



## Social Support or Team U

**Who is on this journey with you? Who can you count on? Who ya gonna call?**

I have been pretty lucky on my road trips and rarely had problems. A flat tire once I think that's it (why I drive a newer car!). And it's why I have AAA Roadside Assistance, I want to have support if something goes wrong. So like AAA (or like the Ghost Busters reference above) who you can call if you need to? When the road gets rough or you have a metaphoric or literal breakdown, who can help you? We don't do this journey (life or cancer) alone. We are interconnected to and interdependent with many people on many levels at all times- jobs, families, life in general. We need other people. We absolutely can't do this by ourselves. Everything we do involves someone else. Driving our car, eating food, getting gas, turning on the water faucet, wearing clothes, all of these basic things require multiple unseen people who have participated in the making of the things whose use we take for granted everyday....these people support the underpinnings of our life. Then there are the people we physically interact with at work, social organizations, transportation, medical facilities, sports events, spiritual communities...the list goes on, I think you get the picture. We do not live in a vacuum....every single day our life is intertwined with and interdependent on hundreds of other people. And yet, how often do we really think about how much we need each other and how we play our part in this big tapestry?

As humans, we are actually hard-wired for interaction and relationships with others. Some people like more interaction-the extroverted social butterfly comes to mind; some less-the introverted recluse, for example. Wherever

you are on that continuum, “social support” encompasses much more than mere interaction and doesn’t care at all if you are extroverted or introverted!

According to Professor Jason Saterfield, University of California, San Francisco,  
“The most commonly used definition of social support is that it is the perception and actuality that one is cared for, has assistance available from other people, and is part of a supportive social network.”

### **So what is so important about social support?**

“Social support, whether from a trusted group or valued individual, has been shown to reduce the psychological and physiological consequences of stress, and may enhance immune function. Social networks, whether formal (such as church or social club) or informal (meeting with friends) **provide a sense of belonging, security and community.**” It ties in with some of our basic “needs” of love, safety and belonging. Research of the legendary ‘Blue Zones’, (the areas with the highest numbers and concentrations of centenarians and longest lived people) have demonstrated the overwhelming benefit of social support...it can help you live longer!!

In fact, **social support is now really proven to be a literal life-saver.** People that are supported by close relationships with friends, family or fellow members of church, work or other groups are less vulnerable to ill health and premature death. Studies have shown individuals afflicted with leukemia, breast cancer, prostate cancer and heart disease have higher survival rates if they have extensive social support.

According the NIH (National Institute of Health), “*Numerous studies indicate social support is essential for maintaining physical and psychological health. The harmful consequences of poor social support and the protective effects of good social support in mental illness have been well documented. Social support may moderate genetic and environmental vulnerabilities and confer resilience to stress...*”

## **In a nutshell, Good support=Better physical, emotional and mental health!**

### **Benefits of Social Support**

- \*Improved physical health \*Greater resilience to stress\* Improved self-esteem
- \*Enhances quality of life \*provides a buffer against adverse life events
- \*Feeling of security \*Improved mental well-being\* Greater life satisfaction

**There are 4 well established categories of social support: ( and I’ve added a couple of my own)**

**Emotional Support:** This is the support that comes to mind when people talk about support. It is about nurturance. It refers to demonstrations of empathy, love, concern and caring. Emotional support bolsters one's self-esteem and confidence. An Emotional Supporter serves as a confidante, offering acceptance, care and understanding. This is someone who will listen and give us a shoulder to cry on. They can walk beside us, bearing witness with no judgement and holding space for us to just be. Trust, is a cherished ingredient of the Emotional Supporter. They allow us to be vulnerable and protect that vulnerability.

**Informational Support:** This refers to assistance of knowledge, information, and skills. The Informational Supporter is someone to bounce ideas off of and provide advice. We can go to them when we need information on where to go for resources, get a different point of view or learn a skill. We all know "fixers"-they want to fix the situation or problem and usually have some great ideas. The Informational Supporter is very useful when trying or learning something new and many times is a paid professional...coach, mentor, teacher, etc.

**Practical or Instrumental Support:** This is very tangible support. It is concrete assistance in helping us do or get things done. The Practical Supporter AKA the Task Master (in a good way! They truly master tasks! ) might not be good at emotional support, or might not be a good problem solver or advice giver, but they can help cook dinner, clean house, drive us places, run errands etc. The Practical Supporter might also help with gifts of money or food.

**Companion Support:** This has to do with companionship, feeling connected and belonging. The Companion Supporter is someone whose company you enjoy, but might not be who you necessarily tell all of your problems to. This is someone who is willing and able to spend time with you. This is the person who calls for no reason and you feel connected. This can also be someone whose energy you love or thrive on. You feel happier or more energized just being with them. (Pets also can be fabulous Companion Supporters-even if they don't call that often!)

**And here are the 2 I've added....drum roll please...**

**Shared Experience Support:** After my cancer diagnosis, I realized that I had all the above support and was still missing something....I still felt a bit alone. Some level of support just wasn't there and I realized it was because none of my team understood what I was going through. When we are in a frightening place...loss of a loved one, addiction, depression, disease, or a transition in life like new parenthood, retirement, divorce, new empty nester, etc, it is comforting and "supportive" to connect with others who are facing or have faced a similar situation and truly get what we are going through.

**Spiritual Support:** Where and how do you find spiritual support? For some, it is from a traditional, religious institution, leader or faith. For others, it can come from another place of peace and wonder..for me, it is nature. I find the most spiritual connection to nature and from nature. Think about where spiritual fulfillment comes for you.

