



7. HOW TO NURTURE MY SOCIAL NETWORK?

Specific workshop objectives

At the end of the workshop, the young person will be able to:

- Discover the benefits of nature on their well-being;
- Understand the importance of their social support network in dealing with anxiety-provoking situations;
- Analyze the quality of their social support network;
- Take steps to maintain or develop their social support network;
- Call on this network when faced with an anxiety-provoking situation.

How the workshop works

Welcome the students and present the workshop objectives and how it will work.

A. Mindfulness in nature (30 min.)

(If you decide to stay indoors, the activity will take approximately 15 minutes.)

The activity involves experiencing and discovering the benefits of nature on mental health and, by extension, on anxiety. Many studies have shown the positive impact of time spent in nature on mental health (Ikei *et al.*, 2017; Borelli, 2016; Ulrich, 1984). By helping the students to better understand this and experience it through mindfulness, you are giving them tools to improve their well-being.

This activity requires access to an outdoor setting such as a park, forest, woodland, or yard with trees, preferably within a 10-minute walk. The environment does not need to be especially wild; you can also just go outside.

Even though you need to be in nature to feel its benefits, the activity can still be done indoors with the same explanations but other activities: Observe the effect of natural light or look at nature through the window, handle a piece of rough wood, listen to the birds singing (in a YouTube video, for example), smell essential oils (evergreen trees), etc. If the surroundings are

suitable, move around a little between each step for a change of scenery.

Sight:

1. Tell the students to look all around them, far away and up close, at the sky and at the ground, breathing deeply as they carefully observe their environment for two or three minutes.
2. Explain that natural light stimulates essential functions in the brain, nervous system and endocrine system, which have a positive effect on mood and energy (Edwards and Torcellini, 2002). Research has also shown that simply observing nature through a window reduced the use of painkillers in patients recovering from surgery (Ulrich, 1984).
3. Remind the students of the importance of spending time outside every day to get some natural light—in nature, if possible.

Hearing:

4. Then tell the students to listen closely to the sounds around them: nearby, in the distance, pleasant and unpleasant. Do they notice any moments of silence? They can simply spend a few minutes focusing on these sounds and their effects on them.
5. They will probably hear sounds of human activity (cars, planes, factories, etc.). Explain that true silence is increasingly rare. In North America, there are only about a dozen places remaining where no human sounds can be heard at dawn. Yet, silence has been recognized as a kind of hot shower for the brain, releasing tension in just two minutes (Borrelli, 2016). Nature sounds also help people to recover from psychological stress. Bird song is most often associated with this phenomenon and with the recovery of attention span (Ratcliffe *et al.*, 2013).
6. Remind the students of the importance of taking breaks, in silence, and ideally in nature.

Touch:

7. Tell the students place their palm against the bark of a tree, ideally with their eyes closed. Tell them to take a few deep breaths and hold their position for at least 90 seconds.
8. Explain that touching the bark with their palm calms their prefrontal cortex, activates their parasympathetic nervous system, and triggers physiological relaxation (Ikei *et al.*, 2017). The bark also protects the tree against bacteria, since the tree can't run away. The ground is also full of bacteria, including a specific one we can inhale in nature—*mycobacterium vaccae*—that has been shown to increase serotonin levels and decrease anxiety (Ikei *et al.*, 2017).
9. Remind them of the importance of sitting on the ground, gardening, touching the trees or even rough wood.

Smell:

10. Tell the students to take deep breaths and feel the air entering their lungs. Is it cold? Warm? Dry? Humid? What smells do they recognize?



11. Explain that the air is cleaner under the trees, because they act as a filter. Trees also release phytoncides, known to strengthen the immune system and reduce stress hormones (American Society of Microbiology, 2010). A substance produced by evergreens also promotes relaxation.
12. Remind them of the importance of spending time in the forest or around trees.
13. Wrap up by explaining that humans have spent 99% of their existence in nature and that our current urban lifestyle has many negative consequences. Spending time in nature can help them better manage their anxiety. For example, a 30-minute walk in nature reduces sympathetic nerve activity (which increases stress), increases parasympathetic nerve activity (which increases relaxation), lowers blood pressure and heart rate, and decreases cortisol and stress hormone levels (Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs, 2019).

