



NATURAL SUPPORTS

Natural supports are the relationships that occur in everyday life. Formal supports usually involve some form of payment for services and may include relationships with service providers – such as counselors, therapists, line staff and care managers.

In contrast, natural supports usually involve relationships with family members, friends, co-workers, neighbors and acquaintances, and are of a reciprocal (give-and-take) nature. Such supports helps one to develop a sense of social belonging, dignity and self-esteem.

A solid support system can make a significant difference in a person's life. Studies have shown that individuals with a greater diversity of relationships and/or involvement in a broad range of social activities have healthier lives and live longer than those who lack such supports. Unfortunately, according to research, people with mental illnesses may have social networks half the size of the networks among the general population.

Benefits of Natural Supports

Natural supports foster empowerment, independence and growth and reduce the need to rely on services.

The support provided by informal community relationships cannot be taken for granted. Research has shown that people with mental illnesses, like each of us, consider these relationships significant sources of support, perhaps even more so than the general public. Work colleagues were also identified as major sources of emotional support. These types of relationships are also important, even though they do not fall into the category of intimate relationships.

How do people develop natural supports?

There is no single method or easy answer for developing a system of natural supports. It will require considerable time and persistence, as well as open and honest communication in relationships.

The best way to meet people is by getting involved. Some ways to build up natural supports are:

- participating in community activities and projects
- joining groups and clubs
- volunteering
- socializing with one's immediate and extended family and neighbors
- getting a job





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How can you help others to strengthen their natural supports?

Working together, you can develop specific strategies that enhance an individual's natural supports.

For example:

- Help people discover and express their interests. Engage them in discussions about possible choices, using inventories where appropriate.
- Collaborate and partner with a person's family if he/she is comfortable with this choice.
- Identify community resources that fit the person's interests.
- Encourage people to participate in social or community activities that are consistent with their interests and cultural, in addition to mental health programs and groups they may already be attending.
- Help people cope with social adversity by recognizing potential discrimination.

Developing natural supports can take significant energy but the benefits are invaluable and can last a lifetime.

Resources

The Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion

Walsh J. Connelly PR. (1996). "Supportive behaviors in natural support networks of people with serious mental illness." *Health & Social Work*. 21(4): 296-303

