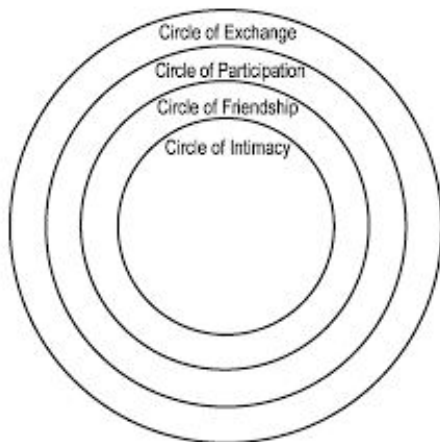


Establishing Circles Of Support and Meaningful Friendships.

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A Circle of Support is a group of people who come together to help an individual (the focus person) navigate life. The original models were designed to help those with learning disabilities connect to their community but they have expanded to include other areas, such as supporting individuals through mental illness and grief. Many faith communities have Circles of Support for groups such as the homeless or the incarcerated. We at St. Martins are part of the Families Together project with many people providing various degrees of support to our adopted families.

As individuals it can be a worthwhile exercise to map our own Circle of Relationships, which can help us identify those who are meaningful in our lives and those to whom we may turn in times of need.



Start by placing yourself in the middle of the circle, drawing 4 concentric rings around you and then naming those in your life who are in each circle

Circle One: The CIRCLE OF INTIMACY is made up of those with whom we share great intimacy, it may be a partner, child or parent, a close friend or a pet; those who we feel we cannot live without.

Circle Two: The CIRCLE OF FRIENDSHIP is made up of those people who are friends or relatives with whom we socialise, share a meal, see a movie. However we do not feel we need to see them regularly or share our deepest thoughts with them. Over time, some of these friends may move into circle one.

Circle Three: The CIRCLE OF PARTICIPATION are people in our community with whom we may participate at work, church, class and support groups, for example. This is where you make the friendships that often move into the second circle, the circle of friendship. Think of it as the nursery for

friendships.

Circle Four: The CIRCLE OF EXCHANGE is made up of people who are paid to be in our lives. Doctors, teachers, therapists, hairdressers, paid caregivers and so on.

For the purposes of this article we are going to focus on circles two and three, looking at what our church family can offer us, how we maintain our circle of friendships and finally how we, who are called to love and care for each other, can be an effective member of someone else's circle of support. In essence: how can we be good friends to each other?

In times of need try to communicate openly, asking for what you want. Sadly, many people feel let down, thinking that people don't care. However not everyone is able to recognise when someone is in need. We as a church are so good at serving, at doing things for others, that we often are reluctant to admit to needing help ourselves. The circle of relationships is a two way process. We need to work at it in order for relationships to be effective and we need to be able to admit our vulnerability to those whom we know will keep our confidence.

We need to be able to "vent" out of the circle and receive love, care and support in it.

We have clergy who can help with matters of faith. We have Stephen Ministers who will listen and care, sharing Christ's love and walking beside you as you encounter life's difficulties, whether they appear minor or momentous. There are Eucharistic visitors to share communion with you at home. There are Helping Hands to provide meals, individuals who may help with errands, drive you to church or hold your hand.

We have worship services, healing ministers, uplifting music and education classes to support you in your spiritual life. We have coffee hour, parish conversations and A Place at The Table, all places where we can forge meaningful relationships.

The Caring Ministry page on our website has a comprehensive list of resources and support available locally as well as many useful articles.

Regular contact with people and friends is an essential part of wellness. Whilst some people are happy with their own company, loneliness and lack of support leads to depression and anxiety. Psychologists tend to agree that having five close friends whose company you enjoy is an important part of wellness. So make a list of those friends and consider what it is they have to offer you in good times and in bad. Likewise, what can you offer them? How can you be a Good Friend to them?

Don't expect to have all your needs met by just one friend. Ask yourself: who is the practical friend, the one who will help with shopping or errands? Who is the one who you would trust to clean your kitchen, or help you dress? Who is the good listener who will let you vent and not judge or offer unwanted advice? Who do you enjoy going out with, who will walk in the arboretum with you, who will go to a movie or for coffee with you? Who is comfortable just sitting in silence with you? Who will pray with you? Who might come to a doctor's appointment with you and take notes, will hold your hand through chemo, and who will do the heavy lifting whilst you recover from surgery?

For some of us making friends is easy and comes naturally . For others it is hard; we have to put ourselves outside of our comfort zones but the benefits are worth it.

How do you cultivate friendships? It is a two way process. Showing gratitude and letting your friend know they mean something to you goes a long way. Help them if you can: show interest in them. Reconnect with friends by sharing a coffee, e-mail or text. Make new friends by joining organisations or volunteering with like-minded people. Take it slowly and choose people you like, respect and trust and who like, respect and trust you in return.

Good friends will like and accept you as you are, faults and all! Good friends will listen and share with you , both the good and the bad. They will not betray your confidence. They will let you express your feelings and emotions, without judging or criticizing. Good friends will laugh and play with you. Good friends will cry with you.

Good friends do not railroad you into taking actions you do not wish to take. They do not tell you what you must do. They do not assume to know what is best for you. Rather they give advice when asked and help **you** to work out what to do. They will stand by you even if they might choose differently. They respect your boundaries and do not intrude upon your space, possessions, privacy or feelings. Good friends will ask what you need, saying "would you like me to... ?" or "what can I do to help?" Good friends allow you help them when they need it. A good friend doesn't ever take advantage of you.

Including such people in your life and working at maintaining these healthy relationships now is not just an essential part of wellness. It means that you will be there for each other when needed in times of difficulty.

Sources include:

Advocates for Human Potential Inc

The Mental Health Foundation

Indiana resource Center for Autism.