



How to Get Support during Recovery

After a traumatic experience, it is often difficult to talk about it with others. This can leave you feeling isolated and alone. Finding ways to reach out to people close to you can help tremendously in your recovery. In *How to Get Support during Recovery*, I will provide very specific methods to help you get the help you need. Seeking social support can help you in a number of ways. Talking to someone can help you to reduce your painful feelings about the trauma and make the experience a little easier to understand. By talking to others, you can increase your "re-engagement" in life and, when you are ready, resume normal social activities. Finally, talking to someone can help you to find some meaning in the experience.

Introduction

The focus of these books is to help empower individuals to be able to more effectively cope with traumatic life events. These e-books are built from solid scientific evidence. This evidence has shown that when people know what to expect and how to best deal with different demands related to trauma, they are able to more effectively manage traumatic stress and find ways to grow personally from the experience. It is also true that everyone has a limit, so it is critical to know what the signs are that point to being completely “upside down” when dealing with trauma and when to seek outside support or professional help.

The books in this series are *The Way Ahead*, *How to Get Support During Recovery*, *What You Tell Yourself Matters*, *Coping With Trauma Reminders*, *What Not to Do!*, *Getting Professional Help: Step by Step*, and *Calming Skills: The Essentials of Managing Traumatic Stress*. We have provided options for you to purchase all of the books, as one large book, or individually depending on what your needs are.

The book presented here is focused on helping you to get the support from friends and family that you need to move forward through your recovery. We hope that you find it helpful.

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The Way Ahead

This book is designed for one thing and one thing only—as a practical guide to help you cope more effectively with an experience that has deeply affected your life, possibly turning it upside down. There is a series of seven books, each with its own focus on different aspects of trauma recovery.

Each book is a “pick up and go” workbook with specific exercises and tools to help you help yourself. I will be extremely practical and direct in this book. When people face life’s unpredictable tragedies, they do not have time for idle chat or psychobabble. We now turn to discuss how to gain specific skills in learning how to get support from friends and family to help to aid you in your recovery.

Getting Social Support



After a traumatic experience, it is often difficult to talk about it with others. This can leave you feeling isolated and alone. Finding ways to reach out to people close to you can help tremendously in your recovery. In this section, I will provide very specific methods to help you get the help you need.

Spending time with people who are supportive and understanding is an important way to heal from trauma. Seeking social support can help you in a number of ways. Talking to someone can help you to reduce your painful feelings about the trauma and make the experience a little easier to understand. Some people describe that talking to someone else gave them a new way to view the trauma, a different perspective. It can also help you find solutions or figure out a direction for your recovery. It can even help your mood. It can definitely help you feel less alone in your experience. By talking to others, you can increase your “re-engagement” in life and, when you are ready, resume normal social activities. Finally, talking to someone can help you to find some meaning in the experience.

To help you think about other ways that social support might help you, write down what you might gain from talking to someone about your feelings and about what happened:

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Types of Support. Getting help from people might depend on what you want and need. One person might be a great listener who can help you to talk about what happened without interrupting you. Another person is not a great listener, but is wonderful at getting you out of the house. A third person may provide very good advice and help you to set some goals for your recovery.

If you can, take a few moments to jot down the names of people you might seek out and the type of support you might want from each one. If it is hard to do this right now, that's ok, just come back to it later and try to find at least one person you might try to reach out to.

When you reach out to get support, you can do it in a number of ways. You might feel like telling the story of what happened to you and nothing more, or, you might only want to get advice on what you should do to move forward. You might want to talk about how you have been feeling and what this has been like for you. Taking some time to figure out what support you need right now can help you to target the right people to reach out to and decide how you want to connect.



Below is a list of things that you might be wanting. You can circle or check the ones that seem right for you. Choose as many as you like:

- Share my story of what happened.
- Talk about my feelings and the effect the event has had on me.
- Spend time with someone so that I feel less alone and isolated.
- Get help with my basic needs like transportation, cooking, cleaning, and childcare, paperwork, etc.
- Find someone to “get away” with and do something distracting.
- Seek out someone I trust for physical comfort like a hug.

