

## CHAPTER 6

# Compassion and Companionship

**Y**ou need compassion and companionship for both recovery and growth after trauma. *Social support* is a term many professionals use when talking about this. It simply means having people help you get through the tough times, and a lot of books on trauma recovery will encourage you to get the social support you need. While we agree that social support is good in general, we believe it can be most helpful in the form of a particularly good companion on your journey after trauma. We call this kind of person an *expert companion*. In using this term, we don't mean to imply that this companion has to be a professional or have received any special kind of training. Rather, this companion is an expert at providing a sense of compassion and understanding for you in the aftermath of your traumatic experiences.

You may already be fortunate enough to have one or more such companions in your life. This chapter talks about how expert companions can help you grow after trauma. If you have no one in your life who fits this description, we will guide you toward finding someone. We will also talk about how you can become an expert companion to offer this kind of support to someone else in difficult circumstances. This may happen once you have made greater headway down the path to growth. Perhaps you have already found it happening to you.

### On the Journey with an Expert Companion

What is it like to be with an expert companion? Most importantly, it is easy to just *be*. That is, an expert companion has no expectations for you to do things a certain way and instead allows you to be comfortable just being yourself. That might mean being your sad self at times, your angry self at other times, your frightened self at still other times. Whatever you are feeling, an expert companion is comfortable with you, so you do not need to change. We use the word “companion” to emphasize that this is a

person who can stick with you on the journey through the tough times in trauma's aftermath. A companion goes with you, doesn't push you, and experiences much of what you experience along the way. A companion is someone who waits when you need a break and provides a helping hand when you slip. A companion stays by your side. A companion shares the experience and is interested in how you are doing. Your companion wants to listen to your description of the experience and tries to see it through your eyes. At the same time, the companion can offer a sense of perspective.

## Expert Companions Stay Focused on Your Needs and Strength

In the aftermath of trauma, the journey is one that you, as the trauma survivor, are directing. You will need to chart the course of this journey, since it is personal to you. Expert companions are accepting of this fact and understand that their role is mostly passive, although there may be times when they are more active in providing assistance. They don't become frustrated with the pace, because they realize that this journey is harder for you than it is for them. They do not require a clear sense of the endpoint or of how much assistance you may need along the way. They are comfortable with this uncertainty while having faith in your ability to continue on this path to some unknown destination. But expert companions also have faith in your ability to do well. They understand that as a result of this journey, you will become someone more than you were. They understand that growth is a real possibility and encourage you toward it by pointing it out to you along the way.

## Expert Companions Provide Guidance When It Is Useful

At a time in your life when you may feel less able to see things clearly, understand what is happening, or sense what direction to take, an expert companion can step in with some guidance. An expert companion points things out that you miss, especially about yourself and the progress you are making. An expert companion offers ideas about what might be happening without acting like a know-it-all. An expert companion remains respectful of you even when you have trouble respecting yourself.

Now, you may be thinking that you have never had a relationship like this, or you may be reminded of a special relationship. To get a sense of how important such a relationship can be, here are some questions to reflect on.

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## EXERCISE: Experiencing Expert Companionship

Answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. Think of a time when you felt most understood by another person. Who was it?

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2. What things did that person do or say that gave you the feeling of being understood?

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3. Think of a time when you felt misunderstood by another person. Who was it?

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4. What did that person do or say that gave you this impression?

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5. What could that person have done differently, which would have made you feel understood?

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Expert companions are compassionate and are sensitive to your needs. If you have had this kind of experience with someone in the past, it will be easier for you to recognize the sort of relationship that will be most helpful to you in your difficult circumstances.

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Being subjected to hurtful or disappointing relationships in the aftermath of traumas just makes everything harder. On the other hand, expert companionship is the best kind of relating in the aftermath of trauma. Expert companionship is especially helpful for posttraumatic growth.

## **How Expert Companions Help with Posttraumatic Growth**

You have already learned a lot about how you can move toward growth in the aftermath of trauma. Much of this process involves experiencing strong emotions and dealing with thoughts that intrude on you and seemingly cannot be dismissed. The posttraumatic growth process also involves reflecting on important beliefs that have been challenged by what has happened to you and the building of new beliefs and a new vision for your future. Expert companionship can help you with all of this. Here is how this works.

