

MINDFULNESS for a messy life

Building a Support System

This mini-workbook will give you an up-close look at your network of support, help you identify what may be missing, and offer some ideas on how to find the kinds of people who will enhance your life.

The quiz below has traveled the world and the web. And for good reason. It perfectly illustrates the qualities that matter most in the people we surround ourselves with.

See if you can answer the following:

1. Name the five wealthiest people in the world.
2. Name the last five *Heisman Trophy* winners.
3. Name the last five winners of the *Miss America Pageant*.
4. Name ten people who have won the *Nobel* or *Pulitzer Prize*.
5. Name the last half dozen *Academy Award* winners for best actor or actress.
6. Name the last decade's worth of *World Series* winners.

How did you do?

Maybe if you're a writer you got a few of the Pulitzers. If you're a film buff you got an Academy Award winner or two. Most of us though (myself included), can hardly answer any of these. And that's exactly the point. We don't tend to remember the headliners of yesterday-however renowned they may be.

Now try this one:

1. List two teachers who aided your journey through school.
2. Name two friends who have helped you through a difficult time.
3. Name two people who have taught you something worthwhile.
4. Think of two people who have made you feel appreciated and special.
5. Think of two people you enjoy spending time with.
6. Name two people whose stories have inspired you.

Easier?

Undoubtedly yes! Because these are the people that matter in our lives. The people who care, the people who make a difference.

A Powerful Resource

A support system is made up of the people/beings around whom we feel good about ourselves, who we can rely on for support, and who help make our mental health challenges a little more manageable—whether family, friends, coworkers, teachers, neighbors, mentors, spiritual or religious leaders, supervisors, neighbors or pets. Of course, our connection with everyone is unique, and the extent and kind of support they offer us is equally so.

Though we can't depend on any one person for everything (wouldn't that be nice?), our support system as a whole can help us:

- Counter feelings of isolation
- Develop a sense of belonging
- Give us an opportunity for healthy venting (aka a compassionate ear)
- Responsively manage difficult people and circumstances in our lives
- Better handle both emotional and physical challenges
- Remind us that we are cared for
- Stay safe in potentially dangerous circumstances
- Recognize our positive qualities and accomplishments
- Affirm our value as people

Which is to say it's a pretty key piece in this whole mental health puzzle!

Who's who?

Because most of us have many different kinds of relationships in our lives, often complex ones, it can be difficult to say definitively who is acting as part of our support system. I've found in my own life that the people I engage with tend to fall pretty consistently into one of the following three categories:

- 1) **An Ally**-someone who consistently has your best interests at heart.
- 2) **A Saboteur**, someone who sabotages you, either intentionally or unintentionally.
- 3) **A "Waverer"** someone who goes back and forth between being an ally and a saboteur depending upon the circumstances.

Let's explore these categories in a little more depth to better identify which people in our lives might be playing which role

Allies

Allies are people who consistently make a positive contribution to our lives. They come in all forms, from all different parts of our lives. Whatever their generation or background, they tend to be people with whom we share a common set of values, particularly with regard to relationships and how we think people should be treated. Allies make us feel better about ourselves, about possibilities for the future, and about life in general. Most importantly, they directly or indirectly help support our mental wellness.

We can think of allies as the people on our team, all of whom want to see us do well. But our allies all have unique strengths and weaknesses, and our relationships with them reflect that. For instance, we may have an adoring friend whose own struggles with mental health make the connection with them feel shaky, or a totally grounded friend who simply can't understand what it is to contend with mental unwellness.

So, we come to depend on different people for different things. For example, we might call on a particular friend for compassion and advice during times of personal crisis, but we don't call them when we're overwhelmed because their methods for managing stress don't work for us. We may find that an older relative doesn't understand or relate to our current life goals, but we really value our weekly conversations with them as a reminder of their core values and love for us. We may be able to depend on some allies on a regular basis, while others may not be as accessible but they can still be counted on when really needed.

Whoever your allies, and however they offer support, reach out for help when you need it. For instance, if you have someone(s) in your life right now that you consider an ally, you might want to share with them your experience of taking this course, and if at any point you feel like you need a little push or moral support as you go through it, ask if they'd be willing to give that to you.

And if you don't have active allies in your life right now, know that they are out there. Check out *Finding Allies* below for some ideas on how to meet people. You don't have to go it alone!

Saboteurs

“Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great.” -Mark Twain

Very simply, a saboteur is someone who undermines us, whether intentionally or unintentionally, directly or indirectly. Most of us have at least one saboteur in our lives, though often we don't realize it because we consider them 'close'. There are those who intentionally try to sabotage us (who I refer to here as “detractors”), perhaps by belittling us, our dreams, or actively putting obstacles in our way.

Then there are those who encourage our destructive habits, bring us down, and just generally have a negative influence on our lives (who I refer to as 'negative influencers'). It's critical to our mental and emotional well-being that we identify the *saboteurs* in our lives and determine how best to diminish or eradicate their impact.

