Lesson 12: Social Support

**Slide 1: Objectives**

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Describe various sources and types of social support
- Discuss the benefits of and strategies for developing social support
- Identify resources for meeting people
- Identify counseling and advising resources
- Discuss the benefits of virtual support networks

**Slide 2: VIDEO: Meeting New Friends**

Tell me how you met your first college friends.

I actually made my first friends at Welcome Week, and like, orientation.

High school friends to begin with and then kind of, I’m open to meeting all new people, so just hanging out in classes, sitting next to people, just said 'hey'.

Well, because I’m thirty-three and a lot older it’s kinda hard. It's intimidating because there’s younger kids here. But they make it comfortable for me to talk to them.

I've been trying to just really throw myself into things, even when I'm tired and would rather just go back to my dorm. I've been trying to get out there and join groups and go to events and stuff on campus because there's so much going on all the time.

**Slide 3: Get Involved!**

It’s always a good idea to develop a social network of supportive people no matter where you are. The first step is to get out and meet people! This can seem like a daunting task, but it doesn’t have to be!

Luckily, college provides many opportunities to meet new people! You’ll meet them in your classes, of course, but another great avenue for finding new friends is to become involved in a student group. Joining a student group that interests you will help you meet and get acquainted with people who have similar interests. Whatever your interests are, there is probably a campus group or activity related to them. Whether it’s intramural sports, drama, music, art, faith, or something else, explore the opportunities your campus has to offer and get involved!

Resource Links:
Student groups: [http://sua.umn.edu/groups/](http://sua.umn.edu/groups/)
Gophers After Dark: [http://sua.umn.edu/events/afterdark/](http://sua.umn.edu/events/afterdark/)
Volunteering on Campus: [http://sua.umn.edu/involvement/](http://sua.umn.edu/involvement/)
Rec Sports: [http://www.recsports.umn.edu/](http://www.recsports.umn.edu/)
Engage!: [http://engage.umn.edu/twincities/search](http://engage.umn.edu/twincities/search)
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Slide 4: Tips for Meeting New People

Other helpful hints for meeting new people might include the following:

- Get to know your neighbors in your house or building. Introduce yourself and strike up conversations when you have a chance meeting. Maybe invite them to go to the rec, to lunch or even just for a walk.
- If you live in campus housing, leave your door open when you can. This is inviting and sends the signal that you’re open to talking, hanging out, or just having people pop in and say hi. Similarly, if you see a neighbor sending the same kind of signal, stop by.
- In your classes, you’ll probably notice that most people tend to sit in the same seats or area during each class session. This is a great opportunity to get to know people around you. They may not become your best friends - or maybe they will - but it’s always a good idea to cultivate an informal support system in each class. You never know when you might need to ask someone to take notes for you – and vice versa. Or, ask them to study with you before an exam.
- Study at a coffee shop, in a common area, or outside on nice days. Resist the urge to go back to your dorm, apartment, or house between classes. If you stay on or near campus, you’ll be more likely to meet others and you’ll reduce travel time too.
- Try to move outside your comfort zone and involve yourself in activities that put you in situations with people who are different from you. You never know who you’ll meet!

Slide 5: Diversity

You’ll have many, many opportunities to experience a diverse set of people in college. You’ll not only meet people with interests, habits, and backgrounds that are different from yours, but you will also probably encounter people from different cultures. You’ll meet people who are from rural and urban backgrounds, conservative and liberal beliefs, a variety of religions, and a great number of different states and countries. This can be an amazing opportunity to learn about other people – their customs, beliefs, history, and way of life.

This is also a great time to practice openness. Viewing others who are different from you with a healthy dose of curiosity and appreciation allows for learning, enlightenment and forming new friendships. Differences do not have to be obstacles. Instead, view this as opportunities to learn new things, make new friends, and broaden your perspective! You may develop interests you didn’t know you had.

Slide 6: VIDEO: Social Activities

Having a strong social support is a great way to relieve stress. What kind of organizations or groups are you a part of?

Um, I mean, some people think a fraternity’s just partying, but like, I mean, you’re actually putting in work, coming up with events, planning stuff, trying to get people to come to it, advertising, talking to businesses to cater for different events and sponsorships. It can be a lot of stress, but I mean, it’s all, I say it all in a sense of like working, so I guess it’s a stress reliever because it kinda takes me out of this classroom setting and gives me something else to do.

