

Relying On Your Support System

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Relying on your social support system while facing addiction can provide much needed relief in your quest for sobriety. Our social supports or friends can be tied to larger groups, such as neighbors, community members, co-workers or other influencers in your network. They can greatly improve your psychological well-being and increase your life expectancy. The mental and physical demands of recovery rely on your motivation and plans to achieve your goals. Friends can help motivate and empower you to stay sober for long-haul.

Do You Need Friends?



As I was conducting a group therapy session earlier this month, I asked my clients an important question. Do you need friends? While I was initially met with some resistance, the discussion ensued with questions and comments such as “using friends (drugs and/or alcohol use) or sober friends?” and “I’m used to being on my own.” Without question, each person recalled an experience of pain or hardship that they had experienced in their relationships. At the same time, everyone wholeheartedly agreed that the rewards of having meaningful relationships far outweighed the risks. Yet when faced with the idea of living a life without friends, the room filled with words like “lonely,” “not living,” “bored,” and “relapse (use of drugs and alcohol).” On the contrary, they argued that friendship offered validation, trust, connection, commonality, and discovery of self in relationship to others.

Inherently, my clients knew the importance of friendships and relationships, but in most cases, their addictions distanced them from the relationships that meant the most.

The Theory Of Well-Being

Martin Seligman, a leading authority in the field of positive psychology, has spent years researching the concept of happiness, which has laid the foundation for his new theory on human well-being. Through his research, Seligman has identified five essential features that make up his well-being theory, one of which is relationships. Those five features are **positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment**. Seligman made it easy for us to remember each element by using the mnemonic “PERMA.” Furthermore, Seligman argues that each of those features contains three specific qualities that he defines as the following: “1. It contributes to well-being; 2. Many people pursue it for its own sake, not merely to get any of the other elements; 3. It is defined and measured independently of the other elements (exclusivity)” [1] For the sake of this blog, the focus will be on the “R” in PERMA (positive relationships).

In his book, *Flourish*, Seligman notes that many of our positive life experiences involve others and that relationships are the remedy to life’s dark moments. He says, “Other people are the best antidote to the downs of life and the single most reliable up.” 1 And there’s a reason for this. In an interview, Dr. Mitch Prinstein, Professor of Psychology at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, stated, “[...] our brains are actually developed to care more about social connection than so many other aspects of what we engage in. In fact, there’s recent research that when we’re at risk of being isolated, it activates pain centers in our brain, telling us that this is one of the worst things we can do for our survival, is lose out on social connections.” [2] Neuroscientist, Matthew Lieberman, Ph.D., says the same thing, that we are hard-wired for social connection, except he reframes social pain as a good thing, stating, “Our capacity for social pain is one of our greatest superpowers.” [3] Liebermann sheds light on the reality that if we do not experience pain when we are disconnected or isolated from others, then we would never be driven to work and connect with others.

Fostering Positive Relationships

Knowing that we need relationships to survive is one thing, but fostering positive relationships for personal well-being is another. So what’s the key? Communication. You can boost your communication skills by practicing methods such as using active and constructive responding (ACR) <http://positivepsychologynews.com/news/doug-turner/20070515248>.

If you’re wanting to create new relationships, try volunteering, exploring new hobbies or interests, joining a support group (such as a religious community, AA or other 12-step programs, or a meditation group), and say ‘yes’ to social invitations.

Written by: Kirsty McLaren, LCSW, Next Level Recovery

[1] Seligman, M. E.P. (2011). *Flourish*. New York, NY: ARIA Paperback

[2] The Psychology of Popularity: An interview with Dr. Mitch Prinstein [Interview by S.]. (2015, June 08). Retrieved February 26, 2018, from <https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/the-psychology-of-popularity-an-interview-with-dr-mitch-prinstein/>

[3] *The social brain and its superpowers: Matthew Lieberman, Ph.D. at TEDxStLouis* [Video file]. (2013, October 07). Retrieved February 26, 2018, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNhk3owF7RQ>

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