THE CATALYST

How building a support system helps my mental health

Recovery taught me two hard truths: you're not alone, and asking for help is okay. I'm rebuilding support deliberately.

By: Anya Nicola | Posted: April 7, 2022

How do you build a support system that works for you? Good question.

I'm hoping that by sharing some of my personal experiences (because I'm still learning new lessons myself daily), I can help someone else out there.

The first thing to learn is: you're not alone. That was probably the hardest lesson for me but having a support system became crucial in instilling that in my thought process.

Being on the road to recovery has its own sets of challenges, of course, but even just getting on the road to begin the trip is already tricky, right?

A little about me. I'm a recovering addict and recovering from an addiction is a process that includes physical and mental withdrawal, long-term cravings, and lifestyle changes to help combat the original causes of your addiction and your addiction triggers.

Sounds a little challenging, doesn't it? As I said earlier, it's a process, and it is not an easy one.

That's where I had to learn my second lesson: Asking for help is okay.

Not too long after seeking help for my substance abuse issues, it became apparent that I had dual citizenship in the world of recovery; my mental health was suffering greatly. I was eventually diagnosed with a few mental health illnesses.

Once my healing journey started, I needed to encompass myself positively to keep it going; that's where needing a support system comes in handy.

Let's be honest – if knowing how to build a support system was already common knowledge, a lot of us probably wouldn't have gotten caught up in the throes of addiction in the first place.

I needed to identify what support types would benefit me because there is no one-size-fits-all in that department.

I love to walk, and I can walk for hours on my own, but isolation can sometimes be unhealthy for me. When anyone offers to take a stroll with me, it feels like I won the lottery every time, but lately, I don't even wait for offers anymore. I've voluntarily organized group walking meetups, stepping out of my comfort zone, and socializing; that's major for me.

Knowing what I needed from my support circle helped me strengthen it, no matter what it resembled. Taking my time building my circle has become essential to the foundation of my recovery.

Another step I had to take meant reaching out to people who knew and loved me already.

Putting my recovery first had created a distance with some of my loved ones. Still, by demonstrating how much I wanted to repair and close gaps, some of those relationships have become even more significant today.

Once I started, things really went on a roll. I began to reconnect with old friends and revisit familiar places that made me feel safe and happy. I went about trying out old hobbies again – I even picked up my old guitar and started retaking lessons. I hadn't touched an instrument since grade 10 when I was in the school band.

I realized that building a support system should also involve my interests outside of my ailments.

Yes, going to therapy regularly and attending 12-Step meetings are crucial to my healing process. Still, regardless of whether I was a pro or a beginner at new activities or interests, I found some very beneficial to the process.

I felt shy and dared myself one day to try yoga (those yoga outfits are cute; I needed to justify the purchase) from the comfort of my home, mind you, but I was still nervous to try it. Now, I hate to sound cliche, but I think everyone can benefit from what yoga has done for my mind, body, and spirit since I started.

I got active, which may sound scary or overwhelming at first because I know it did for me, but it helped me get more involved, which led to getting out of my house.

I started socializing with like-minded individuals and soon experienced the power of sharing healthy coping mechanisms with others. I don't need to become BFFs for these types of connections to be still very beneficial in strengthening my support system.

My fear of being vulnerable always held me back from opening up more. I started to face that fear, and now my vulnerability has become my superpower.

I wasn't always this transparent though, and that's where having a therapist and going to counselling helped the most, because building a proper support system means I will have to be transparent about how I feel or what I need.

Especially since I'm relearning how to be social while prioritizing putting my recovery first at the same time. Having a social network is only a benefit if it's positive, which means I have to be hypervigilant in all my personal or professional interactions. If they start to provide any negative obstacles to my journey (even if they think they mean well), it's my responsibility to remove them.

This is where creating boundaries and sticking to them came into full effect for me. Once any relationship becomes triggering, I am prudent because my recovery is too valuable to take any chances.

I practice mindfulness and I'm now at a place where I stay present about the people, places, or things surrounding me. I'm more aware of any scenario, becoming no longer supportive and acting accordingly.

I may make new life-altering connections; I may have to distance myself from or end relationships that once seemed never-ending.

My support community doesn't need to be overwhelming either but checking out support groups in other areas of my life (parenting, career goals, etc. etc.) is just as beneficial if not a necessity.

Creating a nice balanced routine involving family, friends, career, and professional organizations sounds like perfection but being the leader of my recovery means that I get to be in charge of what that looks like as long as it provides positive reinforcements to my wellness.

I am taking my time to build my support system; I'll slow down if needed and pick up the pace when I'm ready.

Most importantly, I'll continue to make adjustments when necessary because being active in your recovery is an ever-evolving job.

Here are some of my favourite support ideas:

- Yoga
- Meditation
- Reading
- Writing
- Focus on my spirituality
- Walking
- Knitting (Don't laugh, it's another of my favourites)
- Express my feelings
- Asking for help
- Avoid slippery places, people, and things
- 12 Step Meetings/Call my sponsor
- FUN

Author: Anya Nicola

Initially returned to her love of writing to strengthen her healing process. She has since evolved into a freelance writer full-time, paving her way to be very outspoken about advocating and supporting mental health issues. In 2020, in addition to her writing career, Anya became the driving force and Creative Director behind As Told By Anya (ATBA): a versatile source for content creation, consulting and management. ATBA is dedicated to amplifying the often-unheard stories of marginalized BIPOC communities. You can find out more about Anya, her work and social media here: www.linktr.ee/anyanicola

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Mental Health Commission of Canada
https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/
350 Albert Street, Suite 1210 Ottawa ON K1R 1A4
Tel: 613.683.3755 | Fax: 613.798.2989
mhccinfo@mentalhealthcommission.ca