We’re in a group called Campus People Watchers, which sounds really lame but it’s always good to just be in a fun group where you don’t need to think and you can just hang out. And then I’m also in a group called MPERG, it’s uh, it’s the volunteer group I do. And so it’s just fighting for something I’m passionate
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about which helps me cope with stress because it’s actually something I want to do.

And when I’m at the sorority house or when I’m at the events I don’t think about school, I don’t think about work or what needs to get done. I kind of just enjoy myself while I’m there.

I happen to be part of many groups and organizations on campus. Um, one of them is the Philippine Student Association. Um, I’m half-Filipino. Being involved in a cultural group on campus is really fun, um, it’s good opportunity to meet a lot of other people. I’m also involved in Campus Crusaders for Christ, which is a really good Christian-based, on-campus. Um, additionally, I’m on board for Quidditch. Which, for non-Harry Potter folk, we have made it into a sport. But that’s fun. I think being involved in groups where you can find people with, you know, similar likes. Um, you know, stuff like that. People who, you know, want to have fun, want to hang out, want to be around each other and make almost a family environment.

Slide 7: Virtual Support

Another popular way to meet people and stay connected is derived from Internet connections. This includes social networking sites like Facebook & Twitter, friends you keep in contact with via e-mail, and even chat rooms where you can connect with people who have similar interests. Some of them are very close friends while others are colleagues or distant contacts. You may have heard concerns about the effects of all this virtuality on interpersonal social skills, tendencies to become more sedentary, and level of interaction with the real world. Some of these concerns may indeed be valid, but a body of research is now emerging highlighting the supportive benefits of a virtual network as well.

For instance, one recent study found a robust connection between Facebook usage and indicators of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). When we say social capital we mean the strength of connections within and between networks. The results demonstrated that networking through Internet sources can help to ease the stress of certain life changes like moving away to attend college. Students are able to maintain old friendships and form new ones through the same sites (Ellison et al., 2007).

Another study found other positive relationships between the intensity of Facebook use and student outcomes. This research suggests a positive correlation between intensity of Facebook use and students’ life satisfaction, social trust, civic engagement, and political participation (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Factors like life satisfaction and social trust were stronger than factors of civic engagement or political participation - but all were significant. Finally, positive associations have also been found between Facebook usage and psychological well-being (Ellison, et al., 2007).

Slide 8: Is Virtual Good or Bad?

So, what are we to conclude about these virtual networks? Well, they can have some very positive effects on one’s level of social support. This can be extremely beneficial for college students as they encounter many changes, new expectations, and increased responsibility. Often, they are experiencing all of these things in a new environment without their traditional forms of social support. If virtual support helps to fill a void and a very real need, it can be a wonderful tool in the stress management toolbox.

As with all things in life, though, it does pay to remember the old saying “everything in moderation.” No one should rely exclusively on virtual networks for their support, nor should any of us let our virtual networking interfere with our tasks of daily living or progression towards our goals. It’s also not considerate to use our virtual networks to manipulate, intimidate, threaten, or bully others. Sadly, these things do happen. Even though we’ve reported on the benefits of virtual networks here, we also must admit there can be downsides of virtual networking as well. Used wisely, though, virtual social
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networks can be a wonderful complement to our overall support network. Whether face-to-face or virtual, you should strive to develop strong social support within your social network.

Slide 9: Social Network

Your social network is a defined set of people who all know you in some way. Some of the individuals in your network are close friends and family; others are merely acquaintances. In college you will likely develop a broad social network. You will meet many people in the form of classmates, neighbors, roommates and so on. But knowing hundreds of people is not enough. They are all in your social network but not all provide social support. Only some people in your social network will actually be part of your social support system. Social support is important in the management and reduction of stress. Social support is defined as: relationships that bring positive benefits to an individual. The emphasis in this definition is on the word positive.

