

## *A Conversation with Judy Pigott & Dr. John W. Gibson*

**Q: *What is a personal safety net?***

A: A personal safety net is a way to create a safer and more secure future. It is the web of people, plans and papers brought together to give meaning, support, ease, safety and security to your life.

**Q: *When is a personal safety net important?***

A: It is important throughout all of life. In good times it is enjoyable and celebrated. If there is a need, change or crisis of some sort, then this net will form a solid base to find help and call together the team that is needed. When times are tough, whether for yourself or those you care about, a personal safety net provides emotional, practical and concrete support. It is an instrumental aid that helps you increase the likelihood of the best possible outcome.

**Q: *How can a family create a personal safety net?***

A: Family is often part of a personal net, but seldom makes up the complete safety net. The net should be as wide as possible to so that you can get the assistance you need across the broad range of your needs and the demands of the situation. Depth is also important so that no one burns out. Additionally, diversity is a key ingredient so that there is creativity and connection to sources of outside expertise and assistance. Families need to plan ahead, expand their ranks, and develop plans, systems and resources. They should have the conversations needed in order to create a personal safety net for each family member. Families do what they can, and each is unique. We help you look objectively at your own family to assess your strengths and needs.

**Q: *Are there times when it's best not to have a care share team?***

A: We can't think of any situation that would be made worse by having two or more other people who genuinely care about you, have your best interests at heart and work with you through a tough time. A safety net is always valuable because it creates emotional safety and security. You know that you have a team behind you. Any team is best used when there's a defined need and information has been shared along the way.

**Q: *How can I tell if a care-share team will work in my situation?***

A: We can't presume to know what will work in your unique situation. We do know that you'll have more people, ideas and resources to draw from if you have a personal safety net. We believe it is always better to create a care-share team than to go through change or crisis alone.

Making such a team work takes a willingness to think through and clarify what you need and what you can receive. Acknowledging that strength is being able to ask for and accept appropriate help makes this easier. The team should pull together the people who are around you in such a way that none of them will be overtaxed. Personal safety nets and care-share teams don't just happen. There is much to learn and there will be many lessons along the way.

**Q: *How can a person in crisis ask for help without feeling like they are a burden?***

A: There are ways to lessen these feelings. Many people want to be able to ask, but have difficulty actually asking for the help. For some people this becomes easier when they realize that if they don't ask for help in their current situation, then the situation could progress to the point where they'd need even more help later. For others, it helps to them to realize that people often find it enjoyable and rewarding to help others, especially those that they care about. Knowing that you may be able to help someone else in the team in the future can also help.

**Q: *How do you decide who should be in the team?***

A: You should first think about who you call when you have something to share or encounter a problem. You should then think about who has the special skills or knowledge that you might need. In all cases you should weigh various considerations and carefully choose. There is always a risk that someone will not feel the team is right for them or that a care partner will wish someone was not on the team. Developing the skills to have open and honest discussions about needs and preferences certainly helps.

We encourage people who are pulling a care-share team into existence to remember that it is their team. At the same time, we encourage you to not exclude someone who might have a point of view or a set of skills that is different than those of other members. It can be this "voice of the stranger" that sheds light on a situation that seemed to be intractable, or that suggests a previously not thought of course of action. You should be courageous and thoughtful, while holding the reins.

**Q: *What are some of the signs that the group is burned out and how is that remedied?***

A: The group as a whole seldom burns out. More often individuals burn out. Some typical signs of individual member burn out are: withdrawing or no longer doing favorite things, being more irritable, easily upset and short-tempered and feeling overwhelmed. Other signs include fantasizing about escaping the group, getting sick a lot, dropping responsibilities and feeling depressed and moody. Some remedies that we recommend are to reinstitute regular meetings, to take time off and to have fun together to offset your work time. You can also call-in a consultant for help, brainstorm with the group, take breaks and redistribute tasks.

**Q: *What specific advice would you give to military families?***

A: Military families face many challenges beyond the norm. While contributing to the good of the country, they are exposed to more moves and dangers than many others. Having to say goodbye, packing up, moving and starting all over again are one such set of challenges. Dealing with issues related to physical or mental trauma can be another, particularly since these can be difficult to even acknowledge. Currently publicized difficulties in obtaining appropriate care is yet a third that provides an opportunity to really use the support of a team and its advocacy potential. Members of the military and their families have to be even better at setting up a net, at recruiting members, and especially and at finding back-up members.

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**Q: Do you have any specific advice for parents and families?**

A: Parents and families especially need strong and diverse safety nets. Strength is not doing it alone or being “super man,” “super woman,” or a near-mythical “Leave it to Beaver” family; strength includes finding new ways to deal with life’s realities, to ask for and receive assistance. Over the course of life, demands and responsibilities that women, families and parents take on will change. Therefore, the composition of a safety net may also change over the years. An important thing to remember is that you need to make sure that your safety net has members who will help you take good care of yourself while taking care of loved ones. Be strong, creative, flexible and connected.

