

Relationships Matter

*-stories from individuals
with lived experience*



NEED TO BE NEEDED

A Disability & Rehabilitation Research Project

Presented by the Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion

Funding #: 90DPCp0011-01-00



Temple University
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On Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities



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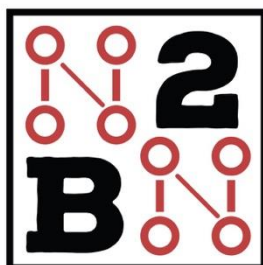
This document was developed for the Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities. The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant number 90DPCp0011-01-00). NIDILRR is a center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Service (*HHS). The contents of this document do not necessarily represent the policy of NICILRR, ACL, or HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

This document was created to reflect the voices and stories of individuals with lived experience of mental health conditions. The images and names were changed in order to protect their privacy. We are grateful for these people who took time out of their day to share their stories.

Thank you to the Collaborative Staff, especially Colin Malefakis and Sabrina Giaimo, who assisted with image creation and formatting.

Suggested Citation:

Snethen, G. (2023). Relationships Matter. *Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion: Need to be Needed DRRP*.



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February 2023



Reciprocal relationships refer

to interactions between individuals that are characterized by mutual give-and-take, where both parties are involved in supporting one another.

We all know relationships matter. A phone call from a friend, celebrating a new job. Someone to bring you soup when you're sick. Advice when challenges seem insurmountable. Someone to grab coffee with and just catch up. The interactions we have with the people who are important to us help shape who we are and affect both mental and physical health.

Individuals who experience serious mental health conditions have smaller social networks. One's diagnosis may put a strain on developing or maintaining relationship. In one study, individuals with mental health reported that relationships are hard to maintain during mental health crises. Others suggest they never had many friends and found it difficult to make friends.¹

The benefits of relationships are well-documented. Research on social relationships often focuses on an individual's access to support, not the

¹ Andersson, G. Denhov, A., Bülow, P., & Topor, A. (2015). Aloneness and loneliness-persons with severe mental illness and experiences of being alone. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 17(4), 353-365.

opportunity to support others. Reciprocal relationships refer to interactions between individuals that are characterized by mutual give-and-take, where both parties are involved in supporting one another.² When individuals engage in reciprocal relationships, they feel a sense of connectedness and belonging.³ This, in turn, can help to reduce feelings of loneliness and increase a sense of purpose and fulfillment.⁴

While research has documented the benefits of relationships, it is hard to capture the day-to-day experiences of reciprocal relationships. This document is the first in a series of resources that represents the voices of individuals with lived experience and reflects their experiences of meaningful relationships. Individuals had the opportunity to respond to a series of questions (see figure 1.) Individuals could choose to type their response or provide an audio recording of their response. The quotes are presented as written or spoken. We have provided a brief reflection and application at the end. However, little interpretation is provided as we believe it is important to let these voices stand alone. The responses were collected anonymously, the names reflected are pseudonyms.

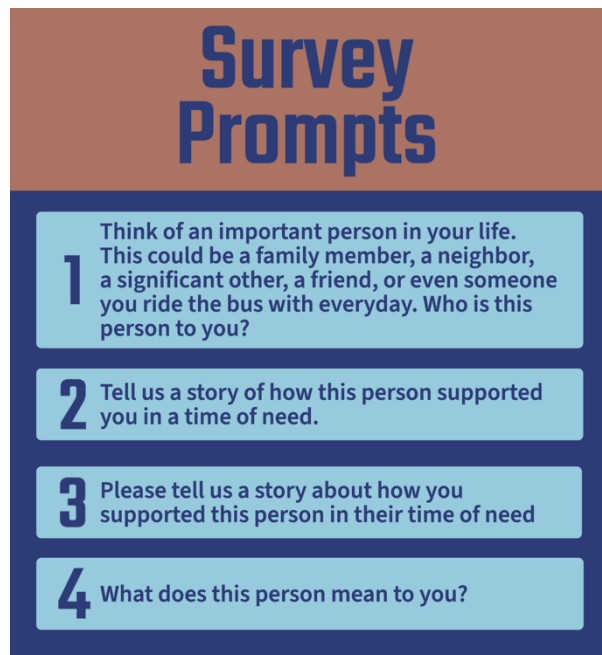


Figure 1. Survey Prompts

² Fyrand, L. (2010). Reciprocity: A Predictor of Mental Health and Continuity in Elderly People's Relationships? A Review. *Current Gerontology and Geriatrics Research*, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2010/340161>

