

# Think Tank: Who's got your back?

## Speakers:

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Amy Hopkins: Let's face reality: we're social creatures. We need people in order to thrive, but we also need the right kind of people. So, what is a support system and why is it important to have one? We're going to talk about that today. Welcome to the Think Tank Podcast.

Hi everyone. This is Amy Hopkins. I'm a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, and I'm here with Angee Bell, Communications Manager, and Lynn Borteck, who is also an LCSW. Hey, Angee and Lynn. How's your week been?

Lynn Borteck: My week's been awesome. Everything has been great. We actually had a little touch of spring, although we're back to winter now, but at least with the time change and the touch of spring, we know that it can't be too far off.

Angee Bell: My week has been pretty wild already. It's kind of like a roller coaster. Pretty busy. The weather is gorgeous, though. I cannot complain. I'm down here in Texas. So, it's very beautiful weather right now. So, that always makes me happy.

Amy Hopkins: Yeah, there is something good about the weather changing to spring. Gives you lots of good hope. So, ladies, we are here today about who's got your back, which is basically talking about the importance of having a support system. And I think we all know that a support system is really the people around you that you trust, and those that are there for you when you need them. Not just when times are good, but also when times are tough. So, Angee, tell me about who's in your support system.

Angee Bell: I think when I think about my support system, I think about my family. Of course, I've definitely got my parents. They're always there for me. They've had my back throughout my life in many, many, many, many, many situations. My partner, Chris, he's always by my side and is a

driving force about life. He inspires me all the time, because he's always doing so many different projects, and I know that he definitely has my back. So, those are probably the main people in my support system.

Lynn Borteck: In my support system, I have three really close girlfriends who I can call any time of the day. I'd like to say or night, but probably not true. Anytime of the day. And my husband is really very supportive, and I think, best of all, is my puppy because she's not only supportive, but she doesn't even judge. So, it's really great.

Amy Hopkins: Yeah, there's something. Pets, dogs especially, are the best listeners, and they love you no matter what. So, really, anybody who's got your back - your family members, friends, teachers, peers, coworkers - can be in your support system. But I think what is also interesting is why it's important to have one.

And so, just to kind of touch really briefly on the research, research shows that human connection is critical to maintaining both your physical and your emotional health. Strong social ties boost the immune system, decrease the risk of contracting certain chronic illnesses, and increase the ability to deal with chronic pain. And, of course, having a support system combat social isolation and loneliness. And being isolated and lonely puts you at a higher risk for physical and mental issues, including high blood pressure, a weakened immune system, and anxiety and depression. So, it's really important that we have a good support system.

Lynn Borteck: And I think during COVID, it's been really critical because their husbands so much isolation, maybe more in the past, hopefully, and maybe we're moving out of it a little bit. But I think that the isolation that people felt for the past year has really been difficult. And I think that it's been harder to maintain the support that they need.

Angee Bell: That's a good point. And I think it's so important to have that support system, but it's not always clear who your support system is. And sometimes you may look around and feel like you don't even have a support system. So, what do you do then?

Lynn Borteck: So, that's a really great question because not everybody has a support system, and we found some tips from the American Psychological Association about how to build and how to strengthen your support network. So, let me just start with reaching out to people, not waiting for someone to reach out to you, not counting who called me last, like, "I called her last so she owes me a call," or that kind of thing, but really

calling, staying in touch. Just calling to say, "Hi, how are things?" Or just to have a nice conversation.

Angee Bell: Yeah. And that's a great point. I think it's so important to reach out to your family and friends, especially your friend network. And I think one of the best ways to do that is through technology, especially these days, with different types of situations, family and friends living far away, too. You can easily connect via email and text messaging. Texting. Oh my goodness, my kids, that's all that they use is texting. When I call them they're like, "Hello? This is a speaking device?"

[Laughing]

Amy Hopkins: They don't want to talk on the phone. Everything is through texts anymore.

Angee Bell: They love it. But video calls are really, really cool. My parents are loving that. I showed them how to use it and they were using it in other avenues, too. So, they love that. And it's great because they live a few states away from me, so it's great to be able to see them and connect with them on a regular basis.

Amy Hopkins: You know, and you can use technology to use the third tip, which is to connect with people who share your interests. So, you can join a club or volunteer, or take a class. And that can help you meet people who share your same interests and likes. And I know for me and my family, we have connected with people because of camping and four wheeling and kayaking. I mean, you can even make a connection in the middle of nowhere with people, if you just kind of open yourself up to the possibility. So, I do think that there are lots of ways to connect with people who have the same interests that you do.

Angee Bell: Totally. We meet the coolest people when we go camping. I love it.

Amy Hopkins: Yeah, for sure.

