

Building Resilience in the Army Community With Social Support, Connection

By Jasmine Taylor, Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness

When times are tough, whom can you count on to have your back? Do you turn to your best friend because they provide great encouragement or a trusted Family member who always offers a safe space? If so, you may know what type of social support you need whenever you may need it.

The American Psychological Association defines social support as “the provision of assistance or comfort to others, typically to help them cope with biological, psychological and social stressors.” Simply put, it is the comfort one receives through healthy relationships with others. In the Army community, it is especially important to have close relationships. “This can more effectively help Soldiers deal with whatever challenges they may experience in areas that impact them emotionally, spiritually or physically,” said Dr. Terrence Elliott, HQ DA G-9, DPRR, Prevention Program and Soldier for Life Specialist.

There are four recognized [types](#) of social support: emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal.

- **Emotional:** expressions of empathy, trust, love, grace and care. This type of support involves physical presence, to include listening and understanding.
- **Instrumental:** tangible aid and service. This type of support involves actively stepping in to help someone manage a challenge or problem they are facing.
- **Informational:** Constructive thoughts, advice, recommendations and information. Those offering informational support do so in the form of giving advice or sharing helpful information to help someone navigate a situation.
- **Appraisal:** This type of social support consists of words of encouragement, feedback or validation.

Each form of social support is essential and impactful but may not help everyone in the same way. Some individuals may have a favorite kind or a mix of preferences. It is common to rely on different people for various kinds of support or to feel more experienced in giving your loved ones a specific type of support.

Furthermore, there is a proven link between social support and health and wellness. “Ultimately, connection and community are key outlets for (Soldiers) to heal,” stated Marco A. Bongioanni, U.S. Army veteran and Licensed Mental Health Counselor. According to a [study](#) published by the *Journal of Research in Medical Sciences*, individuals with a robust support system experienced diminished stress, resulting in lowered chances of chronic illnesses, better sleep and an overall better state of well-being.

Along with improving physical resilience, social support can also help build emotional resilience through companionship. “Strong social connections can make it easier to ask for and give help when someone is going through difficult times,” said Heather Hassinger, Chief, R2 Training Branch.

“When individuals have a strong social connection, it pulls them into the community, giving a sense of purpose and helps to build teamwork and trust to accomplish a mission.”

The absence of adequate social support can pose significant risks to Soldiers. Those who lack appropriate social support may struggle with feelings of isolation and can be more susceptible to emotional challenges. “Social connectedness is critical to psychological resilience; it is the glue that

bonds Soldiers together into cohesive units. Loneliness resulting from a lack of social connection has been associated with increased risk of depression and suicide,” said Dr. Ian Gutierrez and Dr. Madhavi Reddy, Clinical Research Psychologists at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, Research Transition Office.

How to strengthen your connections and social support network

Despite the curveballs that Army life may throw that may impact one’s social life, it is possible for anyone to create new connections or build the bonds needed to benefit from a strong support network. The following tips may help anyone looking to strengthen their connections and grow their social support network.

Be proactive. Make an effort in your relationships. “Finding ways to express feelings with trusted others and respond encouragingly in kind can help create bonds of trust and support that foster greater cohesion and connectedness,” Gutierrez and Reddy said.

Work on your social skills and expand your circle. Improving one’s social skills can strengthen and grow one’s support network as well as build psychological flexibility. “A psychologically flexible individual can quickly adapt to a changing environment. ... Social skills aid in our ability to navigate life’s challenges by minimizing suffering, pain and frustration,” Bongioanni said.

Reach out and ask for help. It may be hard for Soldiers to seek support in general, but it may be particularly difficult for men to ask for help when they need it because they may view seeking help as a sign of weakness. However, regardless of someone’s binary classification, it’s normal and natural to need or want social support. “All humans have a universal need for connection,” Bongioanni said.

“Human connection gives meaning to our lives. Additionally, a welcoming community that promotes connection enhances this effort. It takes courage and strength to embrace social support in environments like the military because they can at times make us feel vulnerable.”

To conclude, giving and receiving healthy, consistent social support can make a significant, positive impact in the lives of Soldiers and their Families. Building strong relationships can serve as a protective factor across teams, offices, installations and countries.

“The Army community has been my Family for the last 24 years. I literally have a worldwide network of supportive friends. The Army and my friends have developed me and continue to push and support me,” said Col. Kevin Goke, U.S. Army Chief of Behavioral Health.

The U.S. Army and other military partner organizations offer a number of resources to help Soldiers and Families strengthen their support networks. For resources, visit:

- [Morale, Welfare and Recreation](#)
- [Army Community Service](#)
- [Family Advocacy Program](#)
- [R2 Performance Centers](#)
- [Military OneSource](#)
- Veterans Affairs: [Whole Health Pathway](#)