Strengthening Your Support Network

As noted earlier, your family is a system that is affected (and affects) the systems around it. When families change because of divorce or separation, there are many systems your family needs to navigate. Think of your support network as an onion. At the center is your child and you, the parents. Surrounding the center are the systems that can help you as you go through family transition.

What does your support system network look like?

Look at the onion picture. Color (or place a check mark) in the support systems that you currently use.

Now take a look at the systems your family is not accessing. Color with a different color (or place an “X”) in the support systems you or your children would benefit from accessing.

You may see that your family has healthy and strong layers of support. Or you may see there are support systems that have fallen away or that need to be tapped to help you in your family transition. For many parents, having a strong system of support will help them recover from the family transition and embrace the new reality.
Who Gives You Support?

Throughout a family transition, you will need support. Whether it is a shoulder to cry on, information on being a single parent, or assistance picking up your children after sports, there are probably multiple things you will need assistance with now and in the upcoming months.

A big part of taking care of yourself is acknowledging when you need help and not being afraid to ask for it. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness – it’s a sign that you know what you need and you’re proactively trying to get those needs met. In other words, it’s good self-care!

While considering who you can turn to for help, be aware of the different types and ways you can receive support. There are three main types of support:

✔ **Emotional support** – We receive this type of support from people with whom we have some level of intimacy, such as a good friend or family member. It is up to you to define the type of emotional support you need. It may be someone you trust with your innermost feelings – someone you feel comfortable talking to and who will nurture you. It may also be someone who will go for a walk with you when you’re feeling frustrated, or someone to distract you with a game of darts or cards when you need it. Emotional support comes in a variety of forms!

✔ **Informational support** – This support includes information about community resources, parenting issues, legal issues, and so on. This handbook and the Parents Forever™ course are examples of informational support.

✔ **Practical support** – This is concrete help, such as money, child care, transportation, or household care.

Your Own Support Network

Who can you turn to for emotional support?

Who can you turn to for informational support?

Who can you turn to for practical support?
Developing New Social Ties

The onion exercise helped you identify people in your network of support. If you have no one listed under a particular kind of support, or could only name a few people in general, you will want to work on strengthening your support network.

Developing new social ties may take years, but you can begin right now. Venture out and forge new relationships to establish the support network that you need. You may want to start by strengthening ties with your family – your own parents, your siblings, or other members of the family you grew up in. You may also consider strengthening friendships you already have. Often you’ll need to branch out and make new friends, including other single parents and parents with the same-age children.

Like many individuals experiencing divorce or separation, you may experience emotional isolation at first. For example, the other parent may have been your best friend. You may have lost in-laws who are important to you. Sometimes friends seem to disappear after a divorce or separation. Often, friends you had as a couple don’t know how to continue associating with you as a single friend. Other friends may have taken sides. Or you may have focused years of energy on the other parent and your children and not kept up with your friends, parents, or siblings.

Whatever the reason, you may be faced with one of your worst fears: being alone. It can be tempting at these times to lean too heavily on your children to satisfy your need for social contact and companionship. It can also be tempting to fill an emotional vacuum with a new partner. If you are considering a new partner, think carefully about what you need from that relationship for yourself and your children. In general, concentrating on friendships rather than romantic relationships will bring about the most healing. You can get the support and companionship you need without making a new commitment before you are ready.

Remember, it often takes time to build new resources of friendship and support. Take time to explore who you are now, how you relate to others, and what you really want for your new life. Give yourself a year or more to forge a new social network. Also, you and your children’s safety needs to stay a priority. Avoid placing you or your children in an unsafe situation – no social support is worth that price!

What ideas do you have for building new social ties?