Lynn Bortek: Tip number four is to consider joining peer support groups. And this is really helpful if you are facing a personal challenge, a loss if you're grieving, an illness, or any kind of interest group. If you're a parent and you have parenting challenges, and who doesn't, you can join a peer support group to help take care of yourself mentally and emotionally. And also, you're meeting people who share some of your needs, they're facing something similar, and right away you have a connection and support.

Angee Bell: Yeah, that's great. I think there's so many different resources out there for peer support groups and there's even some apps where you can connect with people and have your own little community based around the same things that you guys are all going through. So, it's a great way for support.

Tip number five is ask for help. That can sometimes be the hardest thing to do and it's not always the most obvious place, where you're going to ask for help. There's a lot of different ways that you can ask for help. You can find resources at your local library, your place of worship, maybe even the community center, to learn a lot more about local events that you might want to attend or some groups that you can join, where you're going to meet new people and you're going to be able to build your support group.

Lynn Borteck: I know in my own family, people have turned to religious groups and have really built wonderful support systems that way, and found a lot of commonality, and also a lot of just spiritual wellness.

Angee Bell: Yeah. When I first moved to the town before this one, cause I moved another time I was brand new to that town. It was a small little town, too, and I didn't really know anybody. And I actually went to the library and there was a group of people that would get together and paint. They do oil painting. And I was like, "This is so neat." So, I jumped on in, and I joined the group.

And it was nice. It was kind of an older group, but we'd all talk and get together every week and paint. And as we were painting, we'd kind of share our stories about her paintings and what they meant to us. So, it was really inspiring. And as you go about your life in the community, you'd run into them and say hi. So, it was a nice way to get out and meet people, and also have a little bit of support in my life.

Amy Hopkins: And the neat thing about that is that you don't have to know how to paint to join that group.

Angee Bell: Exactly.

Amy Hopkins: You're just kind of opening yourself up to the possibility that I can meet people. Again, you were in a small town. So, that's great. That took being vulnerable and a lot of times that's what it takes to be able to expand your support system and make friends that have similar interests as you.

Angee Bell: Totally.

Lynn Borteck:

So now that we talked about five really easy tips for getting a support group and being part of a support group, let's switch to how do you maintain that support group. Because you need to put a little bit of work into it. And we read an article from Psychology Today that gives you some ideas on ways to maintain it.

So, the first tip is to be honest. If you really want to form relationships and supportive and meaningful relationships, you really need to be honest. Nobody can make friends with someone who is being fake, or at least not a friendship that's going to last and not going to become something that you can rely on and that person can rely on you. So, authenticity is really number one.

You also have to open yourself up to let somebody really get to know you, and hopefully that person will let you in also. Ultimately, when trust is really good, or as it gets better, you'll be able to be direct with each other and really honest with each other, not to hurt each other, but to help each other and support each other.

Angee Bell:

Yeah, that's a great point. The honesty part and being authentic. Sometimes, though, people can be too honest, right? Maybe a little too blunt, and it can lead to misunderstandings that can have an impact on how you communicate and how you manage that support system, that friend or whoever it is in your relationship. So, it's helpful to be considerate of other people's feelings.

And also be empathetic, right? You want to be understanding about what others are going through. You may have a particular opinion about it. So as we mentioned, it's important to be authentic and be real. On the other hand, you don't want to say things that could upset the person or put a damper on communication.

You know, honestly, we're all human. We're going to make mistakes from time to time. It's so important to recognize that. It's part of building that relationship. And sometimes you have to apologize and do what you need to do to repair the situation, and to repair the relationship. It's really good to be aware of having some sort of balance in your relationship. There will be some give and there will be some take, and you have to be aware of that.

And sometimes it can be hard to approach the issue, right? Like when I was little, I was always so stubborn and I never wanted to say I was sorry. I never wanted to apologize. It was just something, a hard set in my head. And I had to get over that. I had to learn that through various people that I had friendships with and relationships with, that

sometimes, even though I didn't feel like I was the bigger person that was guilty, I would still apologize first to initiate the conversation and say, "Hey, this is what I did wrong, and I recognize that, and I'm sorry. Let's talk about it."

And that sometimes can open the door to the other person recognizing maybe their faults, what they did, and then having that conversation to talk about it. So, it's definitely good to do things that you can to repair any kinds of misunderstandings.

Lynn Borteck: Yeah. I was just thinking, I have a friend who I've known for more years than I can count. And we are practically sisters. Actually, recently, she was in a real bind and I gave her my very, very, very honest opinion. And it turned out that I hurt her feelings. And I really felt that we knew each other well enough that I could be that direct with her, but I was wrong, and she let me know it. And I had to apologize and rethink the way I was addressing her at that time and what I was assuming she'd be okay with.

Amy Hopkins: Yeah. I think that's the part about relationships, right? Is that, like in tip number one, about being honest, you are opening yourself up. You're being vulnerable. You're allowing people in. You're wanting them to be vulnerable and allow you in and make that connection. So, when you make that connection, step number two, if you do have a moment of tension or conflict, when you have a good relationship, you want to take the steps to correct that. You want to say, "I'm sorry. This is what I did wrong." And you take responsibility for that.

