Social Support Shorts Episode 12: What Could be Getting in the Way? Barriers to Seeking Help

Hi everyone, this is August with another episode of Social Support Shorts. Thanks again for taking this journey with me. I really appreciate it as always.

Over the last few podcasts, we have discussed specific strategies that may help you identify and match your sources of support, find new sources of support, and communicate your support needs with grace.

For many of you, maybe one or more strategies have proven to be beneficial. For some of you, you may still feel hesitant to try these strategies out, and I get it. Stuff can get in the way.

And some of that stuff may be your own beliefs and feelings about asking for support. And that's what today's episode is all about.

We're going to discuss a variety of automatic beliefs and feelings that can be barriers to asking for help. And by naming these barriers and bringing them to light, it will make it easier for us to navigate them or potentially avoid them altogether.

And we need to challenge them, because as I have stated many times before, you need, and you deserve support. And when we let these automatic thoughts derail us from seeking support, we can be left vulnerable.

Anxiety may start sinking in, depression, feelings of burden, resentment, burnout, and I don't want that for you. And the people in your life, they don't want it for you either.

So that's why we're going to talk about these barriers to asking for help. A lot of barriers come in the form of automatic thoughts, and they relate to past experiences, stigma, beliefs about control, beliefs about time.

Let's start by talking about automatic thoughts in general. Our brains, they are misers. They don't want to spend any energy, and they don't want to take any extra time that they don't need to. That's what makes them so efficient.

Now, we spend a lifetime collecting experiences, and these experiences, they colour our automatic thoughts, and that's what, again, makes our brains so efficient.

For example, here's a simple one that we might have all experienced. At one point in our life or another we have touched something that is too hot. We've all had that experience.

So now, what do we do when we open the oven to take the lasagna out? Do we just use our bare hands? No, we automatically reach for oven mitts. Our brain has jumped from need to take the lasagna out, to put on oven mitts.

We didn't sit there and think: A) Need to take lasagna out, B) Too hot, C) May burn hand, D) Need oven mitts.

And that's an example of automatic thought patterns where we jump from A to D, no need to think about B and C. It's efficient.

Now, let's think of it in the context of caregiving. Let's think of a time when you may have wanted or needed help, and the barrier was an automatic thought.

Maybe you thought, I need help, I should call Mary. But before you finish dialling Mary's number, you put down the phone. Now, what happened there?

Thought A was need help, call Mary, and thought D was put down phone. What happened in thoughts B and C? Was it B) Mary's a busy lady, and C) I shouldn't bother her?

Or was it B) I shouldn't need help, C) Mary will judge me. Or even B) Why am I even calling? and C) This should be my job to do and mine alone. Does any of this sound familiar?

Again, it's very common. Especially with thoughts involving the word should. *Should*, that word is pretty powerful.

And I'd invite you, whenever you have a *should* thought or experience a *should* statement, to just take a beat and analyze it.

Maybe think about what you would say to a friend who made the same statement. What if your friend said: “I shouldn't need help.” What would you say to that friend? Would you say: “That's absolutely true, you should feel terrible about wanting help”? Probably not.

I'd like to think that you would more likely be a Cheerleader in that moment and say: “I know you are a really capable person, but we all need help from time to time. Just ask, and I'll be there.”

Now, if you can imagine saying this to a friend, you can just extend that kindness to yourself.

Now, going back to thought A, need help, maybe there was no call Mary or picking up the phone. Maybe thoughts, B and C were I shouldn't ask for help, no one will help anyway.

And okay, admittedly, maybe you haven't received help when needed, and that past experience is really colouring this thought. And your brain is trying to avoid feeling that

disappointment that you felt then. That makes sense completely, but let's take a moment to ask some questions.

What were the possible reasons that you weren't supported before? Was this before you started the Social Support Shorts journey? Was the right person asked? Was the request direct and with warmth?

And if the answer is no to any of those questions, why not try again now that you have these new tools? If you happen to answer yes to any of those questions, though, then maybe it's time to revisit that Circle of Support.

Remember, it's a living document. Maybe that person who didn't help you in the past just isn't one of the first people you call on. Maybe you move them to the outer circle as more of a backup.