Often after a trauma, many people find it difficult to reach out for help. If you are having a hard time seeking support from others, remember that you are not alone. If you are able to

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identify the barriers to getting support, it will be easier to get around them and get the help you need and deserve. The next section focuses on the different obstacles to seeking support.

Obstacles to Seeking Support. After a trauma, people often have unrealistic ideas about talking to others about what has happened. For example, you might think that talking to someone else will burden or depress that person, or, you will think that everyone around you “has enough to deal with without me adding to it.” One way to challenge this thought is to think about it in reverse. If someone you knew had a difficult experience and came to talk to you about it, how would you feel? Would you want to help? Would you feel burdened? Of course, there are times when others are going through critical life events that make it hard for them to focus on us, but in general, most people are willing to try to help.

People also talk about how they don’t want to share because others will think, “Why are they making such a big deal of this?” or, “Aren’t they over that by now?” Again, we often do not give people enough credit for their empathy. The real issue might be that you are afraid



of the way others will see you if you talked about what happened. Getting over this barrier is very important because it can open up a huge source of help. If you can learn to reach out a few times, you will find out that others do care about you and want to help. Obviously, if you have been in an abusive relationship, reaching out to someone who is selfish or abusive will not be helpful.

Remember that there are people who are loving, caring, and willing to listen to you. If you have a situation where you just don’t have people to count on right now, seeking out support through a professional counselor is an extremely useful thing to do. This person can provide the outlet for your thoughts and feelings giving you the support you need.

So, how do you overcome your barriers to getting some support? Focusing on the barriers themselves and finding strategies to move past them is very helpful.

Overcoming Obstacles. You might use your own writing as a way to move past your obstacles. Draw two columns on a piece of paper. Label the left column “Barriers,” and the right column “Ways Through.” Under the Barriers column, jot down the things that might get in your way as you seek support. Try to list as many barriers as you can.

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For each barrier you listed, look at whether the “Way Through” that barrier is to think about the situation differently. For example, if the barrier you list is “I think that others won’t understand,” perhaps your Way Through statement is “I can’t read minds and I won’t know if I don’t try.”

Barriers

Way Through

1. _____

1. _____

2. _____

2. _____

3. _____

3. _____

4. _____

4. _____

5. _____

5. _____

6. _____

6. _____

7. _____

7. _____

8. _____

8. _____

9. _____

9. _____

10. _____

10. _____

11. _____

11. _____

12. _____

12. _____

13. _____

13. _____

14. _____

14. _____

15. _____

15. _____

16. _____

16. _____

17. _____

17. _____

18. _____

18. _____

19. _____

19. _____

20. _____

20. _____

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Here is a list of statements that might help you to make your *Way Through* list.

- I should realize that people who care about me want to help, so it is useful to them if
- I allow them to help me.
- I can let myself off the hook and realize that I don't have to do this alone.
- When I get upset, it is ok if others see me that way. I don't have to be perfect.
- If I try to share with someone now, it will be easier to get support later. I should take this one-step at a time.
- I should discover if I am angry and pushing others away. This discovery may help me to lessen these feelings and make it easier to move towards people again.
- I should make myself spend time with others instead of remaining isolated.
- If I talk to others about my feelings about what happened I am moving forward in my healing.
- I should remember that I am not the only one in the world to deal with this type of situation. Other people can relate to my difficult experience.
- I should develop new methods of coping with my strong feelings so that I can reach out to others more effectively.

Qualities to Look for in a Support Person. When choosing a support person, it is important to reflect on the type of person you might need. Most people are casual when it comes to making friends. We meet people here or there, strike up a conversation and start spending time with them. This is fine when life is going smoothly, but when a crisis hits, you need to be more thoughtful about the type of person you seek out. For example, is it important to you that the person is empathetic and a good listener? Is it important that the person is trustworthy and won't break your confidence? Is it most important that the person is funny, light hearted, and helps you do fun things again?



Who will be the best suited to help you? In the next section, I provide a list to help you think about all of the different types of social support resources available to you.