³ Prilleltensky, I. (2019). Mattering at the Intersection of Psychology, Philosophy, and Politics. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 65(1-2), 16-34. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12368>

⁴ Prins, K. S., & Buunk, B. P. (1998). Loneliness, exchange orientation, and reciprocity in friendships. *Personal Relationships*, 5, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.1998.tb00156.x>



Interview with Kevin.
Important Person: His Mom

Tell us about how your mom supported you in a time of need.

My mom sends me money when I am running low, even if she doesn't have it for herself. She is there to support me through all my endeavors by sending a thoughtful text or asking questions about what I am doing.

How do you support your mom in her time of need?

I always try to be a listening ear when she is going through something. If I have the funds, I will try to be a financial support as well.

What does your mom mean to you?

My mom means the world to me. I would be lost without her.

Interview with Janet.
Important Person: Her Husband



Tell us about how your husband supported you in a time of need.

My husband supported me in a time of need, specifically when I went through breast cancer treatment. He was my caregiver and my number one support through everything.

Can you tell us a story about how you supported your husband in his time of need?

My husband, boyfriend at the time, also had a medical need that he needed assistance with at the time. It was in an area that was a bit personal, but despite not knowing each other as well as we would have liked, I supported him and provided him ongoing support before, during, and after his recoup.

What does your husband mean to you?

My husband is my number one support in my life. He means home.

Interview with Lanita
Important Person: Her Friend



Tell us about how your friend supported you in a time of need.

They are always supporting me. Encouraging me. When my depression is really bad, they understand and let me know that they are always there.

Can you tell us a story about a time when you supported your friend in their time of need?

They recently went on a well-deserved trip. I helped with watching her son while she was gone.

What does your friend mean to you?

We started as friends and became sisters. She is a huge part of my life and family. We are always able to be ourselves around each other. That is so important. I'm grateful for her.



Interview with Arlo Important Person: Mom

Tell us about how your mom supported you in a time of need.

My mother was supportive by providing a listening ear; she provided comfort when I needed it. She encouraged me to have hope by telling me to keep pressing on and not give up. She stood by me through numerous psychiatric hospitalizations. She visited me daily and brought me the things I needed. She encouraged my siblings to be patient with me even if my progress seemed to be slow at times. This fostered my resilience and most of all, she helped to reinforce my faith in GOD which is also my source of strength.

Can you tell us a story about a time when you supported your mom?

I am there to provide financial support because she is retired. Things need repair around the house and I am willing to help any way I can. Also I give of my time and provide a listening ear when it is necessary.

What does your mom mean to you?

My mother means a lot to me; I really cherish my mother and I am blessed to have her in my life. It is my heart's desire that she lived a long, long time. I appreciate all she has done for me because she sacrificed her time to help me improve my mental health, I am a much stronger person and I am in a better position to help others.

Interview with Amara Important Person: Parents



Tell us about how your parents supported you in a time of need.

My parents are always there for me. They support me in all my endeavors. They encourage me to push more harder in life. They make me feel alive.

Can you tell us a story about a time when you supported your parents in their time of need?

I am always there for them. I make them happy when they need to be. I always believe in them in anything they do.

What do your parents mean to you?

They mean a lot to me. They are the best people in the world. They can't be replaced.

Interview with Archie
Important Person: Wife



Tell us about how your wife supported you in a time of need.

My wife is always there for me. She supports me in any ways. I had a serious work issue and she was just totally on my side.

