involvement of network members varies from person to person. A relationship may be something as regular as phoning you every day, or it may be occasional, such as going to shows together once in awhile. Also, your relationships will often change over time - usually, but not always, strengthening.

Q: Are people paid to be part of a personal support network?

A: No. The people who participate in personal networks are not paid. Their involvement in the network is based on caring, friendship and love. People participate in a network because they get something out of it: Pleasure, joy, friendship and the opportunity to share their interests with another.

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