Examples of People in your Daily Life:

- Spouse or partner
- Family member
- Good friend

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Other Helpers:

- Priest, Rabbi, or other clergy
- Doctor or nurse
- Counselor
- Support group

People You Might Talk To. When recovering from a trauma it might seem logical that we would want to talk to someone we know from our daily lives—the person who knows us best. However, sometimes it helps to talk to someone who doesn't know our lives at all (e.g., a counselor). Think about which of these strategies fits best for you. Then, jot down the names of people you could reach out to in the next few days or weeks.

Talking to a Professional. Depending on your trauma or the level of distress you have been experiencing, it might be very helpful to seek out professional assistance. There are many different kinds of helping professionals (e.g., priest, minister, rabbi, guru, doctor, nurse, psychologist, or counselor). If you have had significant distress related to your trauma that is making it hard for you to work, causing you to have problems at home, or affecting your social life, and it has lasted a relatively long time (more than a month) you should strongly consider getting support from a professional.



You should contact a professional helper immediately if you are experiencing the difficulties listed below for more than approximately a month after your trauma:

- Are you feeling bummed, sad, or depressed most or all the time?
- Are you feeling anxious or having distressing thoughts most or all the time?

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- Are you having continuing problems with work or meeting your life responsibilities?
- Are you increasing your use of alcohol or street drugs, or using them to cope?
- Are you feeling like you want to hurt yourself or kill yourself or someone else?

You should know that you don't have to be feeling completely overwhelmed or have any of the above problems to benefit from talking to a professional. Often these relationships are very helpful and rewarding because you do not have to worry about how the professional is feeling—both of you can focus on you! This is not the case in the rest of our relationships where we must be supportive of the other person as well.

Things to Talk About. Deciding what to talk about ahead of time isn't necessary to get



support, but knowing what you would like to discuss can help you to understand your needs and look for the right type of person to help you. Your needs can change over time and you are the best judge of what you need and when. At this point, try to jot down what you want to talk about in relation to your trauma recovery (if anything).

Some examples are: What happened during the trauma, thoughts I have had since the trauma, feelings related to what happened, stressful reactions I have been having like nightmares, flashbacks etc., how I have been trying to cope with what has happened, what I need from others like love or physical comfort.

The very nature of a trauma is that it is very hard to think about or deal with. One of the ways people try to cope is to avoid the subject all together. The next section focuses on how avoiding the topic is not helpful and what you can do about it.

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Avoidance and Getting Support. Trauma can make it difficult to talk about what happened. Just thinking about the experience can be quite distressing for some people. In some ways, this is what makes an experience traumatic rather than just stressful. Our natural, but not helpful, way of coping with this distress is to avoid thinking about or feeling things related to the event. When we do this, we close up and are unable to talk to others about our experience. If we continue to do this for a long time, it slows our recovery.

Confronting your memory of the experience by talking about it is a crucial part of recovery. You should try to do this if you can. If it is too difficult to do this your own, you should get some professional help. Over time, you will want to develop a balance between processing or talking about the trauma and moving forward with your life. One measure of how you are doing is if you find yourself either not talking at all about the trauma and it's been six months afterward or you are still talking constantly about it, you should seek outside help to make the process go more smoothly.

Starting to get Support. As you think about getting support, you might consider writing out a plan. Your plan should be as specific as possible. For example, you might think about the first person you would talk to, when and where you would like to talk, how you would approach the subject (such as talking about more practical things first), asking if this is the right time for them to talk about this issue, etc. Here is an example.

Mary recently experienced a terrible tragedy. She was in a car accident where a loved one was killed. She decided to try to open up to a friend, Sherry, during one of their weekly meetings over coffee. Mary decided to bring up the trauma on the following Thursday at 3 p.m. when she and Sherry normally meet. Before they met, Mary wrote down how she was going to approach the topic by first talking about how she has been doing and what has been happening in her life. Then, she would ask Sherry, “would you be willing to talk with me about what happened in my car accident?” As part of her plan, Mary listed four main points to talk about, including her memory of what happened, how she has been feeling since the accident, the most difficult part of her recovery, and ways Sherry might help her (something really tangible like driving her son to soccer or just being there as a listener). On the day of the coffee, Mary had her list to help her when she began to talk to Sherry.



