

Self-directed support

Friendships and relationships

Friendships and relationships are essential to our well-being. It is human nature to want the company of others.

This fact sheet tells you how you can build better friendships and relationships for yourself, the people you love and care about and for those who don't yet have anyone in their life.



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The basic facts

The essence of human nature is to be in the company of others. Companionship, fellowship and connection are essential to our well-being.

We all need people in our lives – be they people we tell our secrets to, share good times with, support us when things go wrong, or who simply keep a watchful eye out for us. Although there is no standard number of friends or relationships people should have, what we know is that having other people in our lives makes life worth living.

Studies done over two decades involving more than 37,000 people show that social isolation – the sense that you have nobody with whom you can share your private feelings or have close contact with – doubles the chances of sickness or death.

Extract from ‘Emotional Intelligence’ by Daniel Goleman

More information

Looking at your connections

A good way to start thinking about your friendships and relationships is to consider who you know and what connections you have. You can use the following diagram to do a very simple exercise.

In each circle, just fill in the names of people in you or your family member’s life.

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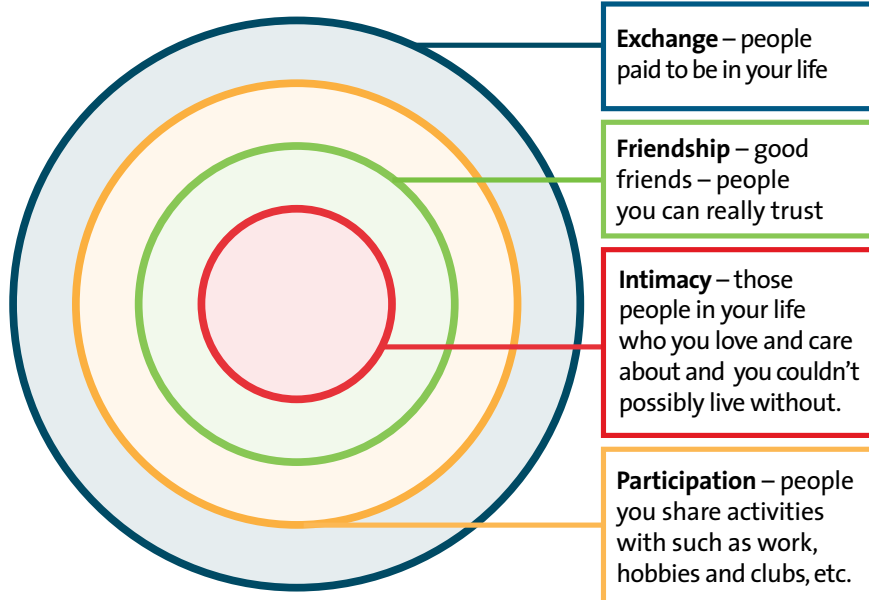
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The red circle is the circle of intimacy. This is where you put people who really love and care about you or your family member.

The green circle is the circle of friendship. This is where you put friends. Different people define friendship in different ways, but usually friends are reliable and the friendship is balanced and mutual.

The orange circle is the circle of participation. This is where you include people involved in you or your family member's life because you do things together. This could be attending college, a club, a day centre or work. Some of the people inside the participation circle can move into the friendship circle over time. Think about any friends you have and where you met them. It's usually through a shared pastime, such as work, a night-school class or a leisure activity.

The blue circle is the circle of exchange. This is where you include everyone paid to be in you or your family member's life. Examples are support staff, GPs, dentists, hairdressers or your postman. You probably don't think much about these people, but they are often essential.

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Outcomes

When going through this exercise you may discover that filling in the intimacy circle wasn't too difficult, but the participation circle is harder. Often people within these two circles may also have disabilities and support needs. Such people can, of course, be immensely valuable. But what it can indicate is that often friendships can't flourish because they are restricted to that one environment. When you really reflect deeply, the last exchange circle gets full of people. This is because when you need support you often have many people paid to support you.

What we need to do is think about how we meet people. For most of us this is through participating in an activity when you meet a variety of people – some you will like, some you won't, and you will get on so well with others that they will move into your friendship circle. Think of as many activities or pastimes as possible that you or your family member could do in order to meet more people.

Building up your connections

- Going to the same place at the same time on a weekly basis. Maybe a local cafe, library or pub. You may start to see others who are there on the same day too and this could spark a conversation.
- Join a group, a club or an organisation. Look on your council website, find information at your local library or visit www.shop4support.com for ideas.
- Peer support – go to a gathering of people in a similar situation like a self-help or support group.
- Take up a hobby and meet others with similar interests – there are loads of ideas if you do an Internet search on 'take up a hobby'.
- Look up options for volunteering. There are many available and a good starting point would be to contact www.do-it.org.uk which offers thousands of opportunities; www.direct.gov.uk also has lots of suggestions, or you could visit your local Council for Voluntary Service or Volunteer Centre.