And care for the relationship, right? We've got to care for the relationships of the people that allow us in their lives, and that we allow in ours. So, that third step in kind of maintaining the support system is that you've got to make time and show appreciation. And sometimes we take for granted the ones that are there for us all the time.

I mean, it's easy to do. Mom's always around and we forget to thank mom a lot. I'm at fault for that. But it's so important that we take care of those that take care of us. And that means we make time for them. We tell them, "Thank you." And we make sure that relationship isn't one-sided. You care about them as much as they care about you. And if you want your relationship to be strong, whether that's with your partner or your children or your family or your friends, you have to reciprocate. So, step number three is be sure that you make time for the people in your life, engage of acts of kindness, in words or actions, with those that support you.

Angee Bell: Yeah. I mean, a support system, isn't just a one-way street, right? You're supporting each other, and you're developing that kind of relationship. So, that's a really important point.

Lynn Borteck: I couldn't agree more. It's kind of like when I think about Stonehenge, it's like all of those rocks, but they all have connections. They all need each other to be standing up the way they are. That's what I think about when I think about support.

Angee Bell: Yeah. I like that.

Lynn Borteck: So, tip number four in maintaining supportive relationships is that you have to be flexible and not make assumptions about other people or the way they do things. And also, keep your expectations realistic because people are different. A good example of that is that I'm the kind of person who really likes to pick up a tchotchke for somebody if I see something that I know that they'll love. If I see a little trinket or something inexpensive that I just know somebody's going to love.

I used to do that for my mom all the time, and I do it for a couple of friends who I know very, very well. And you know, one or two of them, they don't operate that way. They don't pick up something in return, and that's okay. But I kind of had to come to a place where I understood that's not how they show that they're thinking of me. They have other ways of showing it. They might call me more often than I pick up the phone. Everybody is different.

So, if I expected everybody to do what I do, then I might be friendless because we're all really different. So, you need to check out with people, if you have any funny feelings or if you feel like you need to adjust expectations, and make sure that you're not getting your feelings hurt, or you're not also possibly hurting someone else's feelings. Just don't make assumptions. Just be honest with people, as we said, and open.

Angee Bell: Yeah. Good point.

Amy Hopkins: Yeah. I completely agree with that. I think we have to be careful about picking apart the people in our lives because they don't do things exactly the same way that we do, or the way that we want, but that kind of goes back to communicating, too. It's like, you know that your friends' love language, for lack of a better term, is not gift-giving but yours is. So, she gives you, Lynn, things that build your relationship that are not gifts. Otherwise, she wouldn't be a long-term girlfriend. So, yeah, I think it's just really looking at the relationship and seeing how

your differences can make things great, and being grateful for those things.

Angee Bell: So I think, when you look at all of these tips, being honest and understanding and apologizing and appreciating each other, for tip number five, we really need to learn how to show compassion in a supportive relationship, versus being maybe a little bit more cynical. I think it's easy. It's easy to quickly judge one another. It's easy to say, "Oh, why did you do that? Oh, I wouldn't have done that. I would've done it this way."

But then on the other hand, you really need to step back and look at what the person's going through right then, and think about what they've been through in the past, too, and put that all into context. And maybe sometimes it's just compassion that you need to show at that moment. Saying, "That's really unfortunate." Or, "Man, that's a hard thing that you went through. And I feel really bad for you." Kind of expressing that empathy versus just trying to judge. Sometimes people just need a little bit of understanding and a little bit of compassion to help them get through.

Amy Hopkins: I think my favorite line in that entire article where we got all these incredible tips is where they talk about doing what's right versus being right. Because if you're in that frame of mind that you have to win, you have to win an argument or you have to win the gift giving or you have to win whatever, it really will ruin a relationship. So, I thought that the article should have been titled, "Doing What's Right, Rather Than Being Right," because it was so poignant to me. That really, when you look at any relationship, that's it right there. Doing what's right is more important than being right.

Angee Bell: I love it.

Amy Hopkins: You know, I think that this has been a really good discussion about the importance of having a good support system. And I just finished this book not too long ago by Brené Brown called *Daring Greatly*. And it really, to me, kind of speaks to why a support system is important. And her quote is, "Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others. It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives."

So, I know with all that's happened in the last two years of my life, I'd be lost without my support system. If you feel like you need additional support, if you feel like you need extra help, please outreach your employee assistance program if you have one, or your human resources, or your insurance to see if you can get additional help to get



you through a tough time. There is no extra points for suffering and it's a sign of strength to get the help that you need.

Thanks for joining the Think Tank Podcast. We'll see you next month, when we talk about how to keep going, when the going gets tough. Bye, everybody. See you next time.

Lynn Borteck: Bye everybody.

Angee Bell: Bye.

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