

Evidence Base: Mutual Support

Mutual support is a core team skill and a crucial component in any teamwork process. Mutual support is also commonly referred to as “back-up behavior” in the teamwork literature. Porter, et al., define backup behavior as “the discretionary provision of resources and task-related effort to another member of one’s team that is intended to help that team member obtain the goals as defined by his or her role when it is apparent that the team member is failing to reach those goals.”¹ Backup behavior is considered critical to the social and task performance aspects of teams and essentially involves helping other team members to perform their tasks.^{1,2}

Backup behaviors often include filling in for a team member who cannot perform a task (e.g., inexperienced, incapable, overburdened, about to make an error), helping others correct their mistakes, or redistributing work to a fellow team member who is underused. This behavior results in more adaptive teams.¹ The construct suggests some degree of task interchangeability, situation monitoring, and coordination among members, since they must fully understand each other’s roles and be willing to provide and seek assistance when needed.^{3,4}

Mutual support in health care has significant importance as it is a skill that has the potential to improve the quality of patient care.⁵⁻¹³ The health care context is often characterized by high workload, as well as acute and time-sensitive situations; thus, task assistance and backup behavior are crucial to adequate patient care. Mutual support provides a safety net to help prevent errors, increase effectiveness, and minimize strain due to workload. In fact, health care training curricula that include mutual support training have been shown to reduce length of patient stays by 50 percent,¹⁴ reduce hospital costs by 19 percent,¹⁵ increase staff understanding of goals,¹⁶ reduce patient adverse events,^{15,17} reduce mortality,¹⁸ and reduce malpractice suits by 50 percent.¹⁵

Research has demonstrated that TeamSTEPPS® training can enhance mutual support among health care teams. Such training emphasizes how to provide timely, respectful, specific, directed, and considerate feedback; how and when to engage in effective task assistance; and how to advocate for a patient even when it is an unpopular view.

Brock, et al., examined participant attitudes before and after a TeamSTEPPS training session. Significant attitudinal shifts for teamwork skills were observed for mutual support, team structure, situation monitoring, and communication.¹⁹ Moreover, Capella, et al., found that the TeamSTEPPS intervention as applied to training trauma resuscitation teams was effective in improving mutual support and other relevant team competencies.²⁰ Similar research has found that TeamSTEPPS training was associated with significant increases in the quantity and quality of mutual support behaviors, specifically feedback and task assistance.²¹ These findings taken together further illustrate the effectiveness of TeamSTEPPS for training mutual support and the importance of mutual support in ensuring effective patient care.

In summary, mutual support is a core skill that enables teams to function effectively and improve teamwork and patient care.^{5,6} Teams that exhibit effective mutual support typically:

- Back up and fill in for each other in performing tasks²²;
- Self-correct;
- Reallocate functions;
- Compensate for each other when overloaded²²;
- Distribute and assign work thoughtfully;
- Engage in conflict management, resolving personal and interpersonal conflict³;
- Engage in patient advocacy³; and
- Regularly provide feedback to each other (both individual and team oriented).^{3,22}

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Additional Resources

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