YELLOW RIBBON REINTEGRATION PROGRAM®

Building and Strengthening Your Personal Support Network

Facilitator Guide

FOR THOSE WHO SERVE AND THOSE WHO SUPPORT

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Building and Strengthening Your Personal Support Network

Facilitator Note:

The following two symbols are used as indicators:
💻 *(computer) indicates it is time to advance the slide on the associated PowerPoint;*
✋ *(hand) indicates there is an exercise associated with the content.*

Essential class content is noted in ***bold****.*

All class handouts are available for download on the YRRP website at www.yellowribbon.mil/cms/event-handout. Unless otherwise specified as online only in the Materials section below, all handouts should be printed for distribution to class participants.

Class Description:
This class covers the importance of a personal support network and discusses how to develop and use a personal support network.

Stage:
Pre-deployment, During deployment, Post-deployment

DoDI:
1342.28 DoD Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP)

The content of this class has been developed for the Department of Defense Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program. The Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State has reviewed the class and is responsible for content management.

Audience:
YRRP attendees

Time:
45 minutes

Equipment:
- Projector
- Laptop
- Pens or pencils

Materials:

- Facilitator Guide
- Core Material Checklist
- PowerPoint Presentation
  1. Building and Strengthening Your Personal Support Network
  2. Objectives
  3. What Is a Personal Support Network?
  4. What Kind of Support Can You Expect?
  5. Benefits of a Personal Support Network
  6. Personal Support Network Components
  7. Assess Your Personal Support Network
  8. Assess the Size
  9. Assess the Quality
  10. Coping Styles and Support
  11. Strengthening Your Relationships
  12. Expand Your Personal Support Network
  13. Take Care of Yourself
  14. Review of Objectives
  15. Building and Strengthening Your Personal Support Network
- Handouts
  1. Assessing and Strengthening My Personal Support Network

Exercises:

1. Assessing Your Personal Support Network
2. Strengthening Your Relationships

Objectives:

After completing this class, participants will be able to do the following:

1. Define personal support network.
2. Define and identify the components of a personal support network.
3. Describe the benefits of a personal support network.
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of your personal support network.
5. Describe how to strengthen and expand a personal support network.

Introduction

💻 SHOW Slide 1: Building and Strengthening Your Personal Support Network

Facilitator Note:

Introduce yourself as the facilitator. State your name, military experience or affiliation, and perhaps one additional brief bit of relevant personal information that establishes your credibility (i.e., your professional training or experience).

Please limit your personal introduction to no more than 2 minutes to maximize the time attendees are able to engage with course content, practice skills, and participate in self-reflection activities.

Welcome to the Building and Strengthening Your Personal Support Network class.

Do you sometimes feel like you are just getting by with a little help from your friends? This can be true for almost every situation you encounter in life. Our lives are complicated, busy, and challenging. **We cannot accomplish everything – or even most things in life – alone**.

PAUSE for responses after each question.

Do you depend on others in your everyday life to help you get things done?

Are you apt to turn to different people for different situations?

During this class, we are going to explore your personal support network, the benefits of having one, and how you can choose the most supportive people to help you in various situations.

💻 SHOW Slide 2: Objectives

Let's look at our objectives. After completing this class, you will be able to do the following:

1. **Define personal support network.**
2. **Define and identify the components of a personal support network.**
3. **Describe the benefits of a personal support network.**
4. **Evaluate the effectiveness of your personal support network.**
5. **Describe how to strengthen and expand a personal support network.**

Personal Support Networks

SHOW Slide 3: What Is a Personal Support Network?

First, let's define a personal support network. What is it?

PAUSE for responses.

A personal support network is a group of people you can depend on for help on an everyday basis and in an emergency. It is made up of individuals who will check in with you and assist you when needed (van der Poel, 1993).

Should your personal support network consist of only one person?

PAUSE for responses. (*Answer: no)*

Why not?

PAUSE for responses. (Possible answers: he or she may not be available at the time needed; may be absent or away; you may be in an area different from your usual location; it takes a variety of different supports to meet all of your needs)

To be effective, you and the people in your personal support network must be able to make contact with each other quickly when the need arises. So, **having a diverse network will make it more likely that, whatever your needs, you will be able to turn to someone who can help.**

Why do you need a personal support network?