Detractors

Detractors are the most actively negative people in our lives. They consistently make us feel badly about ourselves, our future, or life in general. Often, their behavior is that of a full-on bully. Detractors don't typically share our values, and they rarely relate to or care about our struggles, our aspirations, or our need for emotional support and stability. However, detractors will often claim to have our best interests at heart, and may even believe they do (does “*I'm telling you this for your own good*” sound familiar?). Regardless, it's important that we see their behavior for what it is: sabotage!

Negative Influencers

Negative influencers may not be intentionally undermining us, but their outlook (created by their own negative psychological filters) and/or behavior nonetheless causes harm. Whether they are operating under the influence of a damaged, disconnected, or disempowered filter, their negativity can be contagious. Often these people don't want us to change for the better or simply don't see the need for it. And because we may see in them aspects of ourselves that we want to change, *negative influencers* can really get under our skin, making it difficult to build and maintain our own positive psychological filters.

Waverers

The waverers are the people in our lives who can't clearly be placed in either of these categories. Often this is someone who seems to make both positive and negative contributions to our lives in equal measure, or someone who, for whatever reason, we can't quite get a handle on. This might be a boss who never gives us a hard time, but also never compliments our work, or a friend who always knows what to say, but who can never follow through because something always seems to get in the way. As we go about building and maintaining a healthy support system, it's increasingly important to determine whether the waverers are acting more as allies or saboteurs.

How Can We Tell The Difference? Consider the filters.

I have heard this a million times: "People always show you who they are. Believe them." I agree but I'd like to amend that advice a bit:

People show you who they think they are. Even more specifically, who they think they are in relation to you.

In other words, we bring out certain things in some people, other things in other people, and vice versa—depending upon countless psychological, circumstantial, even biological factors. So I may be at my calm, easy-going best around a friend who makes others ill at ease. Or I may be anxious around someone around whom others typically feel comfortable simply because they trigger me in some way. Our personality, body language, "energy," communication style, values, all align—or don't—with others for so very many reasons.

So, beyond recognizing our own psychological filters, it can be hugely helpful to identify the filters driving the people we spend time with. After all, they are either reinforcing and reflecting back to us the best or worst of ourselves and the world around us.

The easiest way to determine whose filters are lifting us up and whose are dragging us down is to consider how we feel about ourselves, and life in general, when we're around them. When we bring to mind a person we spend a lot of time with, we probably get an initial gut reaction. The thought of them might, for example, make us smile or make us feel anxious, or comforted, or leave us confused.

Although these gut feelings might be a reasonably good indicator of who in our lives is an ally and who is not, the distinction isn't always an easy one to make. Sometimes the people we rely on and think well of, are not actually helping us (though they themselves may be totally unaware of that fact). However, because we believe we need them, we choose to overlook some of the telling signs.

For example:

-You have formed a fairly strong bond with someone, and yet never feel completely at ease with them.

-You greatly enjoy a friend's company, but realize you always feel depleted or down after having spent time with them.

-You have a friend who doesn't directly put you down but somehow you always feel slightly condescended to or judged.

Of course, not everyone brings out either our best or worst—many people bring out a mix of both. Ultimately though, we want to be able to make an informed decision about who we spend time with. Below is a great exercise to help you do that. The **Who's On My Team Worksheet** below will help you determine who in your life is acting as an ally, a saboteur or a waverer.

Support Systems Are Not Fixed Entities

It would be ideal if we all had a solid group of people we could count on indefinitely, but for most of us, some degree of social impermanence is an inevitability of life. As we grow and change, so too, do our relationships. We may have what feels like a perfect-fitting friendship during a rough time in our lives that doesn't seem to work as well when we're doing better. Likewise, we may have friendships or family connections that feel supportive when we're doing well but can't withstand the rough patches.

It can take years for the reality of an ill-fitting relationship to sink in; other times it hits us like a lightning bolt. Either way, it's never easy to let go of someone we thought would be there forever. It is though, an opportunity for self-reflection; to understand the dynamics of the given relationship—what worked, what didn't—and our contribution to each. It's also an opportunity to demonstrate self-compassion; reminding ourselves that these situations are just a natural part of life and not an indication of personal failings.

Finding Allies

You've now taken a close look at some of the people in your life to determine how they may or may not fit as part of your support system. That network however is always expanding and evolving and there may be any number of potential allies already in your orbit that you've overlooked or have yet to meet. The following exercise will help jumpstart your search.

1. *Take out a sheet of paper and head it Finding Allies. Then make a list of people based on the following:*

Who you already know

A good place to start your search is in your personal contact list. Take a few minutes to scroll through the contacts stored in your phone or email address book. This can help you identify people who, for whatever reason, you may not have thought of as potential sources of support. That might include for example, someone you really liked but fell out of touch with, or a friendly acquaintance you've not pursued a friendship with, assuming (perhaps incorrectly) that you don't have much in common with them.

Where you go and what you do

Think about where you spend your time and the activities you're involved in. There could be opportunities for connection you may have overlooked. If you find yourself struggling to come up with examples, remember that a great way of expanding your support system is by trying new things—and it's a great mental health booster as well!

