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2.3 Social Support

Authors

Stacy M. Phillips, MSW

Maria M. Rossi, PhD

Jon Parker, MAMFT, NCC, LPC, LMHC

Heidi Radunovich, PhD, Licensed Psychologist

Michelle A. Parisi, PhD RDN

Social Support

Social support is defined as supporting others by providing “psychological and material resources intended to benefit an individual’s ability to cope with stress” (Hsieh & Kramer, 2021, p.257).

There is a consensus among researchers that social support is a multidimensional construct that has emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and normative components (Hsieh & Kramer, 2021). There are different kinds of support, such as instrumental support (i.e., offering financial assistance or assisting with tasks), informational support (i.e., providing pertinent information to promote successful coping), emotional support (e.g., providing a social connection that acknowledges and legitimizes an individual’s identity and emotions that make them feel heard). This type of support has also been referred to as esteem support, which focuses on giving reassurance of self-worth. Appraisal support (i.e., constructive feedback) and network support (i.e., opportunities for socializing or belonging to a group) (Hsieh & Kramer, 2021).

Social support plays a vital role for everyone. The experiences of military life, including combat and other traumatic experiences, mark social support as crucial for a service member or Veteran. Tips for creating a positive social support system include cultivating current connections and being perceptive to fresh insights and perspectives, among other things (Figure 2.3a).

TIPS FOR

CREATING A POSITIVE SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEM

DETERMINE YOUR NEED
Think about the kind of help you require and the people who can give it to you most effectively.

BE PROACTIVE
Get outside and enjoy your community: join clubs, groups, or organizations that share your interests to make new friends.

CULTIVATE CURRENT CONNECTIONS
Keep in touch with people you already know and work to improve your connections. Reach out to friends, family and coworkers

BE RECEPTIVE TO FRESH INSIGHTS AND PERSPECTIVES
To grow your social network and meet new people, be open to fresh experiences and viewpoints.

PROVIDE SUPPORT TO OTHERS
Join a support group or look for peer support. Always keep in mind that a support network is a two-way street, so by offering help to others, you're more likely to receive it yourself.

Beard, 2021

Figure 2.3a
Suggestions for How to Create a Positive Social Support System
Source
Beard, 2021

When a Veteran or service member returns home, there is a culture change that comes with being a civilian. There are certain areas of concern that you should be aware of while working with Veterans (Figure 2.3b).



Figure 2.3b

Areas of Concern for Veterans and Service Members When Transitioning to Civilian Life

Source

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021

The military is a structured environment with a clear chain of command, which does not naturally exist outside the military (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021). Healthcare, housing, welfare, and social support are included in military service. Transitioning into a civilian community can be challenging without the military's supportive framework and social norms (Guthrie-Gower & Wilson-Menzfeld, 2022). Service members are part of a unit during military training and experiences of military life. Being part of a unit and connecting with other members of the unit can direct how a service member thinks, behaves, and associates with others. Losing contact with the military family (band of brothers) contributes to feelings of loneliness and abandonment (Guthrie-Gower & Wilson-Menzfeld, 2022). This loss can cause emotional and psychological distress (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021).

Different social norms between the military and civilian life can make the transition even harder. Veterans might feel that the language, humor and speaking openly felt very different between military and civilian life. On occasions, they may feel misunderstood, out of place or that they cannot share personal experiences (Guthrie-Gower & Wilson-Menzfeld, 2022).

Veterans and service members with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or major depressive disorder (MDD) may experience problems with parenting, family functioning, communicating with friends and family, establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries with the discipline of their children, and a range of other social and familial problems. Fortunately, research also suggests that increasing social support for Veterans and service members can act as a protective layer against the symptoms of PTSD/MDD and other mental health conditions (Gettings et al., 2022).

It can be hard for many Veterans to reach out for help, but finding a mentor or connecting with other advocates can greatly benefit them. Many mentorship programs are available, such as American Corporate Partners, Veteran eMentor, and the Vet Mentoring Training Program (*Five Reasons Military Veterans Need Mentors*. 2016). Other options include nonprofits or social organizations that can provide social support for Veterans and service members—[Veterans of Foreign Wars \(VFW\)](https://www.vfw.org/) (<https://www.vfw.org/>) or [The American Legion](https://www.legion.org/) (<https://www.legion.org/>).

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