

# Circles of Support



## What are Circles of Support?

Most of us have several circles of support that we have been building our entire lives. Usually, these circles consist of our 1) family and close friends, 2) friends, neighbors, and co-workers 3) community members or organizations with which we interact regularly, and 4) service providers and/or professionals, such as teachers, coaches, health care providers, therapists, paid caregivers, etc. Each circle serves a different purpose and involves different interactions. We may engage with some members of our circles of support daily and others only occasionally. However, within each of our circles, there are generally people who will take an interest in our lives and lend a hand if we are in need. They will be there for us in times of trouble, sorrow, and celebration.

While individuals with disabilities may have well established circles of support among family and service providers, their circles of support among friends and within the greater community are often less robust. Sometimes access issues and social stigma prevent individuals with disabilities from meeting new people, joining groups, or building relationships.

## What are the benefits of Circles of Support?

- Increased social participation and inclusion
- Improved sense of empowerment and ability to achieve goals
- Creation of a safety net of support
- Emotional support for recipients, families, and caregivers
- Opportunity for people to offer their skills in support of others

## What role can Jewish organizations play in Circles of Support?

Whether it be through worship, classes, social groups, or other programs, synagogues and other Jewish organizations offer opportunities for regular interaction and participation. To play a role in the Circles of Support model for individuals with disabilities, we must consider ways to develop these interactions into real connections and turn our organizations into communities of care. We can start by encouraging familiarity—by developing practices and programming that allow us to get to know one another and by seeking understanding of the whole person, their perspectives, their needs, their desires, and their journey. Second, we can promote and model interdependence. We can counter the myth of independence and self-sufficiency by creating structures, such as Chessed or caring committees, to help one another and ask for help without any stigma or shame. Third, we can work to improve both physical and other types of accessibility (as well as communication about accessibility) in our communal spaces, at our events, and in our programs. When we take an interest in and work to address the physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of all community members, our organizations become a strong Circle of Support.

# Avenues for providing support to individuals with disabilities and caregivers

## 1. Work to understand and dismantle our own ableism

- Check ourselves on our own feelings about disability, our fears, our beliefs about the cause of disability and/or our desire to help “fix” someone.
- Understand that a desire for care does not mean someone is seeking a cure.
- Do not provide unsolicited advice or suggestions.
- Learn how ableism is imbedded into the way we think, speak, and act.

## 2. Get to know the individuals with disabilities and caregivers in our community

- Create space for each person to be their authentic self without having to hide or minimize parts of who they are. Remember many disabilities are invisible and a safe space may allow those with invisible disabilities to share.
- Make efforts to become familiar with the whole person.
- Learn how disability or caregiving may be a part of a person’s identity.
- Ask about the type of care or support the individual would like.
- Don’t make assumptions. The experience of a person with either visible or invisible disabilities rarely conforms to preconceived notions.

## 3. Honor each person for who they are and not what they do

- Find ways to show value for each person, regardless of their ability to do tasks or donate to the community.
- Appreciate each person’s life journey, recognizing that we sometimes make those who do not work, marry, or have children feel “less than.”
- Acknowledge the practical and emotional demands on caregivers.

## 4. Create pathways for interdependence

- Build organizational structures and opportunities based on give and take, e.g., support groups, peer buddies, inclusive havurot.
- Make asking for support, without shame or stigma, a community norm.
- Make giving support part of our community culture.

## 5. Form or Expand a Chesed or Caring Committee

- Assess both short and long-term needs within the community.
- Organize ways to provide desired support (physical, emotional, spiritual) by matching volunteers with those who would like assistance.
- Help ensure everyone in the community has opportunities for rest.

## 6. Provide Access and Accommodations

- Work to make our buildings, services, events, and programs accessible to those with a variety of disabilities (physical disabilities, learning disabilities, intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental illness, etc.).
- Communicate clearly about accessibility at each event and ask about additional accommodations that may be needed.

**Ableism:** discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities, often with a patronizing desire to “cure” their disability and make them “normal”; a complex set of power structures, systems, practices, and policies that deny disabled people access, agency, resources, and self-determination.