How do you support your wife in her time of need?

My wife is going through a lot of health challenges. I try to keep to her cheerful.

What does your wife mean to you?

I see her as a gift from God.

Interview with Jess Important Person: Mom



Tell us about how your mom supported you in a time of need.

My mother has been by my side providing care as I struggle with my mental health conditions. Throughout my years of treatment, she would come during visiting hours, go with me to my appointments, and spend time with me physically. Even when she lived in other states, my mom was a consistent support.

Can you tell us a story about a time when you supported your mom?

My mother also suffers from her own mental health conditions. I provide a listening ear and can understand her struggles. I know that having a daughter who can empathize and can be someone she can rely on has been a major part of her recovery.

What does your mom mean to you?

My mother is my hero. She advocated for me when I couldn't. She stood by my side when I was slipping. It takes a strong, understanding parent to be by a child's side. I am 33 years old and still consider my mother to be my biggest support and best friend.



Interview with Hannah
Important Person: Significant Other

Tell us about how your significant other supported you in a time of need.

The person in my life that supported me in many ways is my wife. She supported me in providing more background information about what I'm making a decision about something further. She helped me try to anticipate or communicate whether I might be thinking at any given time.

Can you tell us a story about how you supported your significant other in their time of need?

For me, the way I tried to support the person who looks after my nieces, I give that person some personal space, and I try to demonstrate on a regular basis what I've learned from there, um, from their example, and by also reminding them of their responsibility themselves.

What does this person mean to you?

They are the love of my life.

Interview with Carli Important Person: Significant Other



Tell us about how your significant other supported you in a time of need.

Early on in our relationship, I lived in an apartment building that wasn't in great condition. One night, we had to be evacuated from the building when a support beam collapsed. I called my significant other, who lived almost an hour away, for support. I was in panic. And despite it being the middle of the night, despite having dated for a relatively short time, he made the trip up to support me and make sure my sister and I were safe.

Can you tell us a story about a time when you supported your significant other?

My significant other was going through a tough time at work. His colleagues were cutting him out of projects, leading to him being fired. My significant other had worked at this company for almost 15 years, so this change was devastating. I supported him in navigating the feelings of the situation and having the confidence to pursue a new job, where he is much happier and is a much more supportive work environment.

What does this person mean to you?

He is my life partner and the person who I hope to grow old with, grow with, and learn to be a more compassionate human with.

Interview with Roy
Important Person: Best Friend



Tell us about how your friend supported you in a time of need.

They were my everything. Down and out 100x over.

Can you tell us a story about how you supported your friend in their time of need?

I showed up time and time again. Regardless, if they thought I did.

What does your friend mean to you?

They mean everything to me. They're perfect.



Interview with Maria Important Person: Significant Other

Tell us about how your significant other supported you in a time of need.

They were there to listen to me when I got news from my doctor. They helped me make decisions or find new ways to the right path so I could get better, find a specialist, and offer comfort, support, and encouragement.

Can you tell us a story about how you supported your significant other in their time of need?

I have actively listened to their wants and needs. I have offered support and encouragement when needed. I also have given them the space they have needed when they needed it. I have just sat with them for support.

What does your significant other mean to you?

This person means a lot to me. We have known each other for 12 years. We don't have any secrets. We even think of something before the other one does and says it. We are in sync. We continue to talk and grow every day with each other.

Relationships matter. The brief stories shared in this document demonstrate the different ways in which people with mental health conditions both receive and provide support. The relationships described included family members, friends, and significant others. It is important to note, these were organic relationships. They were not relationships with paid providers. Responses like: “This person means home;” “We started as friends and became sisters;” and “I see her as a gift from God” reflect how truly meaningful these relationships were to the respondents.