PAUSE for responses. *(Possible answers: extra help; emergencies; information)*

Can you think of an example of a time you might need a personal support network?

PAUSE for responses.

One way to feel more in control of your life situation is to develop a strong network of people who can support you when you need them. Research has shown that **having a personal support network can make it easier for you to cope with many common sources of stress** – from dealing with minor problems at work to recovering from major surgery – and you can expand your network by reaching out to others and developing new friendships (Cohen & Willis, 1985; Pennix et al. 1997; Wellman & Frank, 2001).

SHOW Slide 4: What Kind of Support Can You Expect?

You can receive and give certain types of support through a personal support network. Let's talk about the **different types of support** now.

- **Help with belonging**: People want to feel like they are part of a group, such as a club, a family, or a branch of the military. They want to feel like the group will not be complete without them (van der Poel, 1993).
- **Help with feelings**: People can better manage their emotions when they share feelings – good and bad – with friends, family, or professionals (van der Poel, 1993).
- **Help with things**: People do not always have enough items, or they have items they can share with others, such as food, clothing, books, a car, or money (Pennix et al., 1997; van der Poel, 1993).
- **Help with information**: People need help acquiring knowledge or facts. This might include information like job training, how to care for a baby, or the pros and cons of the new cell phone model (Van Der Gaag & Snijders, 2005).
- **Help with finding help**: People can also support others by sending them to someone else for help. This advice might include the name of a good dentist, the best grocery store for fresh produce, or a reliable babysitter (Van Der Gaag & Snijders, 2005).

SHOW Slide 5: Benefits of a Personal Support Network

We just discussed the various types of support that can be provided through a personal support network. The benefits on this slide list some reasons why having a personal support network can be advantageous. Remember, these benefits are also helpful to those individuals for whom you provide support. Take a minute and read over these bullets.

PAUSE for participants to read.

*The following **benefits of a personal support network** are listed on the slide:*

- ***Increases self-esteem*** *(Dumont & Provost, 1999)*
- ***Helps with practical aspects of life*** *(e.g., child care, transportation) (Pennix et al., 1997; van der Poel, 1993)*
- ***Improves mental and emotional well-being*** *(Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Fratiglioni et al., 2000)*
- ***Reduces stress and stress-related illnesses*** *(Cohen & Wills, 1985)*
- ***Increases immunity (resistance to disease)*** *(Berkman & Syme, 1979; House et al., 1982; Seeman & Syme, 1987)*
- ***Provides companionship*** *(van der Poel, 1993)*
- ***Supplies emotional support*** *(van der Poel, 1993)*

Which of these seem especially beneficial to you?

PAUSE for responses.

Your support network can ease your stress by providing many kinds of practical and emotional support – from bringing you homemade soup when you are sick to talking with you when you are feeling low. **Having a support network does not just help you – it lets you help others too.** Even if you are doing fine, **you may gain self-confidence from helping others who are still struggling with challenges you have overcome** (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Wellman & Frank, 2001). Many studies have also found that **having strong ties to others can improve your health and even help you live longer** (Pennix et al., 1997).

SHOW Slide 6: Personal Support Network Components

EXERCISE 1: Assessing Your Personal Support Network

Facilitator Note:

Handout 1 will be used. The purpose of this exercise is for participants to identify the people and organizations that are included in their personal support network, and ways in which they feel supported by each support mentioned. Participants will complete the first row of the table. This should take approximately 2 minutes.

There are two components of a personal support network – formal and informal supports.

Formal supports consist of government and private agencies and other organizations that have been established to assist people.

Here are some examples of a formal support: non-profit organizations; private and public mental health agencies; low-income assistance agencies; thrift stores and other second-hand stores; departments of family services; church groups; medical assistance agencies and organizations; work place assistance agencies; mentors; supervisors; chaplain; youth and child care agencies; self-help groups; psychological health providers.

Can you think of any situations when you have connected with a formal support?

PAUSE for responses. (Possible answers: health; mental and medical related; grief; spiritual; community based; disabilities; financial; information; job-related)

Informal supports are individuals who are there for you when you need them.

Here are some examples of individuals you may consider to be informal supports: family; friends; neighbors; church members; associates; and coworkers.

Why do you need both types of support in your life, formal and informal?

