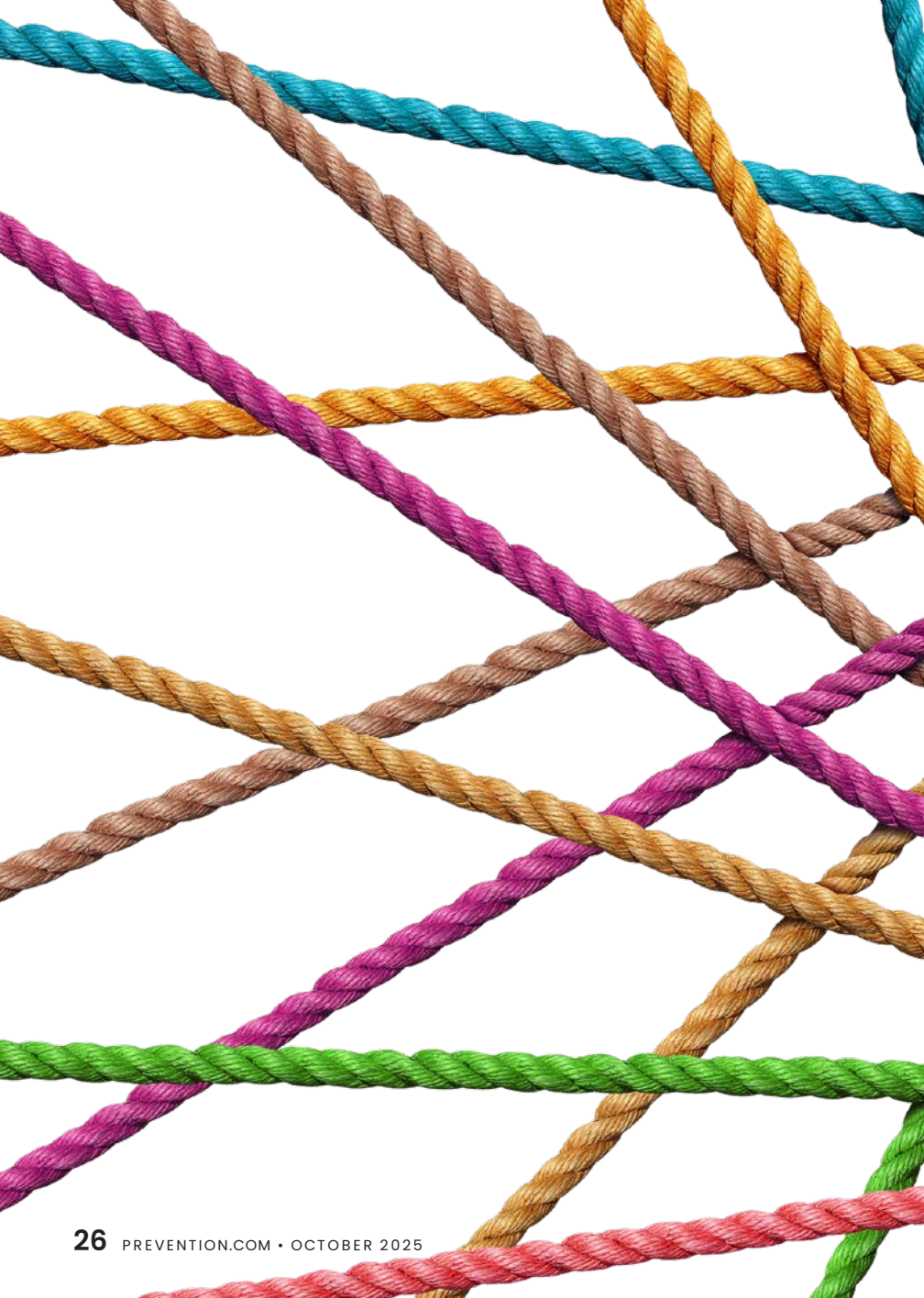

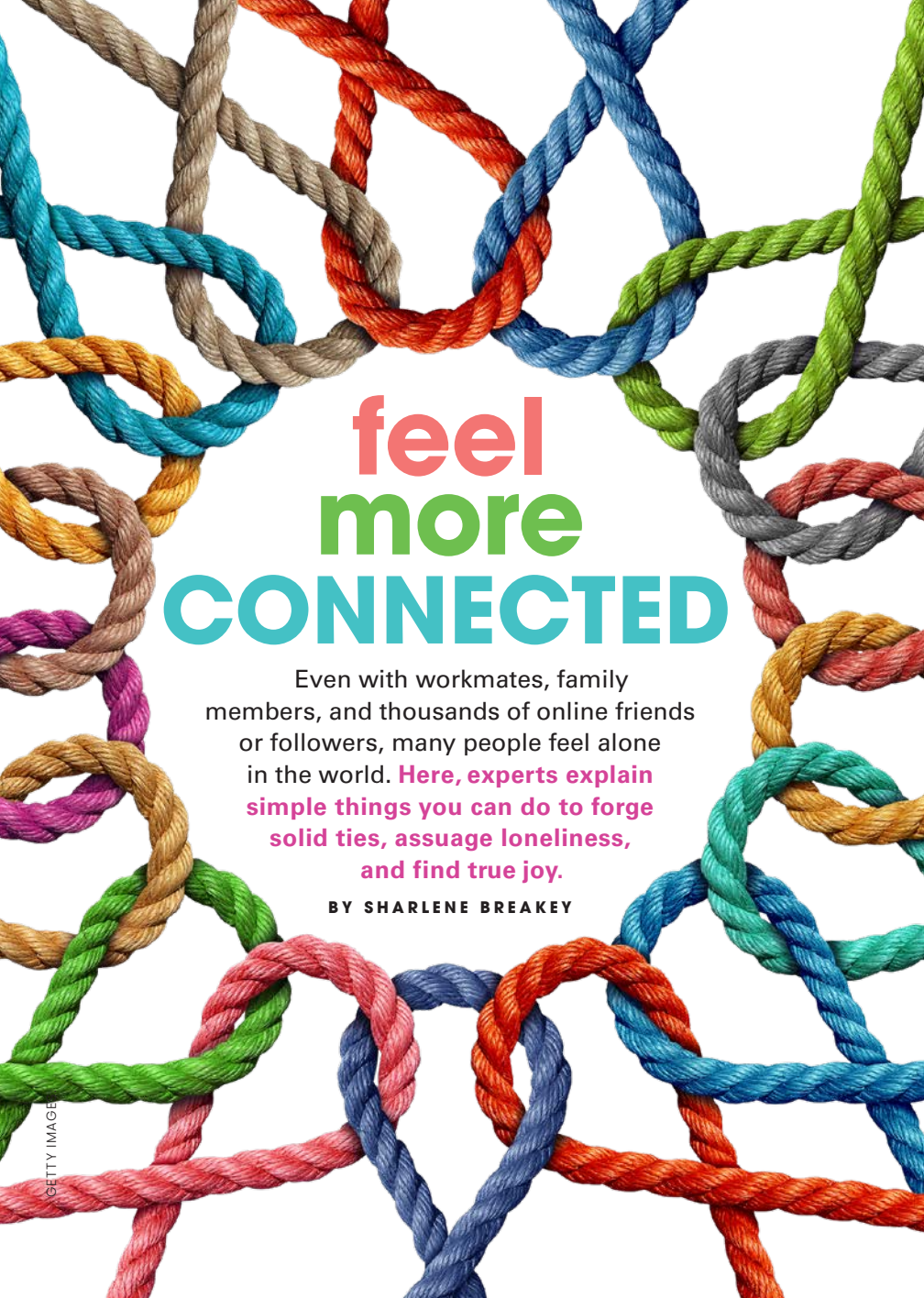

feel more CONNECTED

Even with workmates, family members, and thousands of online friends or followers, many people feel alone in the world. **Here, experts explain simple things you can do to forge solid ties, assuage loneliness, and find true joy.**

BY SHARLENE BREAKEY

GETTY IMAGES

Alison Silvers, 60, had been feeling lonely ever since she and her husband had moved from the city to the suburbs four years ago. She shifted into high gear trying to make herself happier, digging into her contacts list to find friends of friends and then joining a book club. But nothing clicked, which Silvers says left her "feeling lonelier than ever." Then, two years ago, she decided to sign up for a class in acting and improv, activities she had always loved. A few weeks in, as she burst into laughter with the other women there, she experienced a "jolt of joy," making her feel lighter than she had in months. It was so healing that she found herself smiling at unexpected moments throughout the rest of the week.