B. The week in review (10 min.)

1. Briefly review the challenge given at the end of the 5th workshop. Ask the students if they tried any strategies to cope with more stressful situations in the past few weeks.
2. Now, ask the students how their week went. How did you feel in general? Did you step outside of your comfort zone? If so, in which situations? If not, why?
3. Next, review the two specific questions from the previous two weeks: 1) What lifestyle habit has helped you reduce your anxiety in the past few weeks? How did it help you? and 2) Did you manage to face an anxiety-provoking situation this week, despite the fear and stress it was causing you? If so, what did you do? What gave you the courage or strength to do it?
4. If you want to go into more detail, you can ask the following questions:
 - Did you learn anything new about yourself?
 - Did you notice anything different about the way you perceive or react to certain situations?
 - Did you learn anything about your comfort zone and your personal objective?

C. The importance of my social support network (45 min.)

1. Ask the students why they think it's important to surround themselves with supportive people they can trust. Complete with the following explanations:

Having a social support network is a protection factor in coping with stress and life events. It helps meet various personal and social needs, including support for self-esteem (through the appreciation that others feel for us), the feeling of usefulness (by feeling useful to others, which increases our self-esteem), emotional support (by providing comfort, listening, and understanding), concrete help in terms of favours and occasional financial assistance, relevant



information (by giving relevant advice, information about opportunities), academic support, support for social integration (helping to make new friends, meet new people), etc. This social support network can also help when it comes to dealing with the developmental stages of adolescence. Being able to rely on different people is reassuring (Pauzé , 2019).

During adolescence, it's important that a teen's social support network include both adults (parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers, coaches) and peers (friends, classmates, teammates, cousins). A balanced network is therefore made up of adults and young people (Pauzé *et al.*, 2019).

What matters most is not the number of people in the social support network, but the satisfaction derived from this support and the quality of the relationships. Having friends who are arguing with each other can be more stressful than comforting (Claes, 2003).

When you are feeling stressed or dealing with an anxiety-provoking situation, the main role of the people in the social support network is to provide support by being present, understanding and available, and listening without judging, while providing support and relevant information (Pauzé *et al.*, 2019).

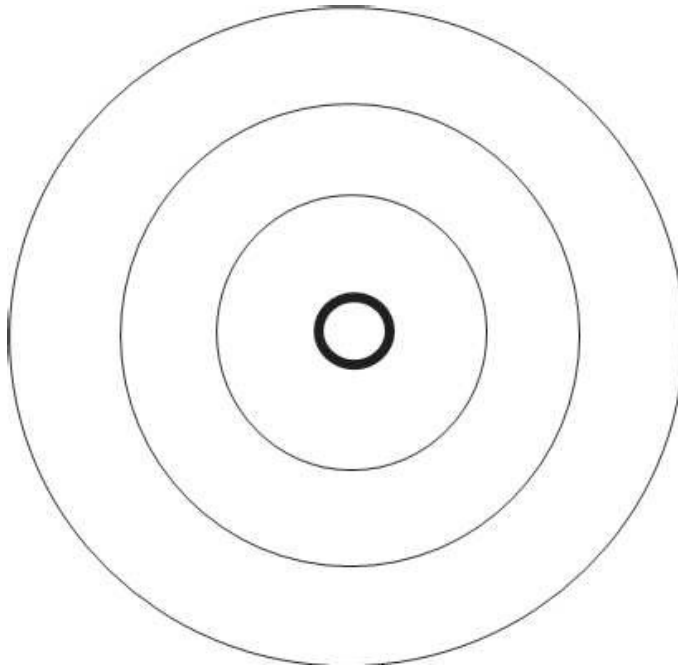
To better understand the importance of peers during adolescence, refer to the following information. Feel free to summarize in your own words.

According to several researchers, successfully fitting in with a peer group and forming friendships act as protective factors when it comes to the many changes that accompany the start of adolescence, whether physical, family related, social, or academic (Claes, 2003). In fact, heart-to-heart conversations with friends can help to lessen the anxiety related to transitioning to adolescence; they can also help to increase self-esteem and coping skills. Friendships also create feelings of security and well-being. They make you feel like you're "somebody," like you're important and have value and status. Finally, friendships are an important source of support during stressful events. Researchers have found that the quality of friendships is more important than the number of friends a person has (Claes, 2003).

Having friends to confide in, share concerns with, and trade opinions with creates feelings of security and support. Conversely, feeling alienated (angry, distant) from your friends is linked to mental health issues, such as symptoms of depression and anxiety. A lack of friendships, or poor-quality or rocky friendships, are also risk factors for the eventual appearance of mental health disorders such as anxiety (Claes, 2003).