To help you make your plan, fill in the blanks below:

1. I would like to talk to _____ (1 = Can't Do, 10=I can do)

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2. The best place for me to talk to him/her would be _____ (1 = Can't Do, 10=I can do)
3. The best time to bring up my story would be _____ (1 = Can't Do, 10=I can do)
4. The most important things I would like to tell them would be (1 = Can't Do,10=I can do)
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
 4. _____
5. The thing I am most worried about or afraid of when I think about talking to someone is: _____ (1 = Can't Do, 10= I can do)

Now, how confident are you that you can manage each of these steps?

6. Write a number from 1 to 10 (1 = Can't Do and 10 = I can do).

The steps that have higher numbers beside them should make you feel good. If you listed some steps with lower numbers (or possibly all of the steps), it is good to know this now because you can practice before you approach this person. One way to practice is to do some “positive thinking.” We call this positive imagery or success imaging. Close your eyes and picture yourself successfully talking to someone about your experience or even making a call to talk to someone. You should imagine that you finish the conversation and feel better because you got some things off your chest and you felt heard.

When you talk to others about what happened, the first step is usually the hardest. Whether you choose to talk to a therapist or a friend, often people will say that the first five minutes was hard, but then it felt better. Recognizing that this is the most difficult part may help you to take that first step. The next section focuses on how sometimes after trauma we push people away due to our intense feelings. We provide some suggestions for avoiding this.

Coping With Strong Emotions without Pushing Others Away. After a trauma, many people feel wounded and like a wounded animal, they push others away trying to protect themselves from more pain or hurt. This can make you feel isolated and alone and will probably make your recovery slower. For others to be able to help you, you need to find ways to cope with your intense feelings rather than shutting down and pushing others away.

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One-step you can take is to increase your awareness of when you are pushing others away. For example, you may be criticizing others for the way they are responding by saying things like, “You are not being helpful to me at all. You don’t care!” Or you may become extremely angry and yell—saying hurtful things, becoming demanding or expecting that others fix your problems for you, or telling people that they just cannot ever understand what this is like for you.



Here are some skills you can learn to manage your intense feelings and actions:

1. Learn relaxation skills to help reduce the intensity of your feelings (see the book *Calming Skills: The Essentials of Managing Traumatic Stress*).
2. Take responsibility for your own feelings and try not to blame others for the way you are feeling.
3. When you are angry, take a deep breath and count to 10, take a walk, or do what works for you to help reduce your anger before you explode at others.
4. Seek professional help so that you can let out your feelings with someone who is there to help you and is able to manage your intensity.

The next section talks about how people might not respond in a way that is very helpful to you and what you might do about it if that happens.

Unhelpful Responses. Sometimes when you reach out to for support, people are not able to respond to you in a helpful way. This is why it is important for you to understand what you need first and communicate that to others as best you can.

From the following list, choose the responses you think would be unhelpful if you opened up to someone:

- The person seems too busy or distracted to talk
- The person gets upset when I talk and I don’t want to be a burden.
- The person just doesn’t get it.
- The person begins to shift or act uncomfortable when I talk about the experience.

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- The person wants to find solutions and move on without understanding my feelings about what has happened.
- The person keeps telling me how I should feel.
- The person interrupts me or tries to change the subject when I talk about the experience.
- The person criticizes how I am trying to cope.

The best way to deal with people who might not be responding in a helpful way is to share what you need rather than shutting down. Of course, some people are going to be more responsive than others are, so you want to figure out who will be most responsive to your needs.

When your support person does respond to you in an unhelpful way, sharing your needs does not have to become a confrontation. For example you might say “I really appreciate being able to talk to you about this. What I need from you right now is for you to listen to me. I’m not ready to try to fix things right now, I just need to vent.” This will be extremely helpful for the listener. Remember, you cannot read people’s minds and neither can they.

