Perceived Support

Definition

Healthcare workers often face long-term chronic stress including witnessing suffering, extensive working hours, shift work, exposure to traumatic stories, and challenging working conditions. As a result, they are at risk for compassion fatigue, burnout, secondary traumatic stress and moral distress. One of the key ways that you can guard against these risks is through perceived support. Perceived support is one of the essential building blocks of wellbeing for healthcare workers that has been demonstrated to lower rates of compassion fatigue and burnout.[1]

Perceived support is defined as an individual's experience of being cared for or loved, having a sense of being valued and needed by other people, and being part of a mutually supportive network.[1] The essential elements of perceived support consists of both personal and professional supports including:

Personal support (Informal)	Professional support (Formal)
Family	Supervisor support
Friends	Organization support and commitment to wellbeing
Emotional support: the feeling of being listened to, and receiving empathy and caring	Coaching/mentoring
Instrumental support: when caring others provide direct assistance in accomplishing tasks (for example helping in the home, running errands, etc.)[3]	Clinical supervision
	Co-worker or peer support
	Therapist or counselor

The key element is the **perception** of support, the feeling that you have the support necessary to buffer any negative impacts of the work-related stress you face.[3] The presence and the perception of support from both personal and professional areas results in improved mental health outcomes, promotes healthy coping strategies, lowers job-related stress, and prevents burnout.[6]

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Strategies for Increasing Support

The first step towards increasing your support is to assess your current network and identify which areas are strong and which ones you could increase. Some questions to ask yourself are:

Question	Possible Action
Do you perceive that you have a strong **formal support network** at the moment?	If not, are there resources you can access to increase your formal supports?
Do you have a mentor or a coach?	If you feel this would be helpful, does your organization have a coaching/mentoring program?

Do you have a supportive supervisor?	If yes, can you talk to them about the norms and expectations of your work and ask them to assist you in identifying strategies that will help you cope with the current work situation. This may include enhancing the work environment and promoting work-life balance (e.g., changing work assignments; recommending time off or reducing overtime hours; encouraging attendance at a conference; or becoming involved in a project of interest)
If it's relevant to your role, do you receive clinical supervision?	If not, can you find someone who could support you in your clinical practice? Clinical supervision can provide you with technical recommendations or help you make difficult ethical decisions. Clinical supervision can also be a place where you discuss the impact of the work you are doing and ways that you can support your wellbeing.
Would you benefit from supports such as a counselor or therapist?	A counselor or therapist can help you to work through challenges you may be facing as a result of your work and assist you in putting positive coping strategies in place.
Do you have colleagues that you can turn to for support?	If not, can you start a group at your organization where colleagues can meet and support each other?
Do you perceive that you have a strong **informal support network** at the moment?	If not, what can you do to increase your informal supports? Are there people that you can reach out to that you feel would be supportive? Perhaps there is a friend, family member or community you used to connect with that you've lost touch with or new supports that you feel would be helpful. Could you reach out to them and establish a supportive connection?
Who do you feel is most supportive to you personally?	Can you reach out to this person/people more often when you need support?
Are there supports that you have overlooked that may be helpful at this time?	Try making a list of all the supports that you have and who may be most helpful in your current situation that would most assist you with your current needs.

Once you have assessed your support, it's important to access that support and utilize your networks when needed.

Case Example

Aranya has been working as a midwife for many years and has been under an increasing amount of stress. She is being asked to take on extremely varied shifts due to short-staffing and has more and more work each week. She is also finding that she is being emotionally impacted by the stories from the women she supports. Many of them have been talking to her about domestic violence in the home and she's starting to have nightmares at night. She's having problems sleeping and is feeling increasingly exhausted.

When Aranya first started her job, she used to talk to colleagues regularly, and there was a group of midwives that she met with each week to talk about work and any challenges. She also had a group of friends that she socialized with most weeks. Lately, however, as she's gotten busier she's stopped meeting with her colleagues and friends regularly. Now, she is starting to feel isolated and has noticed
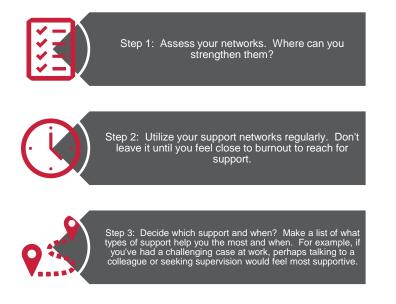
that her colleagues are no longer inviting her to meet with them. She also feels she hasn't heard from her friends in a while and is starting to perceive that she doesn't have a support network.

Aranya decides to talk to her colleagues and they tell her that they thought she didn't have time to meet with them. She had turned down the last few invitations and they didn't want to put pressure on her as they were aware of the stress she was under. She let them know that she would still like to be a part of the group and they will continue to invite her, and will reach out to her when she does not attend to make sure she is okay. Aranya also spoke with her friends and they told her that they were worried about her but didn't know how to address it. They are now organizing a dinner where they can talk about how Aranya is doing and what support they can provide. Aranya has realized that she was perceiving that her support network was no longer there, but that she still did have supports and resources that she could draw on.

Utilizing Your Support Network

It's important to check-in with your networks to discuss what support you may need to mobilize as well as assess what new supports you could put into place. Sometimes you may perceive that you no longer have a strong support network, but there are still supports available to you when needed. Some key strategies for ensuring you utilize your support network in the best way possible include:

Step 1: Assess your networks. Where can you strengthen them?

Step 2: Utilize your support networks regularly. Don't leave it until you feel close to burnout to reach for support.

Step 3: Decide which support and when? Make a list of what types of support help you the most and when. For example, if you've had a challenging case at work, perhaps talking to a colleague or seeking supervision would feel most supportive.

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Through utilizing your supports when needed and accessing them regularly, you can begin to buffer the impacts of the stress you may be facing and avoid long term impacts such as burnout and compassion fatigue.

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