

# SUPPORT:

## *What Happens When You Don't Have it?*

by Kelly Theim Hurst, PhD

*Anyone who has ever tried to lose weight and keep it off – especially throughout the holiday season or the other ups and downs that life offers – knows that it can be quite a challenge.*

What can make this process even more difficult to manage, however, is not having enough (or the right types of) support for your efforts. Most people are lucky enough to have a few important people in their lives – perhaps a spouse or partner, family member, friends, co-workers, neighbors, etc. But even when you have people around you, there is no guarantee that you can or will get the support you need.

Of the people in your life, give some thought as to which ones know about your weight management goals. Then, ask yourself these questions:

- *WHO would you expect to support you through this process?*
- *HOW could they support you? (This question is equally important!)*
- *HAVE you ever expected someone's unwavering support only to realize that they disappointingly came up short in this department?*



Everyone's social network is different, but one common expectation you may have of people who are close to you is that of having their full support if and when you need it. In fact, the people around you oftentimes do want to do and say things that will be helpful to you, but they may not know how. This may have happened to you, too, when a loved one is in need and you think, "I don't know quite what to say" or "What can I do that would help?"

This scenario is common for a few reasons. One, there is often not a "perfect" or "right" thing to do or say. The important thing is that you want to help, but you may need some guidance on how you can best do so. Furthermore, people may not really know what they need others to do or say to support them in their weight-loss journey. Identifying what you need can be a difficult but very important step on the road to getting the right support.

## IDENTIFY YOUR NEEDS

To figure this out, set aside some time to think about those people who are close to you and what specifically they could do or say to help. This could be as simple as listening to you talk when you're feeling frustrated or discouraged, or helping to distract you with a movie or a walk to decrease stress. Perhaps there are words you'd like to hear such as "I'm really proud of you for keeping up with your plan this week!" You may also know that there are things you would like someone to stop doing or say to you. For example, you may not want someone bringing tempting foods into the house or asking, "Are you sure you should be eating that?" at dinnertime.

Keep in mind that you may need different types of support from different people in your life. For example, it might feel right to talk about your emotions with your partner, sibling or close friend.

From your boss, however, you may need practical support such as having healthier snacks in the break room or more flexibility to go to a doctor's appointment during the work day. Remember, you have the right to ask for what you need!

## COMMUNICATE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

So, say you've figured out the support you need. Even people who know you really well can't be expected to read your mind! It is up to you to communicate to others how they can best help you. To help this process go as smoothly as possible, try to find a good time to talk – such as when neither you nor the other person is particularly tired, stressed, upset or hungry. Having a calm and open conversation about how you're feeling is the best environment to recruit extra support.

Compromise is key as well! You may have ideas about the type and degree of support you would want in a perfect world, but you should be willing to talk about what the other person feels is doable. For example, say you really want your best friend to also be your gym buddy for some extra fun and accountability. He or she may not be able to (or want) to make that commitment – but if you keep an open mind, maybe there's another idea you could offer such as having them call you to ask how you're doing or to remind you of your goals each week while you're starting a new habit. Setting realistic expectations of how much others can be there to support you will prevent extra disappointment or frustration later down the road.

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## MANAGING UNHELPFUL SUPPORT

Sometimes, despite admirable efforts to identify what you need and spell it out clearly for others, there may still be people in your life who are less than helpful... or even downright sabotaging whether they mean to be or not. You probably know “sabotage” when you see it or feel it. For example, a co-worker may know very well that you are trying to avoid sweets (you’ve even kindly reminded him/her), but continues to deliver special treats straight to your desk. Perhaps you’ve told your spouse or partner several times that you want to avoid a certain food, but it appears on the kitchen counter each week anyway. Maybe family members push more food onto you at the dinner table even when you make it clear that you’re full.

Although they’re only human, and they may forget your requests even when they seem obvious, people can sometimes have mixed feelings about your weight goals and habits. They might even be struggling to manage their own weight whether they talk about it or not. For example, a friend may be secretly (or not so secretly) unhappy with you if you want to cut back on your Happy Hour tradition so that you can have time to cook dinner at home or go for a walk, so she may even try to guilt you into changing your mind. Your health efforts might also lead some people to feel badly about their own habits – even if that wasn’t your intention – or simply feel uncomfortable or inconvenienced by a change from the familiar. Change is hard and it often happens slowly with bumps in the road. Be patient and stay firm in your original request (assuming it’s a realistic and reasonable request), such as saying “I still really want to see you, but it’s hard for me to go out to eat so often. Maybe there’s something else we could do together that day?”

## FIND ENCOURAGEMENT IN OTHERS

Lastly, some people do not have enough support people in their network. Sometimes friends or family move away, or life’s path seems to diverge and leave you feeling like your social circle is limited. If this feels like your situation, then weight management can feel like a particularly lonely path. Remember to use email, Skype, or even the good old telephone to reach out to anyone who helps you feel loved and supported. Even if someone doesn’t know exactly how to help you in your weight-loss efforts, take advantage of the powerful mood boost that can come from reminding yourself that you have people who care about you.

Although it’s always great to have someone in your corner, you can keep up with your weight management goals even if you just don’t have supportive people in your life right now. Try regularly talking to yourself in a positive way to remind yourself that, no matter what others do to help you or hold you back, you CAN do this! You likely have many tools and resources to help you manage your weight and health – and when you need an extra boost, call in reinforcements!

Losing weight can be an opportunity to form new connections with supportive people, whether it’s a more organized weight management group or even a non-weight-related group that lines up with your healthy lifestyle goals. Look for people who have similar interests like a yoga class, hiking group or healthy cooking class. Surround yourself with like-minded people, and you never know when you might strike up a new connection!

### **About the Author:**

*Dr. Hurst is a clinical psychologist who specializes in helping people achieve a variety of weight and health-related goals. With an emphasis on personalized care and evidence-based approaches, she loves working with individuals on creating and sustaining meaningful behavior changes.*





# ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

## LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

### Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
  - Community Discussion Forum
  - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



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