

Working with Your Supported Decision Making Team

What is Supported Decision Making?

Supported Decision Making (SDM) is getting the help you need, from the people you trust, to make your own decisions. Isn't that how we *all* make decisions? We *all* need help when we're faced with tough choices, or don't understand our options, or just want some advice. It's simple: they give you information and advice to help you make the best decision for you. They support you so you can decide what's best for you.

SDM is a very important tool people with developmental disabilities can use to make their own decisions while getting the support they need. For you, SDM can be used instead of more restrictive options, like guardianship. If you have a guardian, SDM can be used to increase your control over your own life. The goal of SDM is making sure that the person with a disability is in control of their own life as much as possible. Studies have shown that when people with disabilities have more control over their lives – more *self-determination* or *empowerment* – they have better lives including increased employment, independence, and safety.

Who Are the Supporters?

You choose the supporters you want in your life. The resources section at the bottom of this handout has some ideas on how to do that. Some people have one or two close supporters while some have large support teams; do what feels right for you. You just want to make sure that your team is made up of people who care about you, who help you, and who listen to you. It is a good idea to choose people who have different kinds of expertise (e.g., money management, medical care, communication, future planning) so that as you make choices, you have someone on your team who has some experience they can share. Someone on your support team may have a Power of Attorney (POA) to help you make decisions, while some supports may be less formal. It is also a good idea to have a mix of ages, ideas, and roles in your life if you can. Remember your team may change over time just as your friends and networks change over time.

Most people choose family members to be on their team, but you can also choose friends, paid staff, neighbors, family friends, or anyone important to you who is willing to help. The people you choose should know what is important to you and respect your choices, and they should not be involved in helping you make choices that benefit them. For example, someone who helps you with money management should not be part of the team when you're deciding if you want to give that person money for any reason.

Supporters Working as a Team

In the best SDM teams, all supporters communicate with each other so that everyone understands what is important to you. You may not want to share everything about your life with all of your team members, and that is okay. However, you do want to make sure all team members know who is on your team and how they can reach each other. It is a great idea to have your team meet together, virtually or in person, on a regular basis so they feel connected and stay up to date on what is going on in your life.

Support team members may disagree with each other about some choices. It is usually a good thing to have team members with different ideas so they can help you figure out the pros and cons of each choice.

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However, the most important part is that the team members listen to YOU and respect that you get to *make your own decisions*. Remember that you are in control of your life.

When You Disagree with Your Team

A big part of Supported Decision Making is called “the dignity of risk.” That means we all have the right to make some bad choices and to learn from those choices. If you disagree with your team about a choice you want to make, that is a good reason to stop and think about whether or not you really want to make that choice. You picked this team because they know you well and have good ideas. If you really want to make a choice that your team thinks is a bad idea, that is your right. But, make sure you are doing everything you can to make good choices. A good team will be there for you if you make a bad choice and you need to change it later. Always be kind and thank people for their help and time.

If You Want to Change Your Supporters

You may find that a supporter is not able to help you as much as you need, or maybe they are not respecting your choices. This can happen. If you want to change a supporter talk to the person who you would like to leave your team. Thank them for the help they gave and tell them you would like to find someone else to help you make choices. They can go back to just being family, a friend or neighbor. Then find someone new for your team, and keep moving forward to live the life you want.

Supported Decision Making Resources	Where to Find It
The Arc of Northern Virginia’s SDM Toolkit with SDM in action videos, ideas on how to use and get started with SDM, 3 minute and extended recorded presentation on SDM, and SDM handouts and quick guides	https://thearcofnova.org/sdm/
Webinars on SDM implementation and team building	https://youtube.com/user/VideosatTheArcofNoVA
Asking any SDM questions	https://thearcofnova.org/answers/
“Supported Decision Making” book by Jonathan Martinis and Peter Blanck with ideas on wording for Powers of Attorney, background on SDM in the courts, and data on self-determination and SDM increasing safety	https://tinyurl.com/SDM-book
"Setting the Wheels in Motion" article by Suzanne Francisco for a description of how a mom of three kids with DD implemented SDM for all of them, including her worksheets on getting started	https://tinyurl.com/SDM-Wheels
Jenny Hatch Justice Project info on start of SDM in VA and SDM data	http://www.jennyhatchjusticeproject.org
National Resource Center for SDM’s stories, videos, agreements, and research	http://www.supporteddecisionmaking.org/
“When Do I Want Support” SDM tool for a tool you can use to start creating your own SDM plan	https://tinyurl.com/SDM-ACLU
Center for Public Representation’s SDM forms, stories, news, and laws	https://supporteddecisions.org/
The Arc’s national SDM toolkit with a SDM agreement building tool and more SDM in action stories	https://tinyurl.com/ArcSDMtools
disAbility Law Center for free Power of Attorney builder, help with advanced directives, and information on rights and choices	https://www.dlcv.org/supported-decision-making

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