Social Support Shorts Episode 9: Circle of Support exercise

Well, hello again friends, this is August. Welcome back to Social Supports: Episode Nine. Last time we reviewed what you have learned so far about social support. And at the end of the episode I suggested listening from home, and you may want to consider that actually for the next few episodes because they'll be a little more hands on.

So, for our first hands on project, it'll require a piece of writing paper, a pen or a pencil, a pencil may be better, just so you can erase things because this is going to be a living document you may want to change in the future.

You'll also need a dessert plate and then a glass, I almost said a glass of water, but don't fill it up with water – we need to flip it over and use it to make a circle. If you're a pro at making circles, maybe you don't need the plate and glass, but I am not, so I need those things.

And also, if you're not feeling like doing a hands-on project at all, that's okay. We do have copies of the same thing we'll be drawing on our website that you're listening to this podcast on. You can just download it and print it if you want. It is called the Circle of Support. That's the file you're looking to download.

But either way, if you're joining it or not, feel free to pause the recording here while you grab your supplies or you download the Circle of Support. I'll give about five seconds and then we'll come back.

All right, so welcome back. Hopefully now you have everything in front of you and a flat surface to work on. What we want to do is create something that looks like a bullseye or a doughnut on that piece of paper.

So, the first thing we're going to do is trace the dessert plate on the paper. Or again, you circle superstars out there who can freehand, just draw it freehand if that's your thing. Once you have that first circle drawn, either way, then we're going to place the water glass smack in the middle of that larger circle, and we're going to trace it so it's a smaller circle inside the larger circle. Or again, you can draw the freehand – you show-off.

So now we have created our bullseye, which going forward, we are going to call our Circle of Support. This is a tool I will invite you to go back to from time to time.

It's also what we call a living document. You may find that it will change over time as you learn about the support that surrounds you.

You can move people around on it. You can add people. It may even get a little messy as you change it up, so that was my reason for suggesting a pencil.

If all you have is a pen, that's okay. You can always draw a new one and transfer the names of the people who are in your current social support circle or Circle of Support over to the new one.

So now, what I'm going to do is invite you to imagine yourself smack dab in the middle of that bullseye. I have suggested throughout the podcast series so far to start thinking about those who support you, and now I'm going to invite you to start placing those names in your Circle of Support where you best see fit.

The inner circle generally is for people who are closest to you. For me, it might be my sister, my best friends; it's definitely going to be my cat Buster and yes, you can add pets.

Cats, dogs, goldfish, squirrels, whatever. For me, Buster is a great listener. He does not interrupt, he just lets me free flow, so he is going in my inner circle.

Now the outer circle is for people who are in your life, and they may be important to you, but they may not be the first set of people that you would reach out to for help.

I also have two brothers, and they would be more in the outer circle, maybe even closer to that outer edge. I know they would support me in their own way, but I reach out to them less when I am in need. And the same thing goes for my dog Rufus, who doesn't have Buster's attention span.

I mean Buster, he just sits and listens, and he's a cat, so he just stares at you, and you get that eye contact. But Rufus is running all over the place, making noise, distracting, so... I love him, he's just less dependable. I need to accept he's not going to be in my inner circle.

And remember to also consider the professionals and organizations in your life who support you.

It could be your doctor, your nurse practitioner, your pharmacist. It could be the local Alzheimer's Society, or if you're a member of the spiritual community, it could be you know, the spiritual leader or members of the congregation.

The number of people in the circle does not necessarily matter. Sometimes it's the quality over the quantity, and for you rural folks out there who are listening, you may have more friends and family members in your circle than you do professionals and organizations.

That's okay too. We know that rural towns and villages out there may not have the organizations that the cities do, and that's okay.

If you can only think of one or two people, maybe you can’t think of any at all, we'll discuss this in the future podcast. If you can think of people but have complicated relationships

with some of them, where you feel like there's a communication breakdown, we'll discuss that in the future as well.

Really here, the point is just add these people, professionals and organizations, so that you can in the future look and take stock of who to contact when you're in need.

The visual representation also really helps you to figure out who to contact first, and that's most likely going to be the people who are in the inner circle. And that way your needs are most likely going to be met, and as I mentioned in a previous podcast, when your needs are met, you feel supported, and when you feel supported, it can not only keep negative feelings at bay, but it also reinforces the feeling that you have that support.

And it kind of ensures that you are more likely to reach out for support again in the future when you need it which reinforces that positive cycle of support.

And remember, not everyone supports the same way. We need to consider Superpowers.

Sometimes when I'm using the Circle of Support with people, especially when I'm working with them, and we're sitting down in an office face to face, it's really, really great for me to urge them to write down the Support Superpower underneath the name of the support person. And that's just as a reminder, so then they have it all in one document.

So that way they can take a beat and think about how they need to be supported in the moment. You know, like, do they need physical support? Is it a physical task they need help with? Well, then they'll contact The Doer, right? And which Doer do they contact? Well, most likely the one closest to the middle, because that one is most likely going to be the most readily available and willing to support.

Or, you know, sometimes you may be having a tough day, and you want to vent, or it was a great day and there's some big wins that you want to celebrate.

Well, who on your list is the Listener, and which one is the closest to you in the middle? Well, that might be a good place to start so that you feel supported. It's all about matching it up.

Now, on the flip side, maybe you place a name very close to the center, and they didn't support you in the way that you thought that they would. Well, then we need to ask a few questions. Do they normally support you in the way that you expect? Have they been a great Listener, for example, in the past?

And if the answer to that question is yes, then maybe the situation was a one-off. If not, and it's happened a few times that you've gone to a Listener and it turns out that's not what they are, as I said before, this is a living document.

Do we need to change the support type? Do we think they were a Listener, but they're actually more of a Doer? Or do we need to move the name?

Maybe, you know, something's going on in their own life and they aren't able to support us right now in the way that they have in the past, and we should move them out a little bit so that we are contacting other people for support – giving them some time to take care of their own needs.

It's all about playing around with it. It's taking little experiments and making little observations and moving the people around until we get into this kind of just right zone, this Goldilocks zone, where it's not too hot and not too cold – just right.

And I'll be here with you during these experiments. I just invite you to try as we go, take some extra little steps, try each experiment out with someone who you feel safe with before you go and try it with someone who you may not feel as connected to.

That way, you're setting yourself up for a win, you know, the people that are most likely going to support you are the ones that you want to approach first.

But yes, there's other things that are important here too. In the future, we're going to be discussing ways to communicate your story to others.

We'll also talk about how to effectively communicate feelings of loss, and we'll also be discussing different strategies to communicate your needs.

But before all of that, the next episode we are going to discuss is another activity you may be interested in, especially if you felt like the names on your Circle of Support were a little bit sparse, or you think that you may have forgotten some names; we've actually got an activity that we're going to try next episode that may help you with that.

So for now, I really hope you enjoyed this episode, and I thank you again for joining me on the social support journey. This is August signing out for now. Take care.