That jolt Silvers felt was a sense of connection, the buzzy feeling of being in sync, feeling seen or heard, mattering and belonging. It's a concept full of contradictions. Sometimes it's easy to find; at other times it can be confusingly elusive. We can feel lonely in a crowd or deeply bonded even when we're flying solo. When we do find it, though, connection provides a potent reminder that we're part of something bigger than ourselves. Pretty much everyone craves more of it, and researchers, who have been digging more deeply into this topic since the pandemic, are beginning to understand why.

Recent studies paint a clear picture of true connection as being as important to mental and physical well-being as diet, exercise, and not smoking. When we fill up on it, that tied-together feeling staves off the ache of loneliness, which in turn lowers cortisol, a stress hormone that causes inflammation, and helps prevent chronic illnesses such as heart disease and stroke, type 2 diabetes, depression and anxiety, and even Alzheimer's. Staying connected also affects the immune system, says Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University who was the lead scientific editor on a 2023 Surgeon General's report warning that loneliness, or lack of connection, had become a profound threat to our health and well-being.

Evolutionarily, it makes perfect sense that we need to feel like part of a community. Hunters and gatherers would have starved without the support of their tribes. Holt-Lunstad explains that far from simply being something to endure, gnawing loneliness is a blaring

physical signal that we need more and deeper connection, just as thirst tells us we need water. Of course many people's loneliness was compounded by the pandemic, but the enforced isolation also had an oddly positive impact. "Everyone was admitting to feeling lonely, and that normalized it," says Jeremy Nobel, M.D., M.P.H., the author of *Project UnLonely: Healing Our Crisis of Disconnection* and a researcher at Harvard Medical School. That in turn led many people to seek out connection and inspired researchers to try to discern the best ways to do so.

Here's the big surprise: Connection isn't simply about being with friends and loved ones more often. While that's important, humans also need to find ways to feel attached to the earth and its creatures, their communities, and even the universe. Building a constellation of connections—feeling a tie not only with close relations but also with neighbors and shopkeepers, music and art, nature's beauty, a higher power, or even a random person in the checkout line—leads to a healthier and more love-filled life. Here are six ways to build a network of interrelatedness.

1 connect through CREATIVITY

Expressing yourself, as Silvers did in her improv group, is a time-tested tool for forging close ties. "Look at cave paintings and tribal music and dances—communities have been bonding this way since the beginning

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of recorded history," says Dr. Nobel, who started the Foundation for Art & Healing and Project UnLonely to spread the word.

If the thought of telling jokes or singing with a choir makes you cringe, don't worry: Dr. Nobel says almost any creative act, from crocheting to dancing, can prime you to feel more entwined with the world. So consider trying something you enjoyed when you were younger, or tell yourself that now is the time to finally pick up that paintbrush. Just be sure to focus on enjoyment rather than on being "good at it." When we have fun expressing ourselves, our cortisol levels decrease, lessening our stress, fear, and anxiety. Also, feel-good hormones like dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin are released, flooding us with empathy, a sense of well-being, and joy. "That alone prompts people to act more generously to those around them, paving the way to connection," Dr. Nobel explains.

But there's more to it than that, even when you do your creating alone in your living room. When you get into the flow of strumming a ukulele or sewing, it generates positive emotions and inner dialogue that attach you to your sense of self, and that too primes you to bond with others. Dr. Nobel points to imaging studies that reveal that when we view, make, or hear art, it activates parts of the brain that help us make sense of our environment. These are the same areas that are negatively affected by isolation, but whereas the impact of loneliness on these areas will cause us to view a stranger as a threat, an art-filled brain is more likely to see that person as a potential associate. If you share your creation with others, the bond can grow stronger: "Sharing what you've made reveals part of yourself, and that opens you up to people and conversations," Dr. Nobel says.

2 find value in SMALLER MOMENTS

Some of the most illuminating loneliness studies recently have explored the importance of everyday interactions called "weak ties" in making us feel less alone—these can include experiences as minor as sharing a moment with someone else while waiting for a latte at the coffee shop. "Knowing there are kind people in your community makes you feel safe, secure, and connected," explains Holt-Lunstad, even if you see a given person only once. Beth Howard, a writer, found that out when she joined a community association after having moved to a new town. "Just knowing the people I bump into now makes a world of difference," she says.