## Expert Companions Help with Emotions

After a traumatic event when you feel your most intense emotions, an expert companion can help you feel these feelings without shame. Knowing that your feelings are okay to express will allow you to say more about them and understand them more deeply. Simply being able to say what you are feeling is a relief. Exploring your feelings in more detail is even better for you. This is because the feelings you are having may feel foreign. You may never have felt things so deeply. An expert companion who allows conversations around these unusual feelings is essentially saying to you, “Anything you are feeling about this is okay with me, and I am not going to judge you or leave you because you feel a certain way.”

## Expert Companions Help with Intrusive Thoughts

When you experience intrusive thoughts about traumatic events and their aftermath, an expert companion can be someone to share these with, allowing them to be off-loaded, so to speak, and contained by this other person. It can feel good when someone else knows what you have been thinking and accepts these thoughts without judging you. It provides you with a sense that you are not alone with these disturbing ideas. One client recently said to Rich, “When I leave your office, I think about leaving all this here, and I can come back to it later.”

## Expert Companions Help You Sort Out What to Believe

When you examine your core beliefs or try to figure out what to believe, an expert companion can be a sounding board for you. It’s helpful to be able to say what you think out loud. An expert companion listens to your thoughts as you try to figure out what to believe. While helping you get your thoughts organized, the expert companion never criticizes what you say or tells you what is right or wrong to believe. An expert companion may offer you a different perspective but in a way that does not imply that you have to accept it.

## Finding What Works for You

No one is going to be a perfect expert companion. The key is to find someone who is good for you. In fact, different people need different versions of this kind of companionship. You might need different things from your expert companion at different times.

You may not be used to indicating what your needs are. You also may not understand what it is exactly that you would like to have in this relationship. Here is a list of many of the things that people need at various times from an expert companion. You can use it to figure out what you need and how to express your needs to someone else.

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### EXERCISE: What You Need from an Expert Companion

Check off the things that you need from someone right now.

- ☐ Someone who will listen to how I am feeling without judging me.
- ☐ Someone who will let me know if I am thinking in a way that makes sense or not.
- ☐ Someone who will encourage me.
- ☐ Someone who will let me cry.
- ☐ Someone who will let me be angry.
- ☐ Someone who is okay with me being confused.
- ☐ Someone who can be okay with just not talking.
- ☐ Someone who has some experience with what I am going through.
- ☐ Someone who has a sense of humor.
- ☐ Someone who lets me know what he or she is thinking.
- ☐ Someone who does not push ideas on me.
- ☐ Someone who does not try to tell me what to do.
- ☐ Someone who will take me seriously.
- ☐ Someone who will let me take my time with this.

- ☐ Someone who will let me think out loud.
- ☐ Someone who will not tell other people about what I say or do.
- ☐ Someone who will not think I am crazy because of what I am thinking.
- ☐ Someone who will be okay with me repeating myself.
- ☐ Someone who won't tell me what I should do.
- ☐ Someone who will do some things with me, so I can get a break from this.
- ☐ Someone who will see me as a good person, no matter what.
- ☐ Someone who will let me know if I am bothering them.
- ☐ Someone who will be honest with me.
- ☐ Someone who will take on some tasks I have trouble doing right now.
- ☐ Someone who won't let me become inactive.
- ☐ Someone who will hold me.
- ☐ Someone who won't get more emotional than me about these things.
- ☐ Someone who has time for me.
- ☐ Someone who knew me before all this happened.
- ☐ Someone who can see that I want to change for the better.
- ☐ Someone who will help me learn.

List any other characteristics that would be helpful in an expert companion:

- ☐ Someone who \_\_\_\_\_.
- ☐ Someone who \_\_\_\_\_.

Doing this exercise hopefully clarified the kind of person who could be an expert companion for you. It also may have given you some ideas for how to express your needs to an expert companion. People often need help in figuring out how to help.

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You may be thinking, *Wow! Where do I find a person like this?* Alternatively, you may be thinking of just such a person who is already a companion to you. Or perhaps you are at neither extreme but are somewhere in the middle, thinking that you could have someone like this in your life but are not really sure who it would be. So now that you have a better picture of who you would like to have in your life, you can consider who this person or these people could be.

