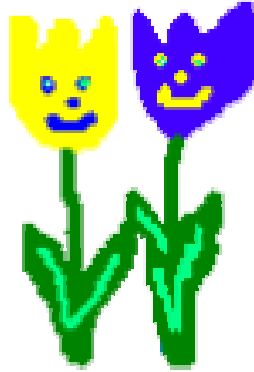


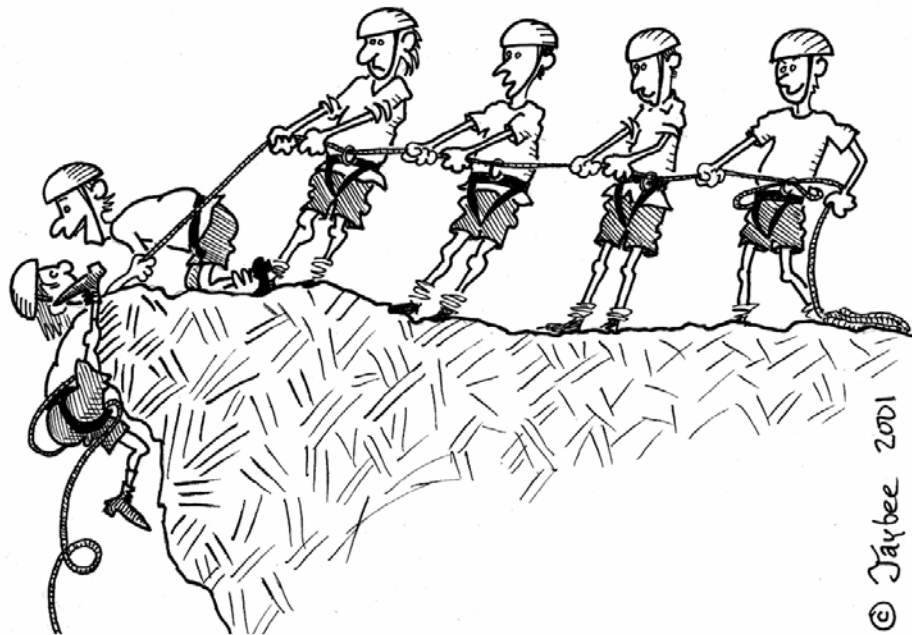
# SOCIAL SUPPORT HELPS PEOPLE GROW



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*Say, Fenner, have we ever told you how much your support means to us?*

*“Trails need to be wider so people can walk while holding hands.”*

- written on a National Forest Service comment card

In psychological research, it has been known for many years that social support is a key factor which determines people's level of physical and mental health. In group and workplace settings, we also know that socially supportive teams are more likely to reach their objectives, hence this big focus in corporate development training on leadership styles and teamwork.

Being in a learning environment which is both challenging and supportive is a powerful formula for growth which can be utilised in outdoor education programs. Outdoor education programs, whilst providing controlled exposure to challenging experiences, should also seek to create a warm and supportive group atmosphere. This is consistent with a person-centred approach to therapy: “As persons are accepted and prized, they tend to develop a more caring attitude towards themselves” (Rogers, 1980: 116). The “elements of a humanistic approach, such as respect for the dignity and individuality of each member and belief in each member's potential for growth and development, are essential in all group work efforts” (McAvoy, et al.: 59).

Social support is a natural, interpersonal fertilizer which can be used to enhance personal growth. During challenging experiences, social support can come from the instructor and from group members. This helps to create a dynamic climate for positive growth.

When the atmosphere is positive and accepting, people will feel comfortable in taking risks and trying new things out. Social support can be a salve to pain encountered along the way. And what's more, social support is a freely available resource in group settings.

It is critical that leaders nurture and demonstrate a caring attitude towards each individual in the adventure education setting (Mitten, 1995). Group leaders who provide challenging experiences in a socially supportive environment are well on the way to success. A sequential process to developing social support can be suggested. For example, plan activities to bond people early on in programs, including such as name games, get to know you activities and then trust activities. In the middle parts of a program, deeper social development activities can be conducted, such as sharing life stories and journal entries. Towards the end of a program, participants can get more involved with providing direct, safe, honest feedback to one another.

By harnessing the positive power of social support, the learning potential of a program can be considerably enhanced. In a recent study of 41 adult Outward Bound participants, it was found that the amount of social support strongly predicted changes in participants' 'psychological resilience' (Neill & Dias, 2001). Resilience refers to an individual's capacity to survive and thrive in difficult circumstances. In this study, there were four measures of social support – overall group support, instructor support, support from the most supportive group member, and support from the least supportive group member.

Interestingly, it was the support received from the *least supportive person* that best predicted gains in resilience. This seems to mean that disruptive, negative individuals may be seriously limiting the potential for other group members' learning and development. These research findings support the need for a humanistic approach and suggest the need for leaders to deal proactively with negative group members who may retard the potential growth of other group members. Early intervention, involving feedback and support to individuals providing low or negative support, as well as to those individuals who are perceiving that they are receiving low support, is recommended.

Finally, we should explore and encourage a multitude of possible ways for enhancing the social support that can be fostered in outdoor education programs. For starters, here's a list of ten suggested ways to improve social support in groups.

## 10 Ways To Improve Social Support in Groups

1. Code of behavior: Establish a code of behavior, such as the “Full Value Contract”, the Outward Bound motto, the organization’s code, or a code developed by the group early in the program.
2. Group issues only: In an early debrief, explain that it is only appropriate to talk about group issues, not about problems with individuals in the group setting. If there are any problems between individuals then these should be sorted out before or after group discussions, on their own or with the instructors. In other words, group discussions are for talking about the group. Positive comments about individuals are of course very acceptable!
3. Model supportive behavior: Students will follow your behavior, so make sure your instructional team is seen by students as sharing a high level of social support.
4. Positive comments during sessions: When instructing or facilitating discussions, complement individual participants on their contribution. Try to use their name each time, e.g., “That’s a really well thought through idea, John, well done....”
5. Early intervention: When a pattern of negative social behavior starts to develop, act to change that pattern earlier rather than later.
6. Anonymous positive feedback: Have everyone stick a blank sheet of paper on their back. Students are then asked to then mill around and write honest, positive feedback on people’s backs. Student can then read and discuss the feedback they received.
7. Lineup: Ask the students to line themselves up in order from the student who is contributing the most to the group through to the person who is contributing least to the group. This can be a controversial and socially challenging task! Once the students agree on the lineup, then say that each student will get a chance to choose one another student who they believe should move further up towards the student who contributed most. Debrief.
8. Individual counseling: Take someone who is not socially supporting the group aside and chat with them about ways in which they can be more positively involved through the program.
9. Removal of participant: If a participants’ behavior continues to significantly disrupt the development of the group and other individuals, then remove the student from normal group activities (e.g. ask them to sit out of an activity, through to removal for rest of the program).
10. Identify strengths and challenges: Ask students to identify the strengths of a group. Draw these in a wide circle. Then ask students what challenges the group faces. Write these in the middle. Explain that the group has enough strengths to hold itself together and to solve the challenges. The challenges the group faces are opportunities (in the middle). As each of these opportunities is dealt with, it becomes a strength of the group.

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