Individuals described receiving emotional, financial, and informational support. Loved ones were consistent companions and supporters through challenging medical conditions- both physical and mental health challenges. Health changes and new diagnoses can be scary to navigate alone. Social supporters can be a sounding board for navigating important decisions or simply listening to fears and concerns. Individuals with mental health conditions have a high occurrence for other physical health conditions.⁵ Having a support person outside of the health professions can help relieve some of the stress that may go along with navigating these health challenges.⁶ Individuals with mental health conditions are also more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, which contributes to high financial stress.⁷ Social supporters who can provide financial support may help reduce this stress.

Individuals described providing similar support for their loved ones. Support comes in all shapes and sizes- opportunities to provide emotional support; financial support when available; even physical support like housing. One individual simply mentioned just physically being with someone for support. The stories shared reflect the everyday support people in meaningful relationships provide to each other.

⁵ Bahorik, A. L., Satre, D. D., Kline-Simon, A. H., Weisner, C. M., & Campbell, C. I. (2017). Serious mental illness and medical comorbidities: Findings from an integrated health care system. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 100, 35-45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2017.07.004>

⁶ McCormick, B.P. (1999). Contribution of Social Support and Recreation Companionship to the Life Satisfaction of People with Persistent Mental Illness. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 33(4), 304-319.

⁷ Olesen, S. C., Butterworth, P., Leach, L. S., Kelaheer, M., & Pirkis, J. (2013). Mental health affects future employment as job loss affects mental health: findings from a longitudinal population study. *BMC Psychiatry* 13, 144. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-13-144>

In reciprocal relationships, each individual is valued by the other. Reciprocal support is likely to increase one's sense of mattering.⁸ Feeling like one matters in a relationship can help build trust and contributes to the stability and longevity of the relationship.⁸ Ultimately, these types of relationships will enhance feelings of connectedness and decrease feelings of loneliness.⁹

In Practice. Reciprocal relationships provide an opportunity for individuals to realize they matter. Often, mental health services aim to meet an individual's physical, social, and emotional needs. While mental health providers may discuss natural supports, the focus is often on the supports one might receive or seek out from their community. Throughout these conversations, providers should also encourage conversations about reciprocity. That is, the focus is not only, “how do they support you,” but also, “how do you support those who are important to you?” This approach encourages individuals to reflect on the needs of others as well as self-reflect on one's own skills and resources.



In fact, the opportunity to provide reciprocity may be a key ingredient to creating and maintaining meaningful relationships and enhancing mattering. The examples provided here were simple, everyday acts that

⁸ Agner, J. L. (2020). Understanding the Role of Participation, Mattering, and Reciprocal Social Support in Improving Health-Related Quality of Life among Hawai'i's Mental Health Clubhouse Members (Doctoral dissertation, University of Hawai'i at Manoa).

⁹ Bai, X., Yang, S., & Knapp, M. (2022). Sources and directions of social support and life satisfaction among solitary Chinese older adults in Hong Kong: the mediating role of sense of loneliness. *Clinical Interventions in Aging*, 13, 63-71. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2147/CIA.S148334>

anyone can provide. Mental health providers can offer a space for individuals to discuss their skills, resources, and ability to provide support. This discussion may give individuals with lived experience the space to think about the ways they can support the people who are important to them. The dialogs in this document may be used to help initiate these discussions. For example, a providers could share an example and then ask targeted follow up questions, like “how do they support you” and “what are ways you support them?”.

In addition to discussions about reciprocity, discussing who provides support to the individual with lived experience can be an opportunity to express gratitude. According to Simpson and colleagues, feelings of gratitude is a precursor to reciprocity.¹⁰ This means a targeted discussion about gratitude may increase one’s likelihood to support others. Strategies to encourage individuals to reflect on gratitude might include a daily or weekly gratitude journal or even social media ‘hey thanks!’ shout outs. Whatever the approach, the goal is to provide an opportunity to think about how others have provided support and what that means to the individual. Ultimately, these conversations could then lead to opportunities to discuss reciprocity.

¹⁰ Simpson, B., Harrell, A., Melamed, D., Heiserman, N., & Negraia, D. V. (2018). The roots of reciprocity: Gratitude and reputation in generalized exchange systems. *American Sociological Review*, 83(1), 88-110.