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### EXERCISE: Finding an Expert Companion

Think of some people from the past who have had some of the characteristics you checked off in the previous exercise. These people might have helped you, or they may have helped others, and you saw how they were able to provide expert companionship. See if you can come up with a few possibilities.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How they helped me or helped others: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How they helped me or helped others: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How they helped me or helped others: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How they helped me or helped others: \_\_\_\_\_



Now switch to the present time. Think of some people who have reached out to you with compassion or have done something unexpected and helpful. These could be friends or family members, or they may be people whom you do not know well. They may have surprised you with their care, but you have not considered accepting their help, because you do not currently have a strong relationship with them. Write down the names of these people and how they have helped. If you have difficulty identifying anyone, we will come back to this topic later in this chapter.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How they helped me or helped others: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How they helped me or helped others: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How they helped me or helped others: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How they helped me or helped others: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

By now you may have a better idea of someone you can invite into your current life as an expert companion.

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Some people are quite comfortable with asking people to help them, and others are not. Here is an exercise that will help you assess how easy or hard this is for you.

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## EXERCISE: Inviting People to Be Expert Companions

Place a check mark next to each statement that matches what you believe to be true about yourself.

- ☐ *I can ask for help pretty easily. (+)*
- ☐ *I like to feel independent. (-)*
- ☐ *I think that other people feel good when they get to help others. (+)*
- ☐ *I like to do things my own way. (-)*
- ☐ *I get embarrassed when I am emotional. (-)*
- ☐ *I don't like other people to know I am having trouble. (-)*
- ☐ *I am usually part of a close network of people. (+)*
- ☐ *I enjoy helping others. (-)*
- ☐ *I feel much more comfortable helping than being helped. (-)*
- ☐ *People I know would be hurt if they found out that I didn't let them know I was in need. (+)*
- ☐ *I am hesitant to tell other people what I am feeling or thinking. (-)*
- ☐ *People I know are very warm and compassionate. (+)*
- ☐ *I have seen the people I know offer help to others. (+)*
- ☐ *It is important to me that I look strong and capable. (-)*
- ☐ *I think people would lose respect for me if they saw my vulnerability. (-)*
- ☐ *I have a solid network of friends. (+)*
- ☐ *I am not afraid to show my feelings. (+)*

- ☐ *I don't trust that people will really follow through with help or stick with me. (-)*
- ☐ *People often make promises, but few really keep them. (-)*
- ☐ *I don't embarrass easily. (+)*
- ☐ *I feel that I am well liked. (+)*
- ☐ *I have felt betrayed in the past by people I trusted. (-)*
- ☐ *People have come through for me in surprising ways. (+)*

**Scoring:** Add up the statements that you checked with a positive sign at the end, and add up the statements that you checked with a negative sign at the end. If the positives are more frequent than the negatives, you will probably be able to seek some of the companionship you need easily. If, on the other hand, you checked the negative items more frequently than you checked the positive items, it may be harder for you to approach someone for help or to accept help when offered. If the positives and negatives are fairly even, you may be conflicted about seeking companionship.

This exercise gives only a general sense of what might make it easy or hard for you to accept companionship. However, it can show you how you may need to start thinking differently in order to benefit from expert companionship.

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You may have discovered that you will need more than one person for companionship. This is because some helpers are better at certain things than others. Also, it can be helpful to have more than one expert companion, so you do not call on any one person too often when you are in need. Spreading around your needs for assistance may be more comfortable for you and for them.

## How to Ask for Help

This book has emphasized that facing up to the difficult aspects of your situation will make you stronger. If you tend to avoid asking for help or personal closeness in your relationships, this may be your opportunity for you to grow in this area of your life. Connection with others will not only help you deal with trauma but also produce a richer life going forward. So we want you to commit to a plan for finding an expert companion. The next exercise is designed to help you with this.

## EXERCISE: A Plan for Help

Identify those people around you whom you can ask for help but you hesitate to approach or don't want to ask. Describe your reasons for not asking until now. Then make a plan to overcome your reluctance, stating the specific actions you will take and when you will take them. Then describe how things went, paying particular attention to those things that surprised you. Look at the example and then write out your own plan in the space that follows. If you have more than one person in mind, make a plan to approach this additional person (or people) as well. You can do this for as many people as you have in mind.

