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## CREATING support

Look out for one another's interests

*Everyone needs people in their lives for authentic and mutual friendship. Social support is significant to our health and wellbeing.*

**“...look out for one another’s interests, not just for your own.”**

Philippians 2:4, Holy Bible (GNT)<sup>10</sup>



**“My support circle is called ‘Jess’s tribe’. I live with Cerebral Palsy and I have a group of friends that help me. We study at uni together and they support me with some tasks, they listen to my concerns, give me their ‘out of the box’ ideas to get through life. We have fun, go out, study, travel in to uni together, and just enjoy life together. They have shown me I can be independent and I am becoming more confident about this every day.” Jess**

**“I have a group of people who get alongside me and we all live full lives. It’s not their ‘job’! They do life with me because they care about me and I care about them.”**

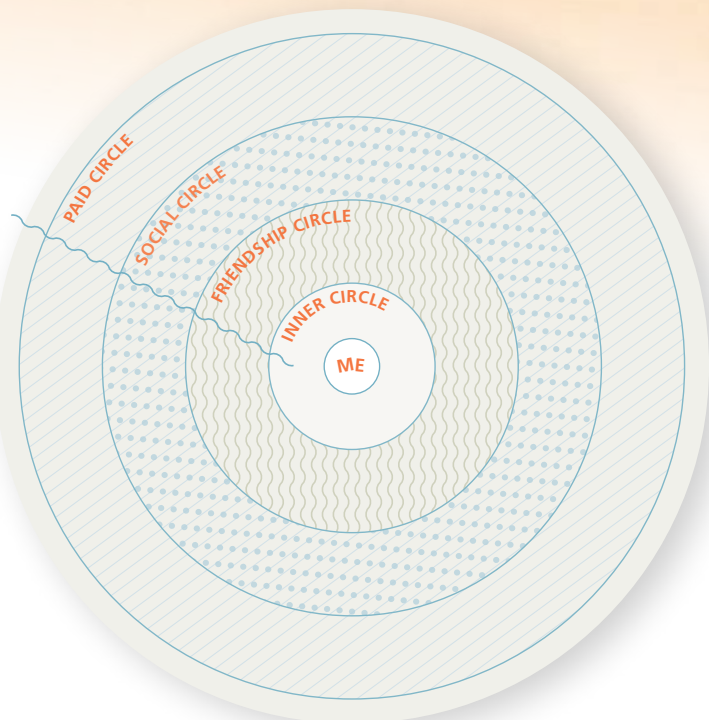
Some people assume that people with disabilities struggle to get out and about and have active, social and interesting lives.<sup>1</sup> For most people with a disability, this couldn’t be further from the truth! However, some people do face barriers to participation and are excluded from social, study, work and recreational opportunities. Having a network of supportive and understanding friends and family is important to overcome these barriers.

Everyone needs people in their lives for authentic and mutual friendship. Social support is significant to our health and wellbeing. Three types of support are effective for people with disabilities. These are: ‘Support Circles’, ‘Peer Support Circles’ and ‘Peer Networks’.

## **1. SUPPORT CIRCLE**

**Support circles<sup>2</sup> help a person achieve their dreams and goals. They start by having a clear picture of what a ‘good life’ looks like for you. This vision guides you to consider which people you may include in your circle of support.**

‘My Support Circle’<sup>3</sup> is a tool that helps you identify the people in your life that you can call upon for support. The tool places you at the centre of four concentric circles. The inner circle includes your family and close friends, the second concentric circle is your friends, the third circle is your social connections, and the fourth circle contains the people who provide you with paid support. You should note down the people in your life that fit into each circle. Then you can look at that information and see if you lack support in any circle and think about ways to identify more people to enlist into that circle to strengthen your current relationships.



## How Jess is using 'My Support Circle'

Jess lives with Cerebral Palsy. She struggles with loneliness and isolation. Jess explains how she uses her support circle:

### a. I wrote the names of people in each circle

"In my inner circle I wrote the names of people who are close to me. I only had two, my mum and my best friend. They know me well and we can be honest with each other. We honour our confidentiality and we keep each other accountable. These are my safe people.

In my friendship circle I wrote the names of people that I hang out with. I invite them to my place and they invite me to their place. We support each other. There aren't many people in that circle for me.

The social circle is my wider social network. It includes people in the online gaming group I belong to, school friends, people at church and others I connect with at different times, like my neighbours. I don't have many people in this circle which is probably why I sometimes feel lonely.

I have a few names for people in my paid circle. They include my GP, my counsellor and my hairdresser." (Your paid circle can include support workers and any other person who supports you in a paid role).

### b. I thought about these questions?

- Who is in each circle? I saw I had gaps in some circles.
- Do I have enough people in my inner circle and friendship circle? This is where most of my support will come from, so I need to grow those two circles.

- Do I need more or different people in my paid support circle? At present I am happy with the people I have in this circle.
- Are people in my paid circle providing support that the inner circle can provide? When I looked at this question I realised I was telling my cleaner stuff, because I don't have anyone else to talk to.
- Is there someone I would like to move into another circle? I have two friends in my friendship circle that I think will be willing to see me more often.

