

Lesson 5 - Building a support network

In this lesson, we will focus on ways to build a support network that can provide ongoing assistance and encouragement to help you improve your mental health and wellbeing and better manage some of the emotional challenges associated with living with arthritis.

By building a strong support network that includes friends, family, support groups, peer networks, and mental health professionals, people living with arthritis can improve their mental wellbeing, find comfort in shared experiences, and receive the necessary support.



Key points

1. Social support from friends and family or peer networks tailored for people with arthritis can help reduce stress, depression, and anxiety.
2. Emotional support reduces feelings of isolation and loneliness and provides a sense of belonging and security.
3. Raising awareness about how your arthritis affects your mental health (and vice versa) can help break down stigmas and misconceptions.



Support from family and friends and from peer groups

Having a strong social support system of friends and family members can help people living with arthritis experience less stress, depression, and anxiety and better manage these experiences when they occur. Sharing what you need in the way of support with the people closest to you opens new opportunities for them to provide comfort, understanding, and encouragement. Being open about your experiences, emotions, and concerns with your friends and family members can create a sense of understanding, empathy, and connection.

For most people, social support is vital to feeling less isolated and lonely. Having a reliable support system is one of the best ways to succeed at adopting healthier lifestyles such as being more physically active, eating a diet full of whole foods, managing and preventing stress, and getting enough sleep – all of which are essential for managing both arthritis and mental health.¹ Friends and family can offer encouragement and help in navigating the healthcare system, making the management of arthritis more manageable. Social support systems can also help with daily tasks that can be physically challenging such as transportation, meal preparation, or attending medical appointments.²

Many cities and regions offer arthritis support groups – both online and in-person. Most people find it very helpful to have the opportunity to share their experiences with others who understand the day-to-day challenges of living with arthritis. Peer groups can provide a safe space for sharing experiences and practical tips, as well as getting emotional support and encouragement from others who understand what you are going through. Identifying and actively engaging with arthritis patient communities can help combat feelings of isolation and provide a sense of belonging. The Canadian Mental Health Association offers important information on how to build an effective social support system for yourself [here](#).



Advocating for yourself and others like you

Self-advocacy involves speaking up for oneself, making informed decisions, and seeking the resources and support needed for well-being. Advocating for yourself and others within the arthritis community can be an empowering step in managing mental health challenges. Raising awareness about the impact of arthritis on your mental health, at home or at work, can help break down stigmas and misconceptions surrounding stress, depression, and anxiety. Sharing your experiences in a safe and respectful environment can promote understanding and increase empathy and support within the community.

At a societal level, advocacy is the key to driving research and innovation, promoting systemic change and creating more inclusive health systems. Many individuals have found that participating in patient advocacy groups or campaigns can be life changing for them. On a personal level, advocacy is empowering and increases confidence to self-advocate in clinical settings. It raises awareness and reduces the stigma and misunderstandings about the mental health challenges that arise from living with arthritis in our society. Advocacy is the key to driving research and innovation, promoting systemic change and creating more inclusive health systems. Many individuals have found that participating in patient advocacy groups or campaigns can be life changing for them. On a personal level, advocacy is empowering and increases confidence to self-advocate in clinical settings. At a societal level, advocacy is the key to driving research and innovation, promoting systemic change and creating more inclusive health systems. It raises awareness and reduces the stigma and misunderstandings about the mental health challenges that arise from living with arthritis in our society. Advocacy can also help highlight the barriers to treatment that people with arthritis face like long wait times in health systems that erode mental health, and inadequate access to and coverage for mental health services particularly among underserved groups. Click [here](#) for some self-advocacy tips.

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By becoming an advocate, you can help increase the availability of supportive and inclusive healthcare for arthritis. And as a bonus, you are likely to meet other like-minded brilliant, talented individuals who find meaning and purpose working together to improve the lives of people living with arthritis!

References

1. Martire, L. M., & Helgeson, V. S. (2017). Close relationships and the management of chronic illness: Associations and interventions. *American Psychologist*, 72(6), 601–612. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000066>
2. Uchino, B. N. (2006). Social support and health: A review of physiological processes potentially underlying links to disease outcomes. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 29(4), 377–387. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-006-9056-5>