

Aging Well with ‘Natural Supports’

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<https://www.therecord.com/opinion/2022/03/01/natural-supports-can-help-older-adults-age-with-grace.html?rf>

As we age, many of us will experience disability, loss of spouses and friends, and increased vulnerability, including all sorts of practical challenges. These realities should not take away from our quality of life, but it does mean we have to be intentional about the natural supports and relationships we will need to continue to live full lives in the community.

‘Natural supports’ refer to the support and assistance that flows from our family relationships, friendships, neighbourhood contacts, religious affiliations, and our connections with community associations, such as clubs and civic groups.¹ Natural supports are voluntarily and unpaid.

Research has shown that when people have engaged natural supports, they tend to be healthier and happier.² This is explained by the fact that relationships and social networks enhance our sense of belonging and serve as a buffer for well-being. Natural support networks are usually created by elders themselves, their friends, or their families. In some cases, senior’s organizations facilitate the development of these kinds of natural supports.

During the last decade, three different approaches to supporting older adults’ natural support systems have been gaining traction. These approaches build on

people's natural supports and intentionally organize them in ways that create benefits to people and communities.

First, it is not surprising, with Canadians living longer than ever, that some men and women are choosing to live with others in the final decades of their lives. Mostly it is women who are deciding that there are benefits to sharing a house with 2, 3, or 4 others. A group in Montreal called Radical Resthomes is promoting a new vision of where and how we live as we age³. They work with older adults to help them create self-directed homes, which are managed by the people who live there. The residents look after each other and utilize in-home paid supports as needed. This approach to collaborative living addresses loneliness and social isolation while providing a supportive home environment of mutual caring.⁴

Second, naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs) are apartments, condos, or neighbourhoods that have a high density of older adults. With an aging population, these communities have been increasing across Ontario with well over 20% of neighbourhoods now having at least 40 % of adults over age 55.⁵ NORCs are an untapped resource that can enable more people to age at home.

The Oasis Senior Supportive Living program in Kingston is a NORC example of how older adults can intentionally build natural support with each other. Oasis exists in an apartment building that has many older adults. Oasis focuses on preventing social isolation, facilitating better nutrition, and promoting physical fitness. Oasis is now working with Queen's University to research its impact and to expand the program to 12 other communities across Ontario.⁶

Programs like Oasis are based on the principles of self-determination and community. Older adults determine when and how they want to participate. Relationships and natural supports create a strong sense of community. Although

older adults lead NORC initiatives, some initiatives are exploring the potential of inter-generational approaches that might be well suited to certain kinds of apartments and condos.

Third, support circles create an intentional caring community with a vulnerable person and their family.⁷ Friends and family members are invited to participate in the life of the older person. Support circles meet on a regular basis and provide both emotional and practical support to the person and to each other. Widely used with people with disabilities, support circles can also be a vehicle for problem-solving and planning. People who have circles often say that asking others to be involved can be the hardest part in a society that puts such value on independence. Yet, surprisingly perhaps, people who are invited to join a support circle typically say they are honoured to be asked. For elders with chronic or genetic illnesses or people in the last months and years of life, support circles nurture natural supports and a sense of belonging.

Effective use of natural supports does not mean that people do not want or need paid supports such as home care. The development of natural supports should be seen as complementary to a robust formal elder care system. In fact, government could also fund community support associations to facilitate the development of natural supports in neighbourhoods.

The development of natural support networks should be seen by older adults and their allies as an important approach to help ensure that we can all age in place in our communities.

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Inclusion: Building a New Story with People and Communities. His website is www.johnlord.net. He is a leader with Seniors for Social Action Ontario.

Endnotes

¹ Alicia Blater and Betsy MacMichael (2016). Natural supports: An integral part of a good life for anyone- the what, why and how! Report from Daas; Division of aging, North Carolina. <https://medicaid.ncdhhs.gov/media/1205/download>

² Susan Pinker (2014). *The Village Effect: How face-to-face contact can make us healthier and happier*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.

Vivek Murthy (2020). *Together: The healing power of human connection in a sometimes lonely world*. New York: Harper Collins.

³ Radical Resthomes, www.radicalresthomes.com

⁴ Rock Positano (2011). The mystery of the Rosetan people, *New York Daily News*, November 17. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-mystery-of-the-roseta_b_73260

⁵ Catherine Donnelly, Paul Nguyen, Simone Parniak, Vicent DePaul (2022). Beyond long-term care: The benefits of seniors' communities that evolve on their own, *Building*, February 11. <https://building.ca/feature/beyond-long-term-care-the-benefits-of-seniors-communities-that-evolve-on-their-own/>

⁶ Oasis in Kingston web site outlines details of their approach. <https://www.oasis-aging-in-place.com/>

⁷ John Lord and Peggy Hutchison (2017). *Pathways to Inclusion: Building a new story with people and communities*. Third Edition. Toronto: Captus Press.