### c. Growing my support circle

To grow my inner circle I needed to connect with more people so I could develop new friendships. The best way for me to do that was to connect more with my social networks. I needed help to think of places I could meet new people and my support worker shared ideas for activities using a simple tool.<sup>4</sup> After spending regular and meaningful time together, I now have two new friends. We have fun together and we trust and respect each other. These are important qualities for my inner support circle.

## 2. GROUP SUPPORT CIRCLE

**A group support circle is intentionally constructed to promote and support the goals of a person with a disability to provide practical advice and support, solve problems and generate creative ideas to contribute positively to the person's life.<sup>5</sup> No one in the support circle is paid to be there.**

Jess has been growing her support circle for six months. She says "I have new friends and we are having fun. I feel a sense of belonging when we meet. My self-confidence about social situations is growing because my friends have supported me to try different ways of interacting in a group. They give me good advice about what's OK to say and do, and what's best avoided. They respect me and I trust them. I'm not lonely anymore which is the best thing."

Group support circles vary in size, focus, how often they meet, who belongs to the group, and formality. Circles range in size from small groups of 3-4 people, to large groups of 12 people. Members come from family, friends, acquaintances, teachers, work/study colleagues, sporting teams, faith community, neighbours, support workers and employers, etc. They help create the vision and set goals to support the person to overcome barriers, strengthen their support and celebrate life.<sup>6</sup>

There are step-by-step guides on how to create a group circle of support that cover topics such as, who to ask to join your circle of support, how to invite them, ideas for meetings, goal setting and action plans.<sup>7,8</sup>

Barney approached his rural church to ask if he could establish a peer support network for young rural men who were struggling with poor mental health. The church agreed to facilitate the meeting place and offered a support person to help in whatever way the group might need.

The men meet weekly on Wednesday nights and connect socially, chat, share food and play games. They sometimes have a speaker who shares mental health tips to help them stay well.

The group is peer-led and requires minimal support from the church. Several group members have joined the church and are enjoying their new supportive community and friendships.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> House with no steps, website, '10 things not to say to someone with a disability', viewed 27 March 2019, <https://www.hwms.com.au/about-us/blog/10-things-not-to-say-to-someone-with-a-disability>

<sup>2</sup> Resourcing Inclusive Communities, website, 'Circles of support – a manual for getting started', p.4, viewed 26 Feb 2019, [https://www.ric.org.au/assets/Uploads/70239/ufiles/Circles\\_of\\_Support\\_Manual\\_2015.pdf](https://www.ric.org.au/assets/Uploads/70239/ufiles/Circles_of_Support_Manual_2015.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Baptist Care SA, website, 'My Support Circle', viewed 23 March 2019, [https://baptistcaresa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/BCSA\\_My-Support-Circle.pdf](https://baptistcaresa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/BCSA_My-Support-Circle.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Baptist Care SA, website, 'Activities you can try to meet new people', viewed 23 March 2019, [https://baptistcaresa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/BCSA\\_Building\\_Friendships.pdf](https://baptistcaresa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/BCSA_Building_Friendships.pdf)

## 3. PEER SUPPORT NETWORK

**Peer Support Networks are groups of people with similar experiences who purposefully connect for friendship, belonging, sharing of knowledge and practical advice.**

They reduce obstacles to inclusion, decrease discrimination and promote participation. They work best when they are local, free or affordable, members are similar ages and life stages. They need to be well managed, appropriately organised and inclusive. It is an amazing opportunity for a church to facilitate the space and provide agreed support to groups, remembering they should remain peer-led.

## TIPS FOR SETTING UP A PEER NETWORK<sup>9</sup>

- Decide on the network's main aim. Ask participants what they want. How and when to meet, E.g. in person, on-line, or via phone/Skype/Zoom.
- Be specific to one type of disability so people share similar experiences.
- A peer with leadership skills leads the group. Get training or support if no one has the skills.
- Volunteers can support the group (E.g. transport, food, training, administration etc.) but don't take over leadership.
- Be accessible and intentionally welcoming.
- Use an agenda and guidelines to facilitate progress and reduce risks if required.
- Use local people to assist. E.g. council skill bank, Volunteering SA, churches and community groups.
- Spread the word about your network! Tell your NDIA Local Area Coordinator, advertise in local media so people know who you are, where you meet, and what you are doing.
- Have fun in your network. Barney's group has the motto "If it's not fun, it's not done!"

There are more support resources at [www.baptistcaresa.org.au/connections](http://www.baptistcaresa.org.au/connections) with live links to the websites.

<sup>5</sup> Resourcing Inclusive Communities, op. cit. pp.4-6

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Resourcing Inclusive Communities, 2015, 'Circles of Support: Getting Started' (Quick Overview) [https://www.ric.org.au/assets/Uploads/70239/ufiles/Building\\_Support\\_Networks/Circles\\_of\\_Support\\_-\\_Getting\\_Started\\_Final.pdf](https://www.ric.org.au/assets/Uploads/70239/ufiles/Building_Support_Networks/Circles_of_Support_-_Getting_Started_Final.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Resourcing Inclusive Communities, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> 'Starting a new peer support group', video, JFA Purple Orange, viewed 23 February 2019, <https://vimeo.com/210181126>

<sup>10</sup> Holy Bible Good News Translation (Today's English Version, Second Edition) © 1992 American Bible Society. All rights reserved