There are so many ways to create these sorts of small ties. When Ann Marie Romanczyk, who'd lived in her New York City apartment building for years but knew almost no one there, impulsively posted a sign on her door announcing the birth of her son, the warm smiles and spontaneous hallway chats that followed gave her a feeling

of belonging she hadn't even known she was missing. "Neighbors still stop and ask me about my son, who is all grown up, and though we haven't seen inside most of their apartments, they're still dear to us," she says. You also get a bonus when you shop regularly at local businesses. That's a habit Jason Adams, a communications professional in Seattle, got into during the pandemic to support struggling stores; he kept it up after discovering that his jaunts around the neighborhood led to casual chats with neighbors and shopkeepers that brightened his week.

3 take THE TALK deeper

There are biological reasons that a single empathic conversation—in which you can hardly wait to respond because what you are being told so resonates with you—feels so good, whether it is with an old friend or with someone you've just met. "Brain imaging shows that the rhythm of this back-and-forth activates some of the same brain areas that light up in animals as they begin mating rituals," says Andrew Newberg, M.D., director of research at the Marcus Institute of Integrative Health at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia.

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THANK YOU

Nothing can force a meaningful encounter, of course, but some simple steps can make it more likely that you'll find common ground. For starters, remember that most everyone else wants to connect too. This can help you feel less guarded and more relaxed. Asking a question to which you're genuinely interested in hearing the answer makes it easier to listen. Keep your own responses short, and try to mirror your partner's phrasing, tone, and body language. Most important, Dr. Newberg suggests bringing a level of curiosity to the conversation. "There's a falseness to the idea that because you're sitting next to someone in church, they are just like you," he says. "We forget that every person, no matter how familiar, has their own story to tell." Thinking like this can also remind you that someone who may seem very foreign is probably more like you than you think.

4 deepen your bond to NATURE

There may be no more exhilarating sense of being part of something than the one that arises from the wonder of viewing natural beauty—when you hike up a hill to catch a sunrise or take a good look at a patch of mushrooms in your yard. Experts who study transcendent emotions such as awe say that encountering things that seem beyond our understanding (which could include viewing a gorgeous painting or listening to a Beethoven symphony) remind us that we're a part of an impossibly large and mysterious universe. This makes us feel small, but in a way that also links us to that vastness and gives our systems an almost magical hit. "We've found that these awe experiences are very meaningful to people; they create a sense of interconnection," says Jennifer Stellar, Ph.D., an associate professor and director of the Health, Emotions, and Altruism Lab at the University of Toronto.

Like creating art, experiencing awe with another person can be deeply bonding. When Becky Olson, a traveling nurse living in Detroit Lakes, MN, lost her partner a few years ago, she couldn't click well with good friends, who weren't able to understand how she was feeling, but she found great comfort in communing with fellow hikers. "It sounds so simple, but you breathe the air, see the wildlife, and realize that nature isn't outside of you—you're a part of it," she says. It's no accident that she found it easier to relate to others in this environment: Studies have shown that awe and wonder strengthen empathy and kindness, making people more likely to smile at a passerby or help a neighbor lug groceries inside.

5 find a sense of PURPOSE

Holt-Lunstad says performing random acts of kindness might well be the single most important thing we can do to deepen connections—for both the world and ourselves. Whether you

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offer directions to someone who seems lost, pull a neighbor's empty garbage bin back into their driveway, or share a few apples next time you've picked too many, these acts have a bounce-back effect, furthering belonging. Holt-Lunstad conducted a study in which more than 4,000 participants in three countries were asked to do at least one act of kindness each week, from offering emotional support to providing a service to sharing information. She found that those who did so experienced significantly less loneliness, social isolation, and social anxiety; less neighborhood conflict; and more neighborhood contact. "Something literally anyone can do helps an entire community feel more connected," she says. Another study showed that volunteering inspired the same profound feelings of being part of something.

