



Seven Ways to Increase Your Support Network and Why It Matters

This article is from ChurchLeaders.com by Alison Cook. allisoncookphd.com.

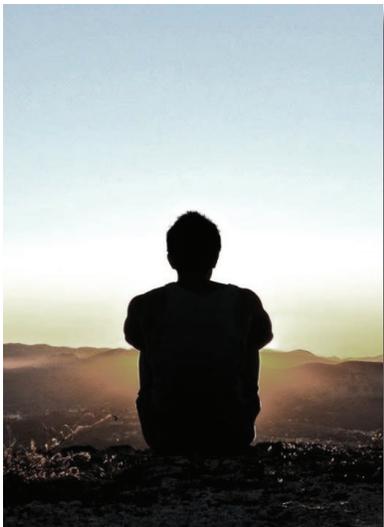
I can't tell you the number of people who write to me looking for help in the midst of a full-blown crisis. They have no support network—no ready-made shelter now that the storm has hit. Finding a good counselor can be hard. It's even harder when you needed it...yesterday.

You likely check in with a medical doctor. You get that your body needs nourishment, exercise, and periodic check-ins to stay healthy. Yet so many of us don't give the same attention to our mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

Here's the best piece of advice I can give: Don't wait until you're in crisis to set up a support network.

I've been there. As a counselor, I struggled with burnout early on in my work. I had to learn the hard way what's it like to face a crisis without a trusted support network. But I learned from that mistake.

I started by finding a counselor through my insurance network, which was daunting in and of itself. I then asked a friend to pray with me bi-weekly. Over time, I reached out to a woman I respected and asked her to mentor me spiritually on a monthly basis. To this day, a month doesn't go by without intentional, soul-nourishing conversation with trusted advisers. Sometimes I need these check-ins more than others, but I never regret them. Looking back, it couldn't be clearer that setting up a support network has kept me strong through life's challenges. By caring for my own emotional and spiritual health, I've had more to give to others.





Seven Ways to Increase Your Support Network

1. Ask yourself: Who is checking in on my mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being regularly?

It might be a counselor, a mentor, a small group, or a spiritual director. But if you can't list at least three people who are regularly checking in with you, then consider expanding your support network. You were not designed to do life alone. We all need trusted advisers.

2. Assess your needs individually and as a family.

Are you struggling to hold it together as a parent? Do you have a child who struggles with anxiety or behavioral problems? How's your marriage? Are you single parenting? Have you been through any sort of trauma, past or present? Think about your specific situation and consider whether an individual counselor, marriage counselor, trauma-informed therapist, peer support group, or life coach might benefit you.

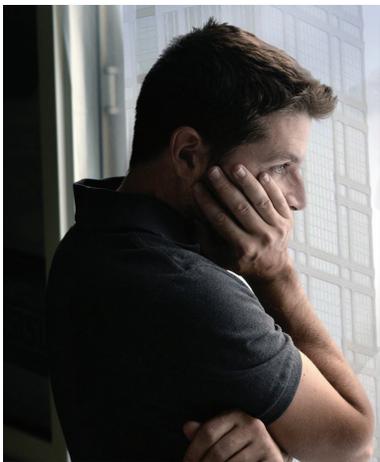
3. Take a look at your budget.

Counseling can be an incredible asset to your support network, and it doesn't have to be expensive. Look at other health investments (such as gym memberships and personal care) and think about whether an investment in mental and emotional health might also be needed. Then check with your insurance company to determine your benefits. There's a reason why many insurance companies provide mental health benefits—regular mental health check-ins are good for your health!

4. Start your search.

If you decide to add a counselor into your support system, here are a few tips on how to find one:

- Contact a local church, university, or seminary to see if they provide free or discounted counseling. If not, ask them for a referral list of counselors in your area.
- Check with friends that you trust.
- Ask your primary care physician.
- Use Psychology Today or Christian Counselor Directory to search for licensed counselors in your region. You can filter your search by insurance provider, areas of specialty, and religious affiliation. You can also use these search engines to find psychiatrists, treatment centers, and support groups.
- If scheduling is an issue for you, consider online options. Visit my [resources page](#) for various online options.





5. Narrow your list.

When selecting a counselor, I always tell people to narrow the list down to two to three that seem to meet your needs. Contact those individuals and ask them for a brief phone interview. During that introductory interview, you'll get a feel for personality and fit. Be clear about what you need. If you have experienced trauma, ask the therapist if they are "trauma-informed." If you need help with your marriage, check to see if the person has training in marriage counseling. Ask for their training and credentials.

6. Join free support groups in your community.

It may be that you're in need of peer support with others facing similar challenges. If that's the case, there are a wide variety of support groups available in most communities. Check with your local hospital or churches for various options. You can also check my [resources page](#) for various support group options.

7. Schedule regular check-ins with a mentor, pastor, spiritual director, small group, or friend.

Some people can ask for help easily when they need it. For others, asking for help can be difficult. That's why I recommend scheduling regular check-ins with a few safe people. When you schedule a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly time to check-in with a friend, mentor, or prayer partner, you know you are going to be asked, "How are you doing?" on a regular basis. Structure makes it harder for the challenges you are facing to fester unattended.

Take the time you need now to put your support system in place—you won't regret this important investment in your mental, emotional, and spiritual health. It will help you on your own journey toward wholeness, and it will help you create a solid foundation for healthy relationships with others.

"Without good direction, people lose their way; the more wise counsel you follow, the better your chances" (Proverbs 11:14 MSG).