Now, other times, these thoughts are less about direct personal experiences like being let down in the past. Sometimes these thoughts are influenced by the outside world – like worrying about stigma.

Stigma refers to commonly shared attitudes or stereotypes about things like dementia. And it can be another big barrier and contribute to those automatic thoughts.

Stigma doesn't just live outside us in society; it is so pervasive that we often internalize it too – it becomes part of us.

So, let's discuss a common one that I hear from a lot of friends and family when I am asked about my work with dementia: “The minute I forget your name, put me in a home. I want people to remember me as the competent adult than I am.”

I have heard that many times from family members. They don't even realize that the message underneath that is completely negative. That it's a really narrow and biased view of dementia, and it's not grounded in reality.

We know from experience that there is a lot more to feel and contribute in life after memory concerns begin.

But sometimes we hear and face stigma so often that our brain creates one of those jumps from A to D.

For example, we go back to thought A) Need help, call Mary. Well maybe Mary hasn't seen the person you were caring for in a while. And even though his memory symptoms are mild, thought B might be, Mary will be shocked by these changes, and thought C might be, Mary might react by treating him like a child or even avoiding him. So, in the end, D) You don't call.

Now let's take that moment. Do you actually believe that? Or have you heard enough people or the media, et cetera, saying *put me in a home, that's the end of me,* that it's become an automatic thought.

If this situation or something similar rings true for you, please remember, you were acting out of kindness, love, and compassion. You were protecting yourself and the person you provide care for by jumping right to thought D.

You may have even avoided the situation, even though you didn't actually know what the outcome would be. And the truth is we can't know these outcomes ahead of time.

Sometimes, others' reactions are negative, but overall, evidence from research tells us something very important – people generally want to help.

And I've said this before, but it's so important that I'm saying this now too. People around you most likely want to help, and they do think you're doing a good job. They just may not step forward because they don't want to step on your toes or they don't know what you need.

They don't want to offer help when you're not asking for it because they don't want you to think that you're doing a bad job. You're doing a great job.

And that really underlines what we've been working towards, getting that communication flowing again so you can get the support that you need.

So that's another thing that may get in the way, something we call societal stigma. These really subtle, seemingly innocent beliefs that lead to negative perceptions of dementia and cause us to shut down rather than open up.

Now, related to stigma are other outdated societal beliefs that may strongly affect our internal self-held belief system.

One common belief is that the caregiver should be able to do it all, and if you don't, you're failing. It's that myth of the noble caregiver that goes it alone.

Does that click with anyone out there? I'm pretty sure it does. Again, it's a very common belief. And how could that get in the way of asking for help?

Well, it could be that you are worried about how family and friends, the people around you, may perceive you asking for help. It may look like you are not doing a good job.

Or maybe that's a real fear, you've received criticism from them in the past, and you don't want to get that criticism again, which is completely understandable.

And here, think of how important it would be to really, really practice communicating with grace. It's not going to work with everyone in your family – families, they can be difficult.

Some of them, they just have a thorn in their side. But with others, it might be that their immediate reaction is to kind of get angry or say something passive aggressive or hurtful.

And it could be, maybe, that they are carrying their own feelings of guilt or shame around not helping you more.

And by pushing you away, there goes the reminder that they aren't helping more and they're actually being self-protective as well.

But if you come at it from a place of grace, then what you're doing is you're eliciting from them some more helpful responses, and it might actually be a turning point for your relationship if you're persistent and you guide them towards responding with more grace as well – bring them onto your side and create that team. It could be really important.

Now another feeling related to that noble caregiver belief; guilt is a big factor for not asking support. A lot of caregivers feel guilty, unfortunately.

And you know, you can feel guilty about needing a break. You can feel guilty that needing some time for self-care means that you're taking time away from the person who you're providing care for.

Now, how about this example, is it hitting home at all? I bet for many of you, it is.

And you know, for much of that, when I'm speaking with people one on one, I kind of use the airplane metaphor, the one for that oxygen mask that falls from the ceiling.

You know, when you're travelling, you're always advised that if you're travelling with someone who needs care like a child, you're instructed to do something specifically – what is that? Who is the first person that should put the mask on? That's right, it's you, and why?

Well, because you need to be taken care of – your needs need to be taken care of. You need to be in a good place before you can take care of anyone else.