PAUSE for responses. (Possible answers: formal supports like agencies provide specific assistance; informal supports offer support and friendships that can give you a stronger sense of security that there are people who you know will help you any time)

Look at page 1 of **Handout 1: Assessing and Strengthening My Personal Support Network**. In the first row of the table, take about 2 minutes to write down the names of formal and informal supports in your personal network. There is no need to complete the rest of the table at this time.

PAUSE for participants to write.

PAUSE for responses after each question.

Who are some of the supports you wrote down?

Was it easy or difficult to think of members of your network?

Did you get any additional ideas when others shared who they listed in their network?

Why is it important to actually think about who is in your personal support network?

The strongest personal support networks are based on a mutual appreciation and desire to help (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Wellman & Frank, 2001). How do you know if you have chosen the correct people to be in your network? You need to take time and assess your support networks to see if they are the right match for you. How do you do that? Let's explore that now.

Assessing Your Personal Support Network

SHOW Slide 7: Assess Your Personal Support Network

There are **two important elements to consider when assessing a support network – size or extent of the network and quality of the network** (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987).

SHOW Slide 8: Assess the Size

EXERCISE 1: Assessing Your Personal Support Network (continued)

Facilitator Note:

Handout 1 will be used. Participants will complete items 1-3. This should take approximately 2 minutes.

When **assessing the size of your network** you should ask yourself the following questions:

- **How many supportive relationships do you have?**
- **How many supporters are within an hour of where you live?**
- **How often do you spend time (e.g., face-to-face, phone) with someone other than those with whom you live?**

Take 2 minutes to answer items 1-3 on page 1 of **Handout 1: Assessing and Strengthening My Personal Support Network**. Take a look at the examples in the first two columns to help you complete items 1-3.

PAUSE for participants to write.

The following item wording corresponds to items 1-3 on the handout:

1. *I live with this support.*
2. *I live within an hour of this support.*
3. *I spend ____ hour(s) per week with/talking to this support.*

PAUSE for responses after each question.

Why do you think each question is important in assessing if you have the right number of supporters in your network?

Is there anything you would like to change about your network now that you have looked at it closely?

SHOW Slide 9: Assess the Quality

EXERCISE 1: Assessing Your Personal Support Network (continued)

Facilitator Note:

Handout 1 will be used. Participants will complete items 4-13. This should take approximately 6 minutes.

Besides looking at the size of your network, you also need to **assess the quality of your personal support network** (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987). Here are some questions to help you with the assessment process:

- **How satisfied are you with your relationships?**
- **Do you have a variety of supports?**
  - **Do you talk to friends or relatives on the phone, via email, or through texting?**
  - **Do you go to meetings, social clubs, or other group activities?**
  - **Do you belong to online social networking sites or support groups for people with similar life situations?**
- **What kind of supports do you need from those in your network?**
- **Does your network provide sources of support for most of your needs?**

Take 2 minutes to answer items 4 and 5 on page 1 of **Handout 1: Assessing and Strengthening My Personal Support Network**.

PAUSE for participants to write.

The following item wording corresponds to items 4 and 5 in the handout:

4. *I am satisfied with the support I receive from this support.*
5. *My primary way of communicating with this support is _____.*

Take a look at each relationship in your network and determine how satisfied you are with that relationship. Then, look at your network as a whole and determine if it provides sources of support for most of your needs.

Finally, try to identify ways in which you communicate with others. Some people like to talk on the phone, while others prefer texting or emailing. Some people enjoy going to meetings, social clubs, and other group activities, while others prefer to do things alone or with just one or two others. Many enjoy spending time in-person with people who have similar life situations, while others prefer social networking online.

How do you determine if you have a quality personal support network? Examine each network member and see if the support is meeting your specific needs. Are you receiving practical and emotional support? Do you feel heard, understood, appreciated and/or loved? Are you able to be yourself and feel comfortable talking about your deepest problems? Do you have a definite role in the relationship? Do you feel informed and useful?

Remember, **not every support in your network must meet all of these criteria. They should meet the criteria that are relevant to your situation or needs.** For example, you may have a neighbor who respects you and offers you the practical support of watching your child for a few hours while you run errands, but you may not feel comfortable sharing your deepest problems with this person.

Using the criteria outlined on this slide, look at your network and think about each support listed on page 1 of **Handout 1: Assessing and Strengthening My Personal Support Network** based on items 6-13.