**So....your journey (life and cancer) will be filled with many opportunities for others to help/assist/support you or be on your 'team'. Let's figure out your Team U. Who can you count on to help you and for what type of help?**

Many of the people in your life can provide social support. These can include your parents, siblings, spouse/ significant other, adult children, other family members, friends, acquaintances, co-workers, neighbors, paid health professionals, support groups, churches or other spiritual organizations, hobby or other leisure or recreational organizations or contacts. Different people in your life may provide different kinds of support, **it is unlikely that one person can (or should) provide all the support you need**, i.e. one person should not provide emotional, companion, informational, practical and shared experience in the same support instance. Even if they can, it would be better to spread the support basket around.

## Hmmm...

When I was going through cancer, I made the mistake of (not) thinking and assuming that my wonderful husband would provide all the support I needed...after all, I reasoned, he is my very best friend, closest confidante and life partner...my soul mate, for pete's sake! 'He should know what I need (and provide it!)'. I was forgetting that he was going through this too and had his own needs. It was frustrating, hurtful and unrealistic for both of us, not to mention very unhealthy. And frankly it added unnecessary stress and pressure on him, on our relationship and to an already stressful situation. (Compound that with the fact that I also had trouble asking others for support. I did not want to burden anyone else because, I reasoned, everyone is going through something and they don't need my problems too. Does this sound familiar?). Thankfully, we got through it... he loved me through it all and because of his unwavering love, I was able to step back and examine my actions, misconceptions and very unrealistic expectations. As I have heard from many sources, "Expectations are resentments waiting to happen!" How true! I received some very valuable lessons and... "growth opportunities"! that have been instrumental in my life So, take the lesson learned from me...expand your support network and call on the appropriate person whose strength correlates with the support you need. That's a win/win situation. And, most of all,

remember that **people love to help, want to help**, and most are not mind readers and don't know what is most helpful to you or how specifically to help without you helping them with that!

I have made this mistake more times than I can count because I was not aware of the different 'types' of support. I lumped it all into one Support Category. Now that you know these distinctions let me ask... What could be the outcome if you were looking for emotional support from an Informational Supporter? Or Practical Support from an Emotional Supporter? If you answered potential frustration on both sides and unrequited support, you might be right. If you are asking the wrong person for a support that is not in their wheel house you run the risk of A. having you and them frustrated, B. not getting the support you really need and C. beginning a belief that you don't really need anyone or are afraid to ask because it isn't panning out like you thought.

Brainstorm now on all the possible members for Team U available or who could be available to you, remembering paid professionals, groups, etc. that can fill important roles. *(Keep in mind if distance is an issue, will that affect their ability to be on your Team? As with most things, it is not about quantity, but quality.)*



**List 2+ Supporters for each type of Support. Keep this handy, it is a great visual to reflect on and have when you need to reach out.**

## TEAM U

[illegible]

**Please take some time to reflect on and answer the following questions on a separate sheet or in a journal....**

- In general, how do you feel about your Team?
- Do your current Team members meet your needs for social support?
- Are all different types of support covered adequately?
- If not, you have “job openings” on your Team -how will you go about filling these? Try to come up with a couple of ideas to expand your Team in the areas where you perceive a lack.
- Do you have enough Team members in your network?
- Do you think any of your Team members might be feeling overextended?
- Does your Team provide the quality of support you would like?
- If not, what could you do to make the situation better?

**Do you have a difficult time asking for help/support?** (If not, congratulations! you may skip this part)

If so, you are not alone! Many of us have a difficult time asking for help. Let's explore that... (Get out a sheet of paper or journal) . Let's dig deep, be honest and vulnerable.....what is behind that? What are you afraid of? Common answers are: Fear of being perceived as dumb, needy, weak, a burden, vulnerable, incapable, dependent, incompetent.

**What are your fears?**

**Expand on that...what else?**

**What in the past might that have stemmed from?**

**How did it serve you then?**

**Does it serve you now?**

This is the time to get crystal clear on that stumbling block. Knowing yourself requires that you understand and acknowledge your stumbling blocks. Then they can be dealt with and not continue to trip you up. **Knowing when you need help getting over that block and asking for help to do that is not a weakness but a strength.** The next step is to see what that means? If someone asks you for help does it mean they are dumb? needy? weak? a burden? incapable? dependent? incompetent? **It is easy to show grace to others that we don't extend to ourselves.** Chances are neither you or another person who asks you for help is any of those attributes... Needing help does not MEAN any of the attributes listed above, it simply MEANS you or they need help with something you or they currently can't do for whatever reason. **We love to attach meaning to things and many, many times the meaning we attach is flat out wrong.**

Is this resonating with you?

I remember back before cell phones and GPS, (yes, I am that old!) we would travel with a map or atlas. (Actually, I still use those and love them!) Anyhoo, a common perception back in the day was that men (usually the drivers when spouses or families were in tow) were not good with directions and, when lost, refused to stop and ask for directions.

Instead they assumed (and were adamantly sure) they could figure it out by themselves. It sounded a bit like this- "Hell no I'm not stopping at that gas station to ask for directions, we will just keep driving around, I will find it!". Sometimes that worked, many times it did not but in the meantime **much time was wasted, emotions were escalated and general unpleasantness ensued.**


Do we want our life to be like that...stubbornly not asking for directions (help) when doing so would make things so much easier, faster and not so challenging? We are all here for a reason, we all have different gifts and talents to use and share and it is a shame not to utilize that. Why rob someone of their gift to help? Why rob yourself of that gift?

Why rob yourself of your most precious gift-the one of time? **Why waste a minute**

**struggling unnecessarily** when you could already be on the other side of that struggle or at least have others on your side, lifting you up?

**Final thought...**if someone you cared about was struggling and needed help, would you want to know that and would you want to help?

That's how others feel about you.



Asking for help does not mean you are weak or incompetent.

It means quite the opposite...  
You have to be strong, confident and intelligent enough to realize when you need help and courageous to ask for it