2. Now, present the social support network map (adapted from Desmarais, Blanchet and Mayer, 1982), which is in their *Handy student guide*. This activity will allow them to think about the significant people in their life and the roles these people play.



3. Give them the instructions for drawing the map:

- You are in the middle.
- Think about how the people in your life are grouped into different categories (e.g., school, hobbies, family, teachers, counsellors, etc.). On the map, draw a wedge (slice of pie) for each group. The size of the wedge should correspond to the importance of that group in your life.
- For each group, think about significant people and write them on the map according to the following:
 - In the first circle (small one), write the names of the people you see every day (your inner circle).
 - In the second circle (medium one), write the names of the people you see on a regular basis.
 - In the third circle (big one), write the names of the people you see only rarely. You can write their first name or their initials.
- Once everyone is listed on your map, draw arrows representing the reciprocal nature of each relationship. An arrow pointing from you to the other person means you are giving more than you are receiving in this relationship; an arrow pointing from the other person to you means you are receiving more than you are giving in this relationship; an arrow

pointing in both directions means you are both giving as much as you are receiving.

4. Once the map is completed, go back over some of the concepts:

Reciprocity (the arrows). You may have friends who ask for a lot but give little in return. Over time, these friends can become a source of stress in your life. On the other hand, if you take a lot from certain relationships but give little in return, these people may burn out, or you may end up feeling like you owe them something. It's also important to think about the level of support that some people can provide. Some relationships can become "safe havens" when you're anxious and can even enable you in avoiding stressful situations.

The different categories (wedges). It's important to maintain balance in this area as well. If your social support network is made up mostly of your parents and family members, you may end up isolated at school. Staying with your family can be comforting, but it can cause you to avoid spending time with your peers. So it's important to learn how to connect with people your own age. On the contrary, if your only significant ties are with your friends, you deprive yourself of the possible support of your family.

Frequency (circles). It can also be interesting to observe how many people are in the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd circles, and how well you get along with these people. If your main sources of support are all in the 3rd circle (people you see rarely), then you may not be getting enough support. It may be worthwhile to find ways to spend more time with them. And if the reciprocity of the relationships with the people in the 1st circle isn't ideal, it could be a good idea to work on the quality of these relationships, since these are people you see often.

5. Ask them to answer these questions in their *Handy student guide*:

- Do I feel like my social support network is balanced?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied am I with my social support network, 1 being "not at all satisfied" and 10 being "completely satisfied"?
- Can I identify two ways to improve the quality of my social support network?

6. Once this is done, encourage the students to present their network maps to the group and express their level of satisfaction. Ask them to identify the people they can rely on when they're anxious. Ask them to explain how these people help them during difficult times. Confirm the steps they plan to take to improve the quality of their network.

7. Often, this activity highlights the difficulty some students have with making friends—and the sense of helplessness this creates. Listen to their experiences with compassion and without judging. Then, as a group, try to figure out what they can do in this situation: What things do they have power over? Explore the possible strategies for making new friendships and maintaining good relationships. Write the answers on the board and complete with this list of strategies (Jeunesse J'écoute, n.d.; Mayo Clinic, 2016; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.):



Establish good relationships:

- Smile, be relaxed;
- Make jokes;
- Appreciate the person, show interest in them;
- Compliment their accomplishments and skills;
- Make eye contact with the person you're talking to or who is talking to you;
- Practise active listening, show signs that you're listening (agree, nod);
- Take the first steps to talk to someone;
- Ask questions about the other person's situation and experiences;
- Take the time to listen before resuming the discussion;
- Identify shared interests;
- Wait your turn to talk;
- Participate in the discussion;
- Use a calm, steady tone of voice;
- Don't try to monopolize the conversation.

Maintain good relationships:

- Listen attentively;
- Get involved, show interest in others;
- Open up, learn to talk about yourself;
- Express yourself clearly and honestly;
- Take initiative, talk about your ideas and projects;
- See and respect other people's points of view;
- Criticize opinions and behaviours, not people;
- Accept criticism from others and tolerate differences;
- Encourage, help, and compliment others;
- Have a sense of humour.

D. This week's challenge (5 min.)

1. Explain that this week's challenge (also in their *Handy student guide*) is to do something to maintain or develop their social support network. Explain, as needed.