### Example:

1. Who is someone you can ask for help? *My friend Julia.*
2. Why haven't you asked this person for help? *Julia has a lot of her own problems. I haven't wanted to burden her and make her life more difficult. Plus, I wasn't sure she would really understand why I'm struggling the way I am.*
3. What is your plan for how you will ask this person for help? Describe the specific actions you will take and when you will take them. Be sure to identify what you need help with.

*Date: October 1. Action: Before talking with her, I will write out exactly what I need from her.*

*Date: October 7. Action: I will ask her to go to lunch.*

*Date: No later than October 20. Action: We will have lunch together and I will ask her for what I need.*

*Date: The day after our lunch. Action: I will call her and thank her for talking/listening to me.*

*Outcome: She told me she was honored that I asked her for help. This surprised me. She also said her sister experienced something similar years ago. She always felt guilty that she couldn't help her sister more. I think she may see helping me as a way to make up for what she wasn't able to do for her sister.*

**Your plan:**

1. Who is someone you can ask for help?

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2. Why haven't you asked this person for help?

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3. What is your plan for how you will ask this person for help? Describe the specific actions you will take and when you will take them. Be sure to identify what you need help with.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Action: \_\_\_\_\_

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Action: \_\_\_\_\_

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Action: \_\_\_\_\_

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Action: \_\_\_\_\_

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Action: \_\_\_\_\_

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Outcome:

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In completing this exercise, we hope that you have begun to see that there are possibilities for some companionship among a variety of people you know. If you've been reluctant to ask for assistance, you may have found that it has to do with pride, maintaining your reputation, fear of rejection, or any number of motives. These kinds of motives are very human but may be based on inaccurate thinking. Perhaps you have started to notice flaws in these thoughts and how taking action tests these ideas. Although not everyone you approach for expert companionship will be able to offer just what you want, we hope you will be able to see that some aspects of assistance are worth taking the risk of asking for.

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## Other Sources of Expert Companionship

If you had trouble in the earlier exercises identifying who could be an expert companion in your life, there are other ways to find this kind of companionship. This section focuses on alternative places to look.

### Online Companions

Many people decide to go online to seek expert companions who may be better able to understand their situation than the people around them. You can connect online with others who have been or are going through similar circumstances. You may feel like you don't have to explain yourself so much, because they already know what your feelings and thoughts about the traumatic situation might be. Finding other trauma survivors can give you hope as well as ideas for how to cope. You may find blogs or websites devoted to your particular trauma, and engage in chats. One of the advantages of this form of support for many people is that they can be quite anonymous. This can

seem important if you are dealing with a traumatic circumstance that carries some stigma. Finding others online who are in a similar situation solves this problem in two ways. First, they will be less likely to be judgmental. Second, because the communication is anonymous, you will be less anxious about how others might view you.

## Inspirational Sources of Expert Companionship

You may struggle with the feeling that no one understands what you've been through. Autobiographical accounts of trauma, through blogs, books, or other media, can be very helpful in reducing the sense of aloneness and the feeling of being an outsider that can come with experiencing trauma. When you suddenly feel removed from the social group to which you have always belonged, because you have experienced something that others do not understand, it is often good to hear from people who have already been traveling the path that you are on. Another source of comfort may be in scripture and your religious faith, where you have a sense that God is your expert companion.

It is important to add that there will always be some aspect of your experience that is unique. However close another's experience may be to yours and however understanding an expert companion may be, there is an essential loneliness in these circumstances that cannot be entirely escaped. You need to understand this so that you will not be unnecessarily disappointed in the efforts expert companions may make. They cannot take the pain from you, and they cannot understand everything.

## Professional Companions

Another option for expert companionship is finding a professional companion or helper. There may be a nonprofit organization in your community that provides support to trauma survivors who are specifically in your situation. Some organizations provide individual or group counseling services, and the people who provide the services have a great deal of knowledge about what to expect when dealing with the circumstances that you face. In this way, they may be particularly helpful, because they are used to helping many others whose circumstances are similar to yours.

It may be harder to find an individual psychologist or counselor who is right for you unless you can find someone with a good deal of experience dealing with your particular trauma. You can ask for recommendations from people you know. If you do not know anyone who has worked with a mental health professional, you can contact your local or state professional association for psychologists and counselors, which may be

able to give a referral. You can also find referrals through the websites of the American Psychological Association, the American Counseling Association, or *Psychology Today* magazine.