As you’ve probably guessed, social support involves other people and how they can help you cope with life’s ups and downs. In fact, studies routinely show that, for many people, social support is one of their primary and most effective coping resources (Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Hefner, 2007; Schnider, Elhai, & Gray, 2007; Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts, & Chen, 2009). Other people can help us, listen to us, guide us, challenge us, pray for us, and simply be with us. Humans are social animals; thus, support from others is extremely important – even for those of us who generally prefer to be alone. The presence of a caring individual can not only lessen the perception of stress, but can also help us devise strategies for dealing with it.

Two heads are better than one in many cases! We should point out, though, that the level of support you receive is not dependent upon the number of people you know or count as friends. Rather, your level of support is defined by the quality of those relationships. Another way to explain this is to say that having a few good people who really care about you in your life can be better than having many casual acquaintances.

Slide 10: Your Social Support

Social support involves one, several, or all of the following elements:

- First is Emotional Concern. This is characterized by feelings of love, liking, empathy, sympathy, respect, or some other beneficial emotional regard between the two individuals involved.
- Next is Instrumental Aid. The individuals provide either goods or services to each other. It is a reciprocal relationship in which both parties benefit. The exchange of goods or services does not necessarily need to occur simultaneously. For instance, a friend might help you move to a new apartment this semester, knowing that you’ll return the favor in the future.
- Third is Information. This means that one individual may help the other better understand an environment or situation by providing information or advice. This helps alleviate stress in that one of the greatest stressors is fear of the unknown. Thus, providing accurate information or guidance can often be an important form of social support.
- Last is Appraisal. This element of social support involves the individuals providing constructive comments to each other. Think of this as friendly counsel and words of positive affirmation.

Each person in your social network doesn’t need to necessarily provide support in each of these four areas. While some of the people in your social network may be capable of providing all of these elements, most will serve to satisfy just one element or another. Cultivating a strong support network and knowing whom to go to for which element of support are important aspects of utilizing social support effectively (House, 1981).
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Slide 11: Direct and Buffer Effects

The general benefits of social support in helping you manage stress can be categorized into two broad groups. In many cases, social support from other people provides direct effects. In other words, a clear relationship can be found between the level of social support received and the degree of a person's positive mental and physical wellbeing. Generally, the more social support a person receives, the better they feel. This is a direct effect of social support: more support leads to less perceived and experienced stress. The effects are direct because the advice, concern, aid, or information you receive from another person actually helps you address the issue that is bothering you, thus helping you reduce your perception of stress.

At other times, though, social support may provide benefits via buffering effects. Here, just knowing or perceiving that you have support makes a huge difference, regardless of whether or not you actually utilize your support network to help you. Studies have demonstrated that people who simply perceive that they have support available to them should they need it often perceive less stress than others (Cohen & Willis, 1985; Sun, Buys, Stewart, Shum, & Farquhar, 2011). These people also indicate that knowledge of their social support system also softens the impact of stressful events. So, in these cases, social support may not provide any direct effect to actually decrease stress, but the perception and knowledge of having that support is comforting. This is how social support can buffer the perception and experience of stress. It appears that simply knowing you’re not alone can make a big difference!

Slide 12. Cultivating Social Support

You’ve probably heard the saying, “You have to give some to get some.” This definitely applies to social support! Support from others can be cultivated and one of the best ways to do this is to provide your support to others. The vast majority of people will appreciate your empathy and will return the favor as well! So, the rule of thumb here is the more you give, the more you get, or if you want a friend, be a friend. This truly is the single most effective way to cultivate social support in your life. Beyond this basic concept though, there are other factors involved in developing a helpful and effective social support network.

- One factor is assertiveness. Address other people directly, and honestly share your thoughts and feelings in a constructive manner. Let people know what you need and why you need it. Do this in a positive, non-confrontational manner, using I statements. If people feel like they understand what you need, they are more likely to respond effectively to you and your requests.

- Another factor is active listening. Attentively listen to what others are saying. Watch for nonverbal cues, and when needed, clarify the content of other people’s statements. Invite him or her to share more information, advice, or feelings, and provide a genuine, positive response. Active listening is important in providing and receiving social support. If your friends and family feel that you really do listen to them – no matter what you might be discussing – they will be more likely to seek support from you and provide support to you. It’s always good to keep in mind that, in general, people want to feel important and asking them questions followed by active listening is one of the best ways to show them that you see their value and worth.

