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Mental Edge: Harness emotional support, the energy that sustains us day-to-day

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Special to the Journal

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What if there were an energy source that was plentiful, naturally occurring, and safe for the environment? What if this fuel were renewable, tax-free, and could drive personal and economic growth?

Sounds good, right? You would think the Economic Development Council would be all over it. Well, there is such a fuel — emotional support.

In this column I would like to explore the power of emotional support, the surprisingly large number of barriers to it, and ways you may be able to both give and get much more.

If you could harness even some of the energy lost to insufficient support, well-being and achievements could soar.

What is emotional support?

Emotional support involves one person turning to another, sharing and exploring personal concerns or goals, and being receptive to influence. Supportive discussions are respectful and sensitive to feelings. They assume your inherent worth and focus on your strengths and potential. They patiently focus on growth, core needs and underlying values, and not just on solving concrete problems or stuffing you with advice. They might, though, involve the knowledge, experience, and resources of other people.

The importance of support

There is voluminous evidence for the power of support and how much more people can accomplish with it. For example, the value of social support in patients with breast cancer has been well-demonstrated.

Think about times when someone's words stayed with you, helped you cope or transported you to the next level of achievement. Many people can remember times in their lives when they felt truly supported and how much it meant to them.

When I was confused after college about whether I had made mistakes in the majors I chose, a wise peer said to me, "Sometimes you will think you made good decisions, and sometimes you will think you didn't." That worked for me, broke my cycle of rumination, and helped me accept uncertainty.

Support works through a number of mechanisms. It can strengthen your confidence to do what you know must be done. It can give you the optimism and hope necessary to take action. It can help you to persevere, which is often essential for progress. Support makes every victory sweeter, knowing someone is invested in you and will truly enjoy sharing your success.

Overcoming barriers to emotional support

There are significant barriers to giving support and to receiving what you need. You will have trouble with both if you are isolated, perhaps working at home, and have few active relationships. Your challenge may be to reach the busy intersections of life where you can get to know some new people. You may need to experiment with novel activities, even if you are not sure which will be right for you in the long run.

You may have been raised to be highly private and to avoid showing any hint of weakness. Focus instead on the intrinsic value of deepening relationships by engaging with others on emotionally meaningful topics.

You may not give support because you don't realize how much you have to offer. Trust you have the power to help. Indeed, there is strong evidence that just getting words — language — on feelings is important. By listening well, you can help someone express themselves, and in so doing, come closer to identifying what they really need.

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Remember that what is obvious to you now, at this juncture in your life, is far from obvious to plenty of other people. There are words of wisdom about life that many 22-year-olds have not heard yet. Since everyone's family culture was different, and family worldviews limited the range of guidance that was available, your point of view may be foreign.

I still remember when my college roommate's father said rather offhandedly, "Follow your interests passionately and money and all else will follow." Being from New York, I sometimes joke, it was the first time I had ever heard that.

Develop awareness of the needs of others. Try saying more often, "I am happy to be a sounding board for you around this," or "If you would like to talk it out, I am here to listen."

As no one is really a good mind reader, don't assume people know what you need. It is your responsibility to reach out. Asking for help is a core skill of adulthood and one that people often lack. Ask someone for their input, even when you think you know the answer, as it demonstrates respect.

The people that love you the most may not be equipped to be your best supports. They can have boundary issues and be unable to separate their needs and values from your own. They can have too much of their self-esteem tied up in your outcomes, leaving them threatened by your choices. Pessimistic people might be unable to encourage you to take healthy risks. Choose your supports wisely.

I would love to see what would happen if you were exquisitely supported — if you had someone who would be your sounding board on the front end and have your back on the return trip, supplying you with courage along the way. People are often trying to deal with life themselves and don't want to be a burden. Indeed, many people are compulsively self-reliant.

Please assume they would do a lot better if they had the right kind of support — your kind. Assume you can make a crucial difference.

Ben Johnson, PhD, ABPP is a clinical psychologist who practices, supervises, and teaches psychotherapy at RICBT, Brown University and URI. He loves helping people apply a broad range of psychological concepts and strategies to reduce isolation and improve their moods, relationships, productivity, and lives. Please send comments to features@providencejournal.com; be sure to put "Mental Edge" in the subject field. You may also write to "Mental Edge," Features Department, The Providence Journal, 75 Fountain St. Providence, RI 02902



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