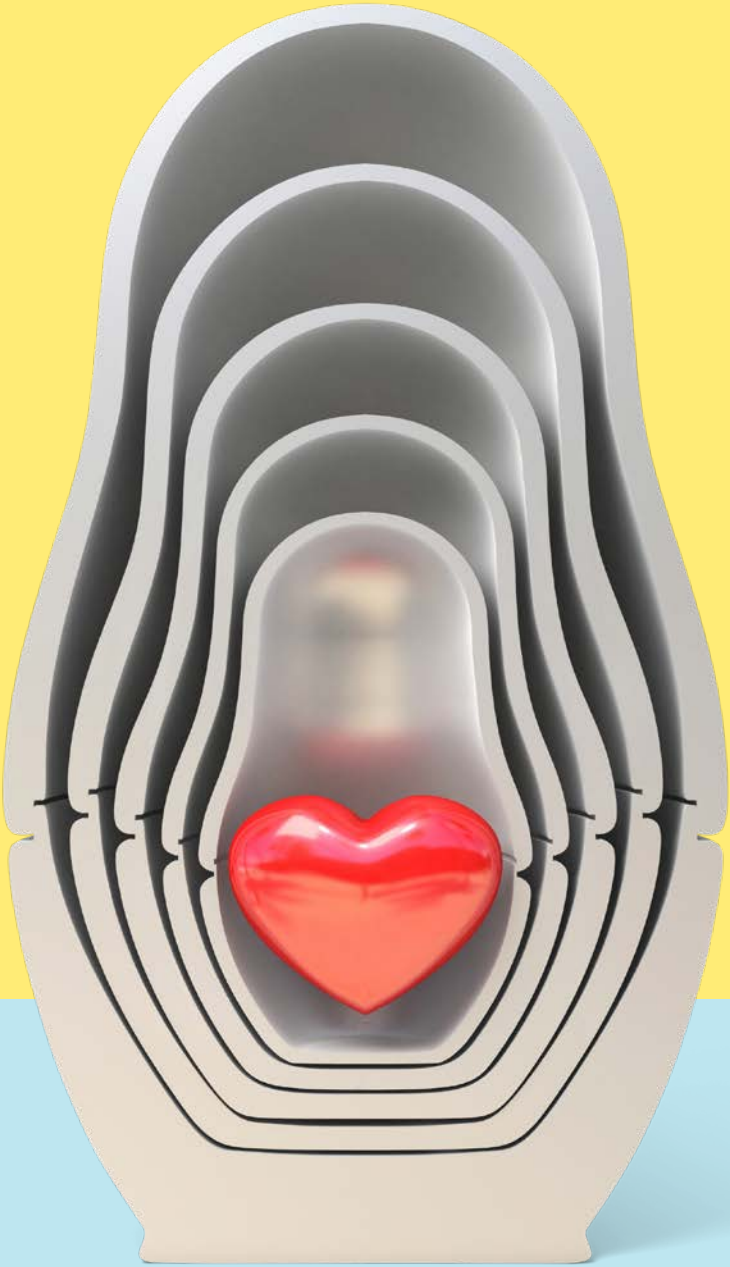
6 find spiritual PEACE WITHIN

Dr. Newberg says there's a reason we often feel less alone when we visit a place of worship. Spirituality offers comfort in community, but it can also serve a deeper function. Rediscovering the rituals of your childhood or trying prayer rituals for the first time can make you feel powerfully tied to something larger. A mantra-based practice like transcendental meditation (TM), which requires no specific belief system, can serve the same biological purpose: reducing activity in the sympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for the fight-or-flight response, while turning on the parasympathetic nervous system, which relaxes you.

The result is a mix of focus and deep calm that some describe as bliss. Dr. Newberg explains that when someone is deep in meditation, chanting, or prayer, their brain's parietal lobe, which processes sensory information and spatial awareness, quiets and they lose the spatial representation of their self. This breakdown of the self makes boundaries between self and others disappear. Studies show that such experiences can also leave people feeling deep gratitude, an emotion that is its own wellspring of connection. A 2024 meta-analysis revealed that grateful individuals reported less loneliness and more satisfaction in relationships and had a greater likelihood of appreciating others. "These types of practices literally change the brain over time, predisposing it to more positive experiences and deep feelings of connection," says Dr. Newberg.

Best of all, feelings of deep connection—whether gained through meditation, dancing, or bonding with a neighbor—ripple outward, affecting others' health and well-being too. And this helps them build their own ties and contributes to a kinder, more compassionate universe.

For more tips on using kindness to connect, visit prevention.com/kindness-muscle.



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