- A third factor is honesty. Being honest goes a very long way in developing trust with others. Related to this is the notion of authenticity, which involves honest disclosure of your thoughts and feelings, even though this is sometimes hard to do. In short, honesty really is the best policy. Dishonesty only serves to harm relationships.

- Lastly is being open. To cultivate social support, you need to be a willing participant. In other words, it’s important that others can see you genuinely want to provide support and that you’re open to receiving support from them. This doesn’t mean that you have to reveal your entire life
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Story to everyone you meet. It does mean, however, that you are sincere in your offers of and requests for support.

**Slide 13: Negative Relationships**

It is important to remember that social support should bring positive benefits to the relationship. You may find that some individuals tend to bring you down. If you discover that a relationship produces more negative consequences than positive results, it may be time to re-evaluate why you are involved. This can be a difficult decision but know that surrounding yourself with positive people leads to positive outcomes!

**Slide 14: Support Services**

Sometimes, a strong support system of friends and family isn’t enough. Life does present challenges for which we might need a little extra help. Your campus has excellent resources to help you deal with these issues, too. For academic concerns, your first stop should always be your academic adviser. He or she is best equipped to answer questions you might have about requirements, your major, policies, or academic concerns. If your adviser can’t answer your questions, they will be able to direct you to someone who can.

If you have questions or concerns about campus life, the Office of Student Affairs is the place to go. The folks who work in this area are dedicated to providing students with an invigorating, safe and encouraging college experience. Thus, they are another excellent resource and source of support! Life can throw us all kinds of curve balls and there are times that we need more help than our friends and family can provide. Your campus counseling and/or health services would be excellent options for obtaining support and guidance. These services are usually provided for little or no fee to students and they are there for your benefit. Why not take advantage of that and use them when needed?

Resource Links:
- Office of Student Affairs: [http://www.osa.umn.edu/](http://www.osa.umn.edu/)
- University Counseling and Consulting Services: [http://www.uccs.umn.edu/](http://www.uccs.umn.edu/)
- Boynton Health Service: [http://www.bhs.umn.edu/index.htm](http://www.bhs.umn.edu/index.htm)

**Slide 15: Barriers and Overcoming Them**

Despite the numerous benefits of seeking support, many students don’t access these services. Sometimes, students just aren’t aware that they are available, but they also cite other reasons for not using them. One study revealed a variety of barriers to seeking help among student populations including lack of time, privacy concerns, lack of emotional openness, financial concerns, lack of a perceived need for help, skepticism about the effectiveness of services, and stigmatizing attitudes about students who seek help (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

Each of the barriers to seeking help has a solution. Some of the solutions simply involve correcting misinformation. For instance, if you are worried about financial constraints, please remember that most student health services are deeply discounted compared to the regular market and health insurance will cover many of the costs. If privacy is a concern, rest assured that all of the counselors, support staff, clinicians, and health professionals you see are bound by patient confidentiality rules. They cannot divulge any of your personal information without your consent.

Maybe you feel that some of the resources we’ve discussed would be good for you, but you just don’t feel you have the time to access them. If this is the case, review the time management discussion
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and re-evaluate your obligations and priorities. If stress or something else is interfering with your ability to be a productive, satisfied student, then it’s probably worth the time and energy investment involved in accessing resources to help you cope. Ignoring the issue, or simply saying you don’t have time to deal with it will only serve to let the problem worsen.

Some students just aren’t comfortable accessing some of the support services available. If this is true of you, ask yourself why. Some people erroneously believe that services like counseling are needed only in extreme cases. Others feel that using these resources might be construed as a sign of personal weakness. This is not true. As a society, we are finally coming to the realization that seeking professional help and support is a healthy, productive option for navigating the maze of life. Intervention or support from a counselor can often help you tap into your personal resilience (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

Slide 16: Summary

In this lesson, we’ve tried to make the case for social support. Hopefully we’ve done that successfully. Having the honest, sincere support of others can be one of the most effective stress management resources. It can be cultivated and we hope you’ve found our suggestions helpful. Share your goals with trusted members of your social support network and ask for their support. Offer to provide your support to each of them as well. If you want a friend, be a friend. If you keep this sentiment in mind, you’ll be on the right track. Good luck!

Slide 17: References


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