Imagine putting that mask on them first and then you pass out. Well, that's wonderful, you help them in that moment, but now you can't help them for the long term.

And it's the same thing with those feelings of guilt, about taking some time for self-care. How are you supposed to help people through this marathon that's caregiving? It's just some food for thought.

It's so important to take some time for yourself. Stress, burnout, compassion, fatigue – they all happen. And then where are you left? Not in a good spot.

So now we've talked about automatic thought patterns from thought A) I need help to thought D) Don't ask for help and the thoughts, B and C, that happened so fast that we don't pause to challenge them.

We've talked about automatic thoughts related to past experiences, to stigma, societal expectations, guilt.

Sometimes automatic thoughts come from the need to feel like you're in control at all times, and that isn't such a bad thing.

It's just, maybe your B and C thoughts are, if you don't have your fingers on all the buttons at all times, that everything's going to fall apart. And believe me, I get it.

Maybe for whatever reason, this is a pattern from your life. Maybe you had a long-standing pattern of little support; you learned early on that to be really effective you need to do it all.

But it may not be working for you right now in this context. You might have, in many areas of your life, been very successful.

But I mean, you're listening to this podcast series because you want to figure out how to get some more support – you're feeling unsupported.

Well, if you are seeking support, that means you're going to have to try to take your fingers off some of the buttons. Is that okay? Can we do some little experiments?

What's a minor button that we can take the finger off first? Can we see if cousin Sally can take care of that button for a little bit?

Who knows, you come back, Sally did an okay job. And maybe you can give Sally a bigger button next time to take care of. Whatever chore or thing that might help to lessen your load, and then maybe you might move on.

Now we've got Sally on our team helping us with a few buttons. Well, maybe we can find someone else to help with some other buttons, right? We can't be in control of everything.

And if there's great communication on the team, well then at least you know that button's being pressed when it needs to. When you get your texts, your check-ins.

So, if this example hits home for you, I invite you to try some of those little experiments. Think about the buttons you can get help with, friends. And that's all I have to say about control.

Let's talk about one final barrier; it takes time out of your day to seek help.

And here, you know, your automatic thoughts may be: I just don't have time. I don't have time to just stop and ask for help. My day is go, go, go.

I've certainly heard that before, and hey, in other contexts, I've been that person.

And it's funny because when I actually stopped to ask for help, I magically find that I have more time, imagine that.

Just as much, if not more, gets done in my day and I still have some time for that self-care so I can feel effective to take on the next day.

And again, friends, if this example resonates with you, try little experiments. The little buttons. Take some time to pass them around to people who can help.

You may find that what you perceived was lost time was actually an investment – more actually got done in your day.

And one final note, approach all of these experiments with the intention to communicate gracefully. Not only when asking, but also when the chore is complete.

Thank the person earnestly, even if the chore was not completed the exact same way you would have completed it.

Just be warm, bring them closer to your circle into your Circle of Support, really create that team.

All right, friends, it's been a longer one, but we are near the end of another Social Support Short.

The biggest thing I invite you to do is when you find yourself finding some reason to not reach out for support, take a moment. What is the belief or thought that is driving that action?

Is it stigma? Is it worry about embarrassment or some other person's reactions? Is a belief that created this thought, is it valid?

In that moment are you experiencing the noble caregiver belief? Are you feeling unfounded guilt? Or is it a time thing or a control thing? Examine those underlying beliefs. And I'm not gonna lie to you, it'll take time to be able to do this – it's like a muscle.

To catch those automatic thoughts and examine them, it takes time, it takes experience, you really need to be present, and all of that takes practice.

So be kind to yourself while you're doing this. And just keep trying, my friend. Remind yourself that you are doing a great job.

So, this is our time for this episode. I want to thank you again for being with me, I know it's a longer episode, but I feel like it was an important one to do.

For next time, we talk further about the practical reasons you may not be receiving much support, and we provide other methods that may help you to cope with life's demands.

Maybe you just don't have that big Circle of Support and try as you might, it isn't growing. That's okay, we'll discuss other strategies in the next podcast.

As always, thanks so much for taking this journey with me. I really appreciate the trust you have given me and the time that you have taken. This is August, signing off.