2. *Based on the suggestions below (or any others you may have), make a list of some of the activities you'd be willing to try as a way of meeting new people.*

Branching out

Some of the many ways to find your "people" are: MeetUp Groups, taking a class, joining a club, a meditation group, social justice activities, spiritual or religious organizations, support groups, sports teams, activity groups, mom's or dad's groups, or the dog park (assuming of course you have a dog!).

Volunteering is another great people-resource, and gives you an opportunity to get to know your community from a unique perspective, and meet people who care about making a meaningful contribution to the world.

And if you have the time and resources, taking a social-impact trip—also known as voluntourism—is a great way to make meaningful connections with like-minded folks. Check out the Impact Travel Alliance for some great ideas on social-good travel and Relief Riders International for what I’ve heard are life-changing volunteer vacations).

Know this: there are good people out there and the more chances you take—however uncomfortable—the more likely you are to meet them—often in places you least expect!

Asking for Help

Even with a support system in place, it can still be difficult to acknowledge when we need a hand, and harder still to ask for it. However, the benefits can be invaluable, particularly when we’re contending with mental health challenges.

If you’re in need of support, consider who you think might be receptive to a request and reach out. If you’re not sure of what to say, read over this list and see if any of these suggestions resonate.

“I’m not exactly sure what to ask for, but I’m feeling really (depressed/anxious/afraid) right now and don’t want to be alone. Can we meet up?”

“Things have been really hard for me lately—emotionally/psychologically—and I could really use a friend, even just to do something fun and distracting.”

“I’m having a hard time now and would be so grateful if you’d check in on me (daily/weekly/occasionally) to make sure I’m okay.”

“Things have been rough for me lately. I could really use a little boost. If there’s a nice memory you have of me, or just something about me you like or appreciate, would you share it with me?”

“I’ve been struggling a lot lately with my mental health and could really use your help in figuring out some things I can do to feel better.”

“I could really use a friend right now.”



Who's on My Team?

The following assessment will give you a sense of how much of a positive or negative impact certain people are having on your life.

1. Across the top row, write the three qualities you most value in a friend/companion.
2. Down the left column, write the names of the three people you spend the most time with.
3. For each person, go across their row and circle a check mark for traits you feel they definitely possess and an X for those qualities you feel they definitely don't possess. Circle both if you feel they demonstrate that quality intermittently.
4. Next, write in any examples of the person either demonstrating that quality or its opposite. If you circled both, try to include an example of both.

Traits I value → People ↓			
	✓ X	✓ X	✓ X
	✓ X	✓ X	✓ X
	✓ X	✓ X	✓ X

Now you're going to go a little deeper by asking yourself some tough but helpful questions about these same three people. When answering the following questions, try not to over-think, but instead just give your gut-level response. It can be difficult to be this brutally honest, especially about people you love or depend upon. Remember though, this exercise is for the purpose of gathering information – information which may change in the future, and which you can use whenever and in whatever way is most helpful.

In the chart below, circle **Y** for Yes, **N** for No, and **S** for sometimes.

People →			
I feel like we agree about how people should be treated.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
I feel good about myself when I'm with this person.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
I feel optimistic when I'm with this person.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
I feel accepted as who I am by this person.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
This person encourages me.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
This person demonstrates their faith in me.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
This person has been there when I've needed them.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
It feels like this person really wants me to do well.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
I feel like the best aspects of my personality come out when I'm with this person.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
I feel understood when I'm with this person.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
This person treats me with respect	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
This person is honest with me.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
This person does what they say they're going to do.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
I feel safe with this person.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S
This person would go out of their way for me.	Y N S	Y N S	Y N S

Now, you may have gotten all the information you need from a review of the first two parts of this exercise, but if you feel like you want to quantify your answers to get a clearer picture of “who’s on your team”, then this last part will help you do that. You’re going to give each person 3 points for every *check* you gave them on Page 1. Then you're going to give them 2 points for each *Yes* answer on page 2. Finally, give 1 point for each sometimes answer on pages 1 and 2.

Person 1 name:	
How many ✓'s on page 1?	___ x 3 = ___
How many Y on page 2?	___ x 2 = ___
How many "sometimes" answers on either page?	___ x 1 = ___
TOTAL = ___	

Person 2 name:	
How many ✓'s on page 1?	___ x 3 = ___
How many Y on page 2?	___ x 2 = ___
How many "sometimes" answers on either page?	___ x 1 = ___
TOTAL = ___	

Person 3 name:	
How many ✓'s on page 1?	___ x 3 = ___
How many Y on page 2?	___ x 2 = ___
How many "sometimes" answers on either page?	___ x 1 = ___
TOTAL = ___	

Scoring

1-5 = Absolute Saboteur: This person is actively attempting to keep you from succeeding.

5-12 = Saboteur: Whether or not it's intentional, this person is standing in the way of you achieving your goals in life.

13-20 = Potential Saboteur: While this person may occasionally offer something positive, they more consistently make a negative contribution.

21-28 = Potential Ally: This person brings good into your life, despite aspects of their personality not being aligned fully with your needs and values.

29-34 = Ally: They may not always express their support exactly as you want, but you know that this person supports you and wants to see you do well.

35-39 = Absolute Ally: You feel this person is absolutely on your team, has your best interests at heart, and will come through for you when you need.