

THE NEED TO BELONG

by Deb Elkin, LPC

We all need to feel like we have a place where we belong, where we are important, where people care about us. We are not meant to be alone and we are not meant to be totally self-sufficient.

Back in the 1950's, Abraham Maslow constructed what he called a hierarchy of basic human needs that all of us have to have met in order to flourish and grow. It starts with getting our most basic physiological needs met, those of thirst, hunger, and shelter. Next comes our need for safety and security. Following that is the need to belong and be loved, to be affiliated with others and be accepted. We ALL have the need to belong (though some people might like you to think otherwise! How often have you heard, "I don't need anybody or anything!").

My clients' stories recently have been reminding me of the importance of belonging, of having good friendships and solid support networks in our lives. Here are a few of their stories.

Shannon was feeling stuck and frustrated about ever bringing a partner or the job of her dreams into her life. She felt like she'd had several opportunities in both areas, but they never seemed to pan out, and she was always let down and disappointed. She was beginning to doubt that she would ever have either one of them. What emerged as we talked was that she had pursued all of these opportunities "in a vacuum." She'd had gut feelings about them not being right, but brushed them aside. She had never talked to anyone about how she felt or what she thought. She'd had no sounding board and no one to give her feedback or help her get clarity on what she was doing. She'd made her decisions in a void.

One of the participants in my Women's Friendship group is having surgery soon, a hysterectomy. Her plan was to let them "take it all out." It was a fear based decision she had made on her own, coming from the knowledge and life experiences that were hers. When she told the group about it, she got lots of support, and also a lot of feedback and information to consider that was not available to her when she was deciding this on her own. She also got some good resources from them from which she did some reading and research. With the group's support and with this new information, she has since changed her mind about "taking it all out."

When you have solid support networks in your lives, you feel like you have a place where you belong. It is a place where you feel safe telling your troubles and woes. It's a place where you can get help working through a problem. It's a place where your joys and successes get celebrated. You know the people in your support network really care about you and really want to hear what you have to say. You feel safe to be honest and vulnerable with them. And you know they will honor you, not shame you, when you share yourself with them.

A good support network can be found in many places - your family, friends, partner, church or spiritual community – any place that you feel safe and at home. You can join a support group or therapy group. You can create one by pulling together a group of people who meet regularly for the purpose of support and sharing.

Having a good support network will nurture you in several different ways:

- It provides a place to get heard and supported. When we feel heard, we also feel validated that our story and our feelings are real and important. That helps create a feeling of safety (we are not discounted or shamed).
- It provides a place for us to feel loved and nurtured. It often is a place where we can find a shoulder to cry on, someone to hold us, someone to soothe us.
- It provides a place to vent. Sometimes we just need to get things off our chest. It's especially helpful when we just cannot go to the person who we'd really like to let loose on, but we still need an outlet. A good support network provides a safe place to do that.
- It provides a place to get perspective, clarity and advice. Sometimes we lose perspective on what's happening to us. A caring support network can provide that. It's a place to get a reality check, to hear different perspectives and possibilities. It's also a place to hear some sometimes hard truths about ourselves, but offered out of love and caring, not judgement and meanness.

I encourage all of you who do not currently have a solid support network in your lives to find one, to create one. We all do need to belong. From that place of safety and security and love, we are more likely to have the self-confidence, caring and support that we need to live our lives more fully and more happily.

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