It is also true that in trauma recovery, there might be times when you feel that others just do not understand. That is ok. Your own experience is unique and so your journey will be unique in some ways, too. Sometimes, this is the way people find new meaning in their lives or new ways to think about things, because the challenge is to find your own way to move forward. It is also important to remember that when you feel this way it does not mean that others don’t care about you or don’t love you.

The following points should help:

1. Remember that others do care, but that it might be hard for them to show it or for you to accept their help right now.
2. Make attempts to be clear with others about what you need.
3. Express your appreciation to others for what they are doing, how they are listening, and how it has helped you.



Setting Limits. Trauma affects entire systems of people from the traumatized individual in the center to the family members, close friends, and even communities surrounding them. For example, the events of September 11, 2001 affected the entire nation in different ways.

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Think about this as the ripples that develop on a pond when you toss in a pebble. The ripples get larger and larger as they move out from the center, but the ripples have less energy at each more distant circle.

In much the same way, people connected to you even distantly can be affected by your trauma. They may approach you to talk about it. There are times when you will not want to talk because you are still working through things in your own mind. In these situations, you will need to learn how to set limits with others about sharing. You might say, “I’m just not ready to talk about this right now, but I really appreciate your concern. I may want to talk about it later.” Alternatively, you might say, “I’m burned out talking about what happened. Can we talk about something else?”

In addition, you might feel better at times by reaching out to help someone you know might also be hurting, either from your trauma or from something entirely different. This topic is turned to next.

Supporting Others. This section is about finding ways to support others who might be affected by your trauma. As I described earlier, traumas are like ripples in a pond where those closest to the center are the most affected by the experience. For example, your family and friends will have their own strong reactions to your traumatic experience. Often, people who have experienced a trauma feel better when they are able to reach out and help someone else. They feel better when they do not always have to be the center of the attention. You need to find a balance between getting the support you need and helping to support others.



When helping others, keep in mind the list you developed earlier in this book about what you need from someone when you are seeking support. Most likely, others need the same things. They need you to listen, recognize their distress or pain, reassure them that they are coping the best they can, spend time with them, provide advice if they ask you, and give physical comfort (a hug) if appropriate. Of course, this depends on your own level of distress and how much you are personally processing at the moment. Don’t expect yourself to be out helping other people, especially early after your trauma. But, if you can do this as you heal, it can be helpful.

Dealing with Problem People. Talking with supportive people can be very helpful in your recovery, just as talking with unsupportive people can be very destructive. If you are having a hard time with someone who is trying to be supportive, you should consider whether the

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person is “toxic” and may be making your recovery harder. The following list of negative responses can help you to decide if you are dealing with a toxic person.

- The person is telling you that what happened to you was your fault.
- The person is criticizing or judging you for what happened.
- The person refuses to listen when you tell them how their behavior is affecting you.
- The person is using drugs and alcohol to cope.

If you have “toxic” people in your life, you need some skills to deal with them. The key is to set very specific boundaries. First, limit your time with them. Second, have a good friend or other supportive person with you when you must deal with toxic individuals. Third, realize that your own needs are important and that you need to take care of yourself first, so don’t spend time trying to make a toxic person feel better. Fourth, do not discuss the trauma or other emotionally sensitive issues. Do not seek support from a toxic person—you will only be disappointed!

Summary. Getting support to help you in your recovery is extremely valuable. Combined with:

1. Managing trauma triggers (see *Coping With Trauma Reminders*)
2. Gaining relaxation skills (see *Calming Skills: The Essentials of Managing Traumatic Stress*)
3. Dealing with negative thinking patterns (see *What You Tell Yourself Matters*)
4. Avoiding unhelpful coping (see *What Not to Do!*)
5. Getting professional help (see *Getting Professional Help: Step-by-Step*)



These books can help you to find your way on your journey to recovery. Remember that how you approach your recovery makes a big difference. Setting recovery goals, increasing your coping skills, and believing in your ability to succeed are all critically important.