PAUSE for participants to write.

The following item wording corresponds to items 6-13 in the handout and on the slide:

- *This support makes me feel:*
    6. *Understood*
    7. *Heard*
    8. *Informed*
    9. *Useful*
    10. *Loved or appreciated*
    11. *Like I am able to talk about my deepest problems*
    12. *Like I have a definite role or place in the relationship*
    13. *Like I am able to be myself*

PAUSE for responses after each question.

How did that go?

Did your network members meet the relevant criteria on this slide?

After looking at each one, did you eliminate any?

Were you able to add any supports?

Did you get further insights into who should be in your network based on this exercise?

What are your questions about selecting supports to be part of your network?

Some of you may have discovered from the exercise we just did that your personal support network is not as strong as you would like it to be or need it to be in order to deal with the challenges of life. So, now let's look at how to strengthen a good personal support network.

Strengthening Your Personal Support Network

SHOW Slide 10: Coping Styles and Support

Did you know that the way you deal with problems can dictate how your friends support you? Research shows that **how people cope with stress can shape how friends respond to you and the kind of help they offer** (Man Chow & Buhrmester, 2011).

- **If you are open to support in times of stress, friends may more often provide responsive support.**
- **If you deny problems during times of stress, friends may more often avoid the issue too.**
- **If you ruminate, worry, or get overwhelmed during times of stress, friends may try to take charge, criticize, or control the situation.**

Take a moment and think about how you deal with problems and how your friends support you. Are there things you could do differently?

SHOW Slide 11: Strengthening Your Relationships

EXERCISE 2: Strengthening Your Relationships

Facilitator Note:

Handout 1 will be used. The purpose of this exercise is to help participants identify ways to strengthen their relationships with people and organizations in their personal support network. Participants will complete page 2. This should take approximately 4 minutes.

Now that we have taken a look at ourselves, let's examine how we support others. The strongest personal support networks are based on a mutual appreciation and desire to help. As in any good relationship, it is just as important to give as to receive. This is especially true when the support network member is an individual and informal member of your network. **Reciprocity helps maintain good relationships.** Strengthening your network begins with being willing to go out of your way to help others (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Wellman & Frank, 2001).

Think about the supports in your personal network. Are you nurturing your current

friendships? If not, look for **ways to start enriching and enhancing your friendships**. Here are some tips (Demir et al., 2011):

- **Spend quality time together**
- **Stay positive**
- **Communicate openly**
- **Be supportive**

Please refer to page 2 of **Handout 1: Assessing and Strengthening My Personal Support Network**. Using the tips listed on the slide, work to identify ways you may be able to strengthen your relationships with the supports in your network. For example, spending time together; participating in events; lunch dates; volunteering; movie night; and spending quality time with long-distance friends by phone conversations. How can you find and spend quality time with your friends? You have 4 minutes to complete this exercise.

PAUSE for responses after each question.

Can I have a volunteer share some ideas?

Which ones were the easy ones, and which ones were more difficult?

Did you have similar or different ideas than others in the class?

Are you already doing some of these things with your informal supports?

How will these tips strengthen your relationships?

Which of these tips do you want to start doing when you get home?

SHOW Slide 12: Expand Your Personal Support Network

In addition to strengthening your current network, **here are some ways you may want to bring new people into your network. Everyone has different interests and different personalities, so you may feel more comfortable with some of the ideas than with others.**

Genuinely work to help others (without trying to get something in return)

- Be nice for the sake of being nice.
- People who work to help others actually receive more help in return but only if they are focused on the other person's needs and not their own goals (Crocker & Canevello, 2008).

Lean on geographically close friends and long-distance friends

- Long-distance friends are helpful for providing emotional support.

- Friends who live close are helpful for providing concrete help and emotional support (Weiner & Hannum, 2013).

Rely on friends who have empathy for others

- Friends who can see your perspective and understand what you are feeling tend to be more effective helpers (Verhofstadt et al., 2008).
- Try to surround yourself with friends who have empathy for those around them.

Go for the winning combo: Seek to develop new friendships and enrich current friendships

- Just focusing on making new friends or just trying to improve your current friendships can be problematic.
- It is the combination of working to make new friends and nurturing your current friendships that helps reduce loneliness (Stevens et al., 2006).