The life of a parent is certainly different than life as a single person. Without meaning to unfairly stereotype, it is often newly-single dads who find that their skills in meeting up with other guys are somewhat less successful when organizing a play date than when meeting to watch the game. If junior’s play date falls through because someone doesn’t show up, or someone’s child couldn’t be persuaded to put on clothes today, or because the baby is teething, there are several sets of feelings that will have to be dealt with: children’s as well as adult’s. So, use your safety net to provide and help think of back-up plans and strategies that will be good for you and for your kids (whether they’re little or almost-grown). A care-share team can result in shared childcare, more strategic legal decisions, healthy fun with kids and new people in your life. Learn to ask, to confirm and to communicate.

**Q: How can a personal safety net help someone going through divorce?**

A: A strong personal safety net can bring the focus to what we have, rather than what’s missing. Making choices has been proven to improve mental and physical health. By clarifying what’s in place and what isn’t, a care-share team can decrease feelings of being victimized and increase feelings of power.

**Q: What would you like to tell health providers on this topic?**

A: Most health care providers work so hard and care so much that they need their own personal safety net to protect themselves, keep them from burnout and ensure their own security and well-being. When health care providers are part of a larger safety net team, they are more effective and deliver better care. For example, it is often better for a doctor when someone accompanies a patient to their office to take notes or when there is a strong team to count on following a surgery.

**Q: If you are diagnosed with an illness, what is the first step to creating your own network to help you?**

A: Pull together a couple of trusted friends and talk with them. First talk about what you’ve just been told and then about how to begin setting up a team. Fill your friends in on what you’re feeling. Talk it through. Then, talk with them about how you’re going to begin setting up your own personal safety net or care-share team. Make provisional plans for all to consider and discuss after the initial shock of what has happened wears off. We hope that you will implement your own personal safety net and plan for a care-share team well ahead of any specific need; but if you’ve waited, don’t despair.

**Q: How can communities benefit from personal safety nets?**

A: All communities are strengthened when their members are safer, more secure and more connected. When people know one another and encounter each other with familiarity, curiosity, and compassion, there will be more interaction and less distrust. Children will grow up learning how a community can be created and how it supports its members while they support it. The increased sense of familiarity, community, caring, and security will benefit all members of the community.

**Q: How does someone deal with hearing someone say “no” to their request for assistance?**

A: Many of us so seldom ask for help that when we do it’s a big deal and if the person we’ve asked says no, it’s a even bigger deal. Asking is not easy in that it takes courage to be vulnerable. It can be hard to remember that people usually say no for their own reasons, not because of anything about YOU. It can also be difficult to say ‘no’ when we just can’t help even though we all know that it takes time and energy to be there for someone else and that we can’t always figure out how we can fit it into our busy lives. Hearing a “no” will probably not be easy but we should be prepared to hear it occasionally, to not take it personally and to continue to go after the help needed. Hearing the “no” as an inability for the person to do one thing, and not as a rejection of the relationship will help.

We also need to remember that we care for the people who are being asked to be on our team or we wouldn’t be turning to them. We want the best for them and know that if they’re able to be honest with us about their capabilities and availability then they’ll be in our lives for the long haul. While it may be disappointing and even devastating to hear a “no”, looking at the bigger picture will help us get past our feelings. Then, once we are past those feelings, we can ask the person who declined for ideas about where to turn. The sample worksheets in our book and in our forthcoming workbook help provide additional ways to approach this question.

**Q: How does someone decline someone’s request?**

A: There may be reasons that you might not be able to be part of a care-share team or personal safety net. Perhaps the timing just does not work, or this sort of request is one that is too hard for you. Some people just don’t deal well with hospitals, personal care or being hands-on. Others are unavailable at the times when help is needed, or are only able to offer a particular skill at a particular time. When you say no, you can choose to convey as little or as much additional information as you wish, though we encourage you to do so with kindness and appreciation for the fact that you were asked. For example, you may choose to let the person know that while you can’t drive kids to school this week, you may be available to help at a later date or with a different task.

Keep in mind that when we’re part of a team there isn’t the same burden of needing to cover all the bases. There are others who can either handle part of a care partner’s needs, or who can think of other ways to meet them. There is also support for getting the back-up you yourself need.

With this in mind, it’s possible to include new people, to add to the repertoire of folks who are already known to or included by the care partner who is currently in need of help. These new voices can be part or the vibrancy of a group.

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact Linda at 206-659-0665 or at [Linda@PersonalSafetyNets.com](mailto:Linda@PersonalSafetyNets.com)