

Helping a Peer Develop Their Natural Supports

INTRODUCTION



Natural Supports are people in your life who support you without expectations of something in return. Examples of natural supports can include people like your family, friends, chosen family, mentors, neighbors, coworkers, teachers, and other people you naturally connect with throughout your life. However, even though natural supports are non-transactional, non-judgemental relationships, like any relationship, it takes work, intention, and kindness to keep it growing and throwing. Natural supports are no different!

Young adults living with a mental health concern may need extra support in identifying, building, and maintaining relationships with the natural supports in their life. Using their own natural support network, youth peer support specialists can role model this process for the peers they work with.

Included in this issue brief is information on:

- How to develop your own personal network of Natural Supports
- How to help a peer develop their network of Natural Supports
- How to help a peer improve their existing Natural Support network

HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR NETWORK OF NATURAL SUPPORTS



There is no wrong way to develop your network! Every individual is unique and every person has different needs. Here are a few examples from Youth MOVE National staff on how we found some of our most important non-relative natural supports:

"I purposely went to a small college because I wanted small class sizes (averaged around 15-20 people per class). Because of this, I made really close connections with some of my professors; one of which I'm still in contact with today. She has been an important mentor and she really GETS me."

"I had a school nurse become a mother figure to me. I ended up best friends with her daughter, but she always took care of me emotionally and physically and is one of the greatest people I know."

“My grandma's best friend has been a mentor all my life. She wrote my letters of recommendation for colleges, always reaches out to keep up with me, discusses books with me. She has been and always will be a great influence in my life.”

“My friend's Mom gave me a place to live when I was homeless. She helped get me connected to resources, showed me how to apply for jobs and helped me find my first apartment. We are still good friends to this day, and we go to lunch often.”

“I have a mentor that I met through one of my first jobs, she was my bosses boss. We exchanged numbers one day and have kept in touch ever since. She has helped me with college and career advice. She is respected in her own career, and we have a great connection.”

“I was able to get a full tuition waiver through my Community College's Civic Leadership program because of the volunteer work I had been doing. I was doing that volunteer work because I believed in youth voice and the potential to make change. I met many people and friends through doing that volunteer work and being a part of the Community College's Leadership program that became my good friends and natural supports.”

“Chosen family is something you see in the LGBTQ+ community, more particularly in the drag performer community. Personally, I have a drag mother who has been an essential support to my drag persona and career. Because of this connection, I have other supports with a similar stage name all over the country who can give advice, get an out-of-town booking, or donate to my pageantry package.”

We share these examples with the hope of illustrating that natural supports can be found in many different, and often unexpected settings.

We recommend you take time to make an inventory of the people currently in your life that you turn to for any type of support and encouragement. Take time to consider the amount of effort you are investing in these relationships and share your appreciation with those who take time to be one of your natural supports.

The Mental Health Foundation in the UK has published a great resource titled the, “[Top Tips on Building and Maintaining Healthy Relationships](#).” This link is a printable PDF that you can use in your personal life and professional work with peers.

Identify Where You Still Need Support

Identify where you still need support: *What are your goals? What do you need to get there? What do you currently need support with? How can you ask other people to support/help you to obtain these goals?*

One strategy you can use to identify where you need additional support is to use the 8 dimensions of wellness to create your own holistic wellness plan that includes all aspects of your life. There are many different worksheets that use the 8 dimensions of wellness- here are a few of our favorites.

- **From Virginia Prevention Works** - [Dimensions of Wellness Worksheet](#)
- **From the University of New Hampshire** - [Wellness Wheel Assessment](#)
 - The Wellness Wheel can be used as a tool to check in and discover your overall wellness to better understand what is going well and what may be challenging in the moment. It can also help you assess choices or situations that impact your overall well-being. Focusing on all 8 dimensions of wellness aims to improve overall quality of life and healthy habits through personal decision-making.

These are two great resources to share with peers!

- **From Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration** - [Creating a Healthier Life a Step-by-Step Guide to Wellness \(with worksheets\)](#)

Once you have identified where you need additional support, identify who can be this natural support to you- are they currently in your life? Do you need to connect to someone new?

Skip to next section if they are already in your life

Making New Connections

Natural supports can be found in a variety of places. They can be found in settings such as: volunteer groups, schools, and workplaces. They could also exist in smaller settings special interests groups, nonprofits, or faith-based communities. Additionally, they may be present in online, virtual, or in-person spaces as well. Don't be afraid to connect with new people!