Remember that quality matters more than quantity

- The number of friends you have is not as important as the quality of friends you have (Gillespie et al., 2015).

Get a pet (unless caring for one would be a burden)

- Pets (particularly dogs) can help you meet your neighbors and get to know people (Wood et al., 2015).
- Sometimes, people receive support from friends they met through their pet.
- Of course, if taking care of a pet is too taxing, burdensome, or expensive, this would not be a worthwhile strategy for building your personal support network.

SHOW Slide 13: Take Care of Yourself

As you work to expand your support network, you should also focus on taking care of yourself (Shapiro et al., 2007). There are many ways to do this. Here are a few suggestions:

Take care of your physical and emotional health

- When you are battling physical illness or depression, you are likely to have less support in your life (Harknett & Sten Hartnett, 2011).
- Exercise, go for walks, join a gym, and stay up-to-date on your wellness check-ups.
- Get healthy and stay healthy to put yourself in the best position to meet new people and develop new friendships.

Avoid social media friends who post negative content and responses

- Individuals sometimes turn to social media outlets to make contact with supportive others. However, friends who post negative content and responses to your comments are not helpful for your emotional well-being (McCloskey et al.,

2015).

Be patient when waiting for friendships to develop

- New friendships do not always produce helpful support immediately; give your relationships time to develop.
- It can take six months to a year for people's ties to be close enough for support to become helpful (McCorkle et al., 2008).

PAUSE for responses after each question.

Do any of these strategies for expanding your network sound like they would work for you?

Which ones do you want to try?

Summary

SHOW Slide 14: Review of Objectives

Having a strong personal support network can make your life easier while also showing you how much your support means to others. A good way to develop a network is to give others as much support as you hope to receive (Bowen et al., 2001).

Let's see if we met our objectives:

1. **What is a personal support network?** *PAUSE for responses.*
   (Possible answers: a group of people you can depend on for help both on an everyday basis and in an emergency; individuals who will check with you and assist when needed)

2. **What are some examples of formal supports?** *PAUSE for responses.*
   (Possible answers: non-profit organizations; *private and public mental health agencies; low-income assistance agencies; thrift stores and other second-hand stores; departments of family services; church groups; medical assistance agencies and organizations; work place assistance agencies; mentors; supervisors; chaplains; youth and child care agencies; self-help groups; psychological health providers)*

3. **What are some examples of informal supports?** *PAUSE for responses.*
   (Possible answers: family; friends; neighbors; church members; associates, coworkers, anyone else you consider a source of support)

4. **What are the benefits of having a personal support network?** *PAUSE for responses.*

(Possible answers: increases self-esteem; expands level of functioning; helps with practical aspects of life (e.g., child care, transportation); improves mental and emotional well-being; reduces stress and stress-related illnesses; increases immunity (resistance to disease); provides companionship; supplies emotional support)

5. **How can you assess how supportive your personal support network is?** *PAUSE for responses.*
   (Possible answers: determine how many supportive relationships are in the network; ask if you are satisfied with the amount of time you socialize; determine how many close and/or dependable relationships you have with someone who lives close; ask if you spend time with someone who does not live with you; determine if you have a variety of supports and if they provide support for most of your needs)

6. **How can you strengthen your personal support network?** *PAUSE for responses.*
   (Possible answers: spend quality time together; stay positive; communicate openly; be supportive)

7. **How can you expand your personal support network?** *PAUSE for responses.*
   (Possible answers: get a pet; genuinely work to help others; lean on both geographically close and long-distance friends; rely on friends who have empathy for others; seek to develop new friendships and enrich current friendships; remember that quality matters more than quantity; take care of your physical and emotional health; avoid Facebook friends who post negative responses; be patient when waiting for friendships to develop)

SHOW Slide 15: Building and Strengthening Your Personal Support Network

Many times, you may feel you should be strong and should avoid asking for help because asking for help could be seen as a weakness. That is not the case. **A good personal support network is often the deciding factor in determining whether a situation becomes intolerable; whether emotional problems develop into serious mental health issues; and whether an event, like a separation due to a deployment, results in negative or positive long-term consequences** (Cohen & Wills, 1985). So, I strongly encourage all of you to get those personal support networks working for you!

Thank you, and please complete your evaluation for this class.

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