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- Some people set up their own opportunities for volunteering by getting involved in doing something for the local community or setting up a Time Bank see www.timebanking.org.uk

Circles of support

A circle of support is a group of people who are invited to come together and meet regularly to offer support and advice to someone who has a learning disability. It is a way of sharing concerns and plans for the future with someone who needs extra help in areas of their life.

The circle should include people who know and care about the person who needs support, service providers, and experts in areas of relevance such as education, housing or employment.

It is very helpful to have one person who will take responsibility for facilitating the meetings, keeping everyone focused on the task, and someone to take notes.

The 'circle members' will spend time listening to the person and their family/friends, getting to know the person's likes and dislikes, interests and talents, hopes and ambitions. They will then help the person to discuss and explore the things they want to achieve, by gathering relevant information, making telephone enquiries, writing letters etc.

A group of committed people working together to solve a problem or explore a dream is a very powerful thing!

A circle can be difficult to set up on your own. But receiving help through projects such as 'Our Futures' could work for you.

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What is Our Futures?

Our Futures is a programme run by In Control and Embrace Wigan and Leigh.

For many people the support and expertise of others who have been in a similar situation is key to supporting them positively through change. We often call this 'peer support'. Enabling these approaches also helps to increase the social capital of local communities.

The Our Futures programme is a tried-and-tested, family-led project based on 20 years of work by PLAN in Canada. Our Futures was set up to address two major concerns of family carers:

'What happens when I am gone?'

'How can I support my relative to have a really good life?'

Our Futures nurtures and prepares families to, in the first instance, make a difference to their own lives and then to gain peace of mind about the future of the person they care for. Together families may form a group and an overarching circle of support with a commitment that, should something happen to any of them, other group members will continue offering support to an individual's loved one.

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How long do we wait for the invite?

Debbie, a single mum, attended an Our Futures presentation and took information away with her. Four months later she got in contact with us. She wanted a circle for her son, Mark, and daughter, Sarah, both of whom have a learning disability, because she was concerned about how they would cope if either she died or something happened to her which left her unable to support them. Both Mark and Sarah lived with Debbie at the family home and had no plans to move out. If anything were to happen, they would be able to live together without support, only needing someone to pop in occasionally to check on them. Debbie's main concern was that should anything happen to her, Mark and Sarah wouldn't be able to afford to continue living at the home. Debbie felt that if they were required to move they would be vulnerable and open to financial abuse.

At first, Debbie struggled to think of anyone who would be willing to join her circle. However, after spending time with a coordinator, she came up with five names. To date, one circle meeting has been held. One circle member said they had, in fact, been waiting to be invited to help, but felt uncomfortable approaching Debbie directly. In turn, Debbie said that she did not ask for help in case people presumed she couldn't cope. At the circle meeting, day-to-day issues were discussed and Debbie explained that while she had tried to resolve particularly pressing issues, she was still struggling. Although it had been the first circle meeting, three members agreed to take on tasks to help the family. All of Debbie's pressing issues have now been addressed.



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What about people whose family are not interested?

Carly is 22. Throughout her life, her care has been provided by the state and her family. Carly has a moderate learning disability and attended a special school. But her support needs were heightened by a chaotic family life. Carly spent much of her childhood moving between council respite units and her home. When Carly turned 18, her family suffered harassment, which eventually led to the family separating. From here, the only option was for Carly to live in a hostel with 36 other people, all of whom were much older.

Carly was extremely unhappy. She didn't know many people and her family no longer wanted contact with her. Having known Carly for several years, we felt the best thing would be set up a circle for her in order to provide help through her crisis. The circle consisted of people who knew Carly, and its first achievement was to secure direct payments and manage them so Carly could have quality time with personal assistants outside of the hostel. Eventually the circle managed to support Carly to move into her own home, and it has played a critical role in ensuring she can access and contribute to her community.

Four years on, the circle is as strong as ever. The circle is helping Carly search for an alternative place to live, and is supporting her to make the right decisions. Circle members assist Carly in making choices on how to spend her money, and they have enabled her to meet up again with her mother. Carly's life is certainly not resolved, but the circle has her vision at the heart of everything it does.

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on the In Control website:
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Further information can also be found at:

shop4support

www.shop4support.com

Embrace Wigan and Leigh

www.embracewiganandleigh.org.uk

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About the In Control and Me project

A three-year project to produce accessible information for everyone who wants to direct their own support, funded by the National Lottery through the BIG Lottery Fund. You can find out more at www.mencap.org.uk/incontrol or www.in-control.org.uk/icandme