The quality of the relationship a professional offers may be more important than the particular experience that person has with your trauma. If you go to a mental health professional, be clear that you are looking for emotional support in the form of an expert companion. Bear in mind that many mental health professionals are used to working with people who are diagnosed with particular mental disorders whereas you are dealing with trauma. You may be experiencing strong emotions, but this does not mean that you have a mental disorder. If you are sad, you may not be depressed. So it is useful to talk with a professional who understands what you need and can serve as an expert companion, keeping the focus on the kind of relationship that would be most helpful to you. You will know if a professional helper is right for you through your own emotional reaction to being with him or her. You can trust yourself to know.

## You Can Be an Expert Companion

You may find yourself becoming an expert companion. It can happen online or in person. It may happen when you meet someone who has been going through a similar circumstance. You may find that you can help each other. This happens as you compare your experiences and perhaps provide each other with new ideas for how to cope. There may be a sense of relief from not having to explain everything to the other person, because your experiences are so similar. But you might find yourself offering expert companionship to people who are facing circumstances very different from yours as well. Being helped by an expert companion may fill you with a sense of gratitude and inspire you to offer this to someone else.

Your ability to be an expert companion will likely evolve as you travel the path toward healing and growth in the aftermath of your trauma. You may not set out to be helpful, and you may find it hard to imagine that in your difficulty you can offer much to anyone else. But as we have suggested, being an expert companion is most essentially a human skill; it is simply providing a presence in these difficult times. Almost anyone can do this. It does not require a professional degree.

Becoming an expert companion is also a route to posttraumatic growth. Here's how it works. Your own experience with trauma becomes a basis for helping others. You perhaps will feel a special affinity for others who have gone through similar circumstances and feel especially compassionate and empathic toward them. Helping others through similar circumstances could even become a mission for you. This could be very



rewarding and open up new possibilities in your life that you would never have considered before.

There are possible pitfalls, however, that are worth considering. One is retraumatization. If you are trying to be helpful to someone who is having difficulty, what they tell you about their troubles may add to the struggle you are already having with your own circumstances. This may be a sign that you are not quite ready to be an expert companion and, for the time being, it may be better to focus more on managing your own emotional difficulties. It is also important not to assume that you are similar to another person simply because your circumstances are similar. It can be easy to overidentify, taking over another person's trauma experience and making it your own. Unfortunately, this can lead to assuming you know what is right for someone else.

Another pitfall to expert companionship with other trauma survivors is that it may keep you from being with other people who have not had such experiences. It can become easy to divide the world into the people who have known traumas like yours and people who have not, especially when connecting with others in similar circumstances can be so satisfying and when you find you have expert companionship to offer. You may find at first that your most comfortable relationships are with people who can most easily share your pain. But ultimately you will need to be able to find ways to be close to people who do not have direct experience with circumstances like yours.

Despite these pitfalls, most people find that providing expert companionship to others who are struggling is very rewarding. It can be an unexpected benefit to surviving your trauma.

## Things to Remember About Expert Companionship

In this chapter, you have learned about the importance of expert companionship and how expert companionship may meet your needs at this point in time. You've also learned about how to find expert companions, and you've come up with a plan to seek out an expert companion or companions for yourself. We've also encouraged you to consider becoming a particularly effective expert companion yourself—if not now, then in the future after you have taken more steps on the path toward growth.

Here are a few more things to keep in mind. What you need from an expert companion may change over time, and you may find yourself gravitating toward different people in order to meet different needs. For example, you may have someone who is especially comforting to you when you just need a companion to cry with, while another person is more adept at engaging you in conversation about your experiences or about changes in your beliefs. Another companion may be someone who you just like to

spend time with, doing things together that can provide a bit of distraction and relief from the hard emotional work of posttraumatic growth.

It is also useful to remember that your expert companions may need a break from being with you at times, so be charitable toward them. You will also need to be able to count on yourself as a good companion. People cannot always be there to help you in times of need, and you will have to rely on your own ability to manage your emotions. You can use the methods we have described in this book (see chapter 3). Finally, be compassionate toward yourself, and keep in mind that posttraumatic growth is hard work, and it takes time.