Support is an important but complex concept of caring that often is studied but not always defined. For researchers as well as professionals it could be important to gain a deeper understanding for the concept. Support has been described as an interactive process that affects wellbeing and health of the individual. Support is linked to the attachment process and social roles [1]. Attachment will affect both the individual ability to interact with other people but also the individual ability to trust other people [2]. Both the ability to provide (i.e. provider) and the ability to receive (i.e. recipient) support are affected by the persons' age, experience and the social environment [1,3]. The offered support can be emotional, appraisal, informative or practical described as follows; Emotional support promotes a sense of safety and belonging. Appraisal support promotes reassurance of ability and competence. Informative support is offering information to help solving the actual problem and practical support is practical help in solving the actual problem. Support that is perceived as positive by the recipient is more likely to have a positive impact and the emotional part of support is described as most important for support to be experienced as positive. The environment where the support is offered will affect the quality and perception of support [3].

Non-judgemental attitudes are described as important aspects of support. In order to offer adequate support it is not only necessary to consider if support is needed but also what kind of support and when this support is needed [4]. The provider might have difficulty with interpreting what support needs the recipient has [5] but the provider may also be unwilling to provide the support which is required. The provider might hesitate because of fear of doing wrong or inflicting harm [6] or stress might cause the provider to cease offering support [7]. Support can be offered from the individuals own network or lay persons (social support) as well as professionals (professional support) [3].

For researcher as well as professionals it is important to differentiate between social and professional support [8] and care interventions with professional support should aim to strengthen social support [9]. Social support is offered within the social net-work and requires reciprocity and relationships, while professional support does not require reciprocity in the same way and is directly available from professionals in the society. Professional support is also limited by the professional domain and professional knowledge [9] for example childbirth and midwives.

Professional support can be empowering. Empowerment can be considered both a process and an outcome [10]. As a process empowerment will strengthen individuals and it is an important aspect of supportive midwifery or nursing care [11]. This empowering process can be described as a partnership where professionals have power with the individual instead of professionals having power over the individual [12]. When professionals as midwives and nurses act empowering they can have a significant impact on the lives and health of many individuals and families [11].

To act empowering professionals need to consider the possible distinction between to “care for” and to “act supportive” as these verbs are etymologically different. To act supportive could etymologically be understood as the provider having “trust in the capacity” of the recipient expecting that the recipient will “take charge”. Suggesting that the provider mainly provide means for the recipient that will enable or strengthen the recipient to cope with the situation, empowering the recipient. While to “care for” could etymologically be understood as the provider expecting to “be responsible for” and the recipient to be “taken care of” [13]. Having trust in the recipient will promote strength i.e. be empowering [11] while to “care for” may inflict a sense of knowing what is best for the individual mainly from the health professionals point of view [10].

Nurses and midwives offer professional informational support as an important part of their work [3]. However, first time mothers want more focus on emotional support than informational support, from health professionals, during the childbearing period [14,15]. The health professionals personal attitudes influence the quality of support they offer [16,17]. Attitudes are based on feelings to and a varying degree of knowledge about a specific phenomenon [18]. In order to change attitudes a professional training with a combination of evidence based lectures and reflection, health professionals attitudes to support during childbearing changed in a positive way. Healthcare professionals increased their scores in facilitating behaviour and reported a decrease in their regulating behaviour [21]. In addition as a result of the training program for midwives and the postnatal nurses, mothers were more satisfied with both the emotional and informative support during the first nine months postpartum [17] as well as a perceived stronger relation and feeling for the baby, a better preparation for the baby’s needs, parenthood and breastfeeding [17,22,23].

Health professional support, aims to be empowering, facilitating and a positive development for the individuals’ ability to cope with challenging or stress-full situation in life, such as childbearing. In order to empower individuals it is essential that professionals support is sensitive for the individuals unique needs in the specific situation [3,24].

References

*Corresponding author: Anette Ekström, Associate professor, School of Life Sciences, University of Skövde, Skövde, Sweden

Received May 23, 2012; Accepted May 25, 2012; Published May 27, 2012


Copyright: © 2012 Thorstensson S. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.