When the Relationship is Ready, Ask for Support

You can work to address challenges in your time, energy, and/or lack of resources by asking others for help using direct, time limited requests.

Asking for help can be hard, but try to take time to explain to them how this will help you to reach a goal in your life. Also be prepared for them to say no. Continue this process until you find someone that is able to support you with your specific request.

If you are finding it hard to ask others for help, you are certainly not alone! Here are two articles on the subject:

- [Read This if You Freeze Up When It’s Time to Ask for Help by Kara Cutruzzula](#)
- [How to Ask for Help without Making it Weird by Heidi Grant](#)

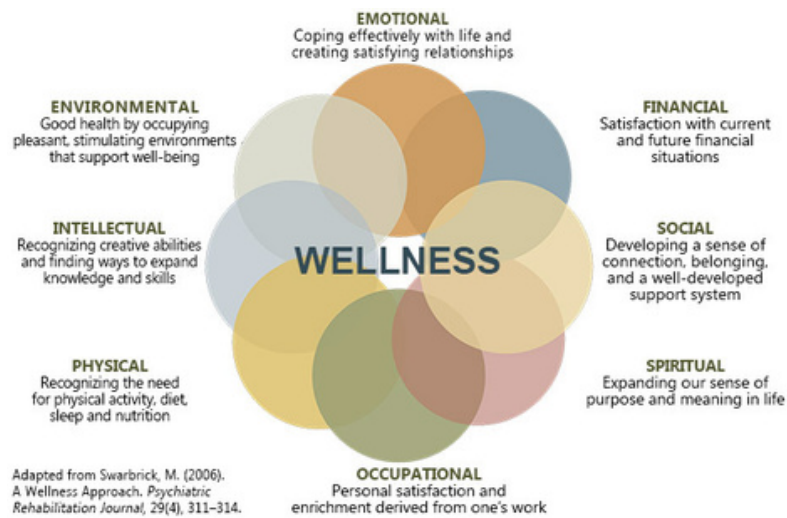
When making a request from someone, it is important to remain flexible. A time-limited request means you have a timeline of how long you will need this support from someone, or a clear idea of how much time and/or energy it will take. Don’t forget to show appreciation and give back to this person your own time and energy when you can!

AS A YOUTH PEER SUPPORT SPECIALIST, HELPING OTHERS TO GROW THEIR NATURAL SUPPORTS



For those working as youth peer support specialists, you can use the process and resources linked above to have conversations with the peers you are working with. It is important to listen to your peer’s values and goals for each of the 8 dimensions of wellness.

You can provide a safe, creative space for them to express who in their life can help them to obtain goals and maintain relationships in each of these 8 domains of wellness. Many people feel pressure looking at all 8 domains at once, it is best practice to do this slowly and overtime. Please note, not all of your supports should be natural supports.



Graphic from [Mapping Mental Health: Dr. Swarbrick & The Eight Wellness Dimensions](#)

HELPING PEERS TO IMPROVE THEIR EXISTING NATURAL SUPPORTS



Family Conversations

Young adults who live with a mental health condition may have strained family connections. It can be helpful to have a Peer Specialist to help a young adult express their voice in a conversation with their parents, siblings or other important family connections that they have. A youth peer support specialist can support a young adult by practicing having conversations where they ask for support in the form of a goal-oriented desire, they can be present with the young adult if preferred during a conversation. They can also meet after the conversation to debrief and share feelings and different perspectives of what was said. It is not the Peer Specialist's role to mediate family conversations. Their role is to hold a space and time for the conversation, in preparation and partnership with the young adult. It is important to honor what a young adult says and to respect what they want for their own life.

Reciprocal Relationships and Respecting Boundaries

Relationships require good, consistent communication. They also require trust and respecting others' boundaries. Youth peer support specialists can support those they work with by holding space to talk about how mental health concerns can impact relationships. As a youth peer support specialist, it is important to be aware how your own mental health concerns may affect communication and trust within your relationships. Whether you are easily affected or not affected at all, taking time to reflect is an important step of being a youth peer support specialist.

CONCLUSION

Natural supports are a great part of life and could be a fun conversation to have with peers. Find ways to incorporate creativity and inspiration in your conversations. Building and sustaining these impactful relationships are critical skills for any youth peer support specialist to have and model for their peers. Consider reflecting on your own natural support system in order to maximize potential capacity in your roles and relationships. We encourage you to explore and delve deeper into natural supports using the resources provided throughout this Issue Brief.

If you would like to request technical assistance and consultation from Youth MOVE National, you can submit your request [HERE!](#)