

Getting Started with Supported Decision Making

What is Supported Decision Making?

Supported Decision Making (SDM) is getting the help you need, from 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 so you can decide.

SDM is a very important tool for people with developmental disabilities who can make their own decisions when they get the support they need. For them, SDM can be used instead of more restrictive options, like guardianship. For individuals with guardians, SDM can be used to maximize their control over their own lives. The real point 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.

How do I Get Started?

You are probably already using SDM in some or many parts of your life. Do you have people who you trust to go with you to the doctor? Are there people you talk to when you're making a tough decision? That is all Supported Decision Making! In short, you've really already started using SDM. Your next step will be to get your needs and process down on paper so you can make sure you're staying on track with your plan, you've got a written plan to share, and you're notifying the people in your plan about what you would like them to do with you.

If this all seems really overwhelming and abstract, you may find it helpful to start by reading about SDM and looking at some SDM plans other people have written to give you some ideas. At the end of this handout, you'll see a chart with a list of books, articles, and sample SDM agreements you can look over to help you get started.

If you like to get started by putting pen to paper, think about these questions and write down your answers. Again, the resources at the end of this handout can help you think about and answer these questions!

- 1) Who are people in your life you trust to help you understand and make choices?
- 2) When do you want help and what kind of decisions do you want help with?
- 3) How do you want people to help you?

Build Your Team

The next step is to build your SDM team. Look at all the times when you need support (like going to the doctor, paying bills, making decisions at school) and the list of people you trust to help you. Do you have at least one person who can help you with each type of decision? Great! Now, go talk to them. Tell them how much you value their help and how much you like it when they help you. Ask them if you can count on them to be there to help you make choices in the future.

Once you have all the people on your list ready to help, decide how you want to connect. You should do what works best for you and your team, but here are some ideas:

- Meet in person and have a pot luck dinner
- Have a Zoom or FaceTime meeting so you can all chat and see each other
- Set up a closed and private Facebook group so you can chat and share updates
- Have a text chain where you stay in contact with the people you trust
- Set up a Google Group so you can email each other and share documents easily

Put your team to work. Send out fun news to share, celebrate birthdays, let people know what decisions you have going on, or find any excuse to stay in touch! Most importantly, include them as you understand choices and make decisions. They will help you figure out the options and make choices.

Think About Additional Tools

Once you have a good grasp of the concept of SDM, you know what you need, and you have your team, start to think about whether or not this is all you need. If it is, you're all set and you can change your plan and team as much as you'd like, to suit your needs. If you think you'll need more help with financial decisions, consider an ABL Account, Special Needs Trust, or Representative Payee for Social Security Benefits. If you may need more help with medical decisions, consider a Power of Attorney. You can also use tools like dream boards ensure your wishes are known and guide of all decisions.

If you find that this is not enough and you still are not able to understand your choices and express your opinions, it may be time to consider a limited or full guardianship. Guardianship can limit some of your rights, such as your right to vote, so it should be used as a last resort. Even if you have a guardian, you still have the right to use SDM. You can keep working with your team, including your guardian, to consider options and select the path that best fits with what you love and want. You should be included to the greatest possible degree in making decisions and you may find that you grow your decision-making skills so much that you no longer need a guardian. No matter what, using SDM can increase your power and self-determination and make your future brighter.

Supported Decision Making Resources

1. The Arc of Northern Virginia's Toolkit with contacts, sample POAs, and more
<https://thearcofnova.org/sdm/>
2. Webinars on SDM implementation and team building
<https://youtube.com/user/VideosatTheArcofNoVA>
3. Asking any SDM Questions
<https://thearcofnova.org/answers/>
4. "Supported Decision Making" book by Jonathan Martinis and Peter Blanck
<https://tinyurl.com/SDM-book>
5. Jenny Hatch Justice Project info on start of SDM in VA, SDM data
<http://www.jennyhatchjusticeproject.org>
6. "Setting the Wheels in Motion" article by Suzanne Francisco
<https://tinyurl.com/SDM-Wheels>
7. National Resource Center for SDM's stories, videos, agreements, and research
<http://www.supporteddecisionmaking.org/>

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8. "When Do I Want Support" SDM tool
<https://tinyurl.com/SDM-ACLU>
9. Center for Public Representation's SDM forms and stories
<https://supporteddecisions.org/>

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