



The Healing Power of Belonging

In an anxious world, connection is an essential prescription for better health

BY JANET REYNOLDS

Feeling out of sorts? Concerned about the here and now as well as the future and what it means for you, your children and grandchildren? On any given day, the frenetic doomscrolling news cycle can make even getting out of bed feel almost impossible.

But while our topsy-turvy world can feel overwhelming and isolating, the good news is that you're actually not alone. According to Civic Science, a consumer polling and market intelligence company, 73% of those 55 and older are concerned about the price of food and essentials, while 55% are concerned about politics. Your worries are real.

The other good news is this: Improving your mental, spir-

itual and physical health can be within your reach, and it can start with something as simple as finding community or expanding the community connections you may already have. Increasing connection is, of course, not a one-stop solution. But experts say it can play a vital role in improving emotional and physical health.

"When you have a sense of belonging, you have an improved immune system," says Elizabeth Vasquez, an associate professor at UAlbany, where she is director of the Center for the Elimination of Health Disparities and part of the university's Center for Healthy Aging. "It goes across the board in improving health."

In fact, the realization that belonging — along with movement, getting out in nature, participating in the arts and service to others — can be critical to our overall health is beginning to change how medical professionals look at people who come in with various physical, emotional or mental health complaints. Rather than simply asking, "What's the matter with you?" doctors in the United States are beginning to ask, "What matters to you?"

Flipping that question, says Julia Hotz, author of *The Connection Cure: The Prescriptive Power of Movement, Nature, Art, Service and Belonging*, can help medical professionals prescribe something beyond medicine alone to help a patient. It's called social prescription, which Hotz defines in the book as "a nonmedical resource or activity that aims to improve a person's health and strengthen their community connections." These prescriptions can include taking up a long-forgotten hobby, learning a new language or joining a swimming group. The key is that the choice is determined by the person's interests and desires.

Does it work? Let's look at Frank, one of many people featured in Hotz's book. Frank was a trucker who spent hours alone, sitting down and not eating well. This lifestyle caught up with him midlife when he was diagnosed with hypertension and Type 2 diabetes. It would have been easy, even medically required, to simply prescribe dietary changes and insulin — which, in fact, Frank's doctors did.

But then something unusual happened. Frank moved, and his new doctor took the time to discover that in his youth Frank enjoyed riding his bike. The doctor "prescribed" a cycling safety course targeted at older adults. Before long, Frank was cycling regularly and had created a cycling group of peers who became friends. He also lost 40 pounds and, yes, came off his insulin. His social prescription helped address his physical and mental challenges.

While social prescription can take many forms, Hotz notes that building community can be an especially critical step toward better health. "When we are transitioning into a new

GETTING STARTED

Want to expand your community but aren't sure where to start? Here are some tips from Elizabeth Vasquez:

- **Start small and local.** Consider trying a new hobby or visiting your local senior center for a program.
- **Look around your neighborhood.** Even if you live in an apartment building, start by waving at a neighbor and see what happens from there. "If you wave to a neighbor, the next thing you know they're talking to you. See what's around you."
- **Look at your skill sets and see where you might volunteer.** Vasquez, 55, began volunteering as a translator two years ago at a free clinic in Albany. "It keeps me engaged, and I know as I get older, I can continue to do that," she says.

period — maybe the kids are out of the house or we are retiring from the workplaces, that can be when we suddenly start noticing this absence of connections," she says. "It can lead to this existential question of, 'What do I do?'" It can also lead to changes in physical health.

Even a little connection can make a difference, Hotz says. She cites two main types of connection: companions, the people we depend on to give us our sense of self, and those perhaps less personal groups that provide us a sense of belonging. "Maybe it's a church or at the Y or people in your neighborhood," she says. "They might not be your BFFs, but they're still people you can belong to — and we know we need both."

Brigid Beckman, minister at Unity of Albany, sees the positive impact of connection regularly in her church, and not just because of attendance at a service. "What I noticed is that, especially after COVID isolation, people in this age bracket were hungry for connection," she says. "They were happy to be back at church and all that, but they were really hungry for connection."

Coffee hour started up again, followed by Sunday potluck lunches so people could linger and chat. Church members have also begun movie and craft nights, a book club and a writing group, Beckman says. The writing group was started by a woman who wanted to sit side by side with others who were using writing to help alleviate their frustrations and concerns. "It's one of the things that will help keep me sane," she told Beckman when proposing the weekly gathering. "Just being in community will build my strength and my own resistance." The result? A community within a community, if you will.

Witnessing the positive changes that creating group opportunities beyond worship has done for church members has prompted Beckman to expand the church's involvement

with other faith communities. "We don't have to reinvent the wheel, and that helps me," she says. "I don't feel like I'm doing it alone. It helps my mental health and my spiritual health, which also helps my overall well-being."

Longtime Unity member Diane Teutschman, 71, knows firsthand the value of community. "I have always had a strong need for connection," she says, noting she's moved a lot in her life. "I like to belong, so I join clubs. For me, I need to be connected. It's a good feeling to feel at home somewhere with like-minded people. For right now, it gives me hope that there's good in the world. It's huge when we have so much negativity and darkness."

At Unity of Albany, Teutschman coordinates Unity Cares, a group of 19 volunteers who help other members with challenges. Sometimes it's a ride to a doctor's appointment. Other times it might be a meal train for someone recuperating from an illness.

"The need to be of service is so strong," she says. "It makes people feel useful and alive." ■

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DISCOVERING WHAT REALLY MATTERS

If you're not sure what matters to you, *The Connection Cure* offers this list of questions to ask yourself as a place to start.

- 1 When was the last time you experienced "a small moment that made you feel more calm, joyful and grateful"?
- 2 When was the last time you felt "in the presence of something vast that transcended your current understanding of the world"?
- 3 When was the last time you felt "completely absorbed in an experience"?
- 4 When was the last time you felt "extremely present" in a moment?
- 5 If you had two more hours in your week, what would you spend them doing?
- 6 When you were a child, what could you spend endless amounts of time doing without getting bored?
- 7 What "activates" you?
- 8 What are you doing to look after yourself?
- 9 What makes you light up when you talk about it?
- 10 What makes you feel like the healthiest version of yourself?