Social Connectedness and Optimal Being
Today:

- **Learn** how social connection impacts health and well-being.
- **Explore and identify** our individual social networks.
- **Practice** connecting with each other in safe, supportive ways.
Why is Connectedness Important?

LONELINESS
The percentage of American adults stating they are lonely has soared from 20% to 40% in a generation.

HEALTH
From immunity to inflammation, Cognitive impairment to stroke, our social connections play a role in disease: risk and preventive.

LONGEVITY
People with strong social connections live longer. And without strong relationships, life expectancy shrinks.
The Connectedness Continuum

(Amateau, G., Hickey, P., Gendron, T., Link, S., MacDonald, C., Watson, T., Welleford, E.A.)

**Definition of social isolation:**
- A state in which the individual experiences less social engagement with others than they would like, and they report that this interferes with their quality of life. (based on Nicholson)

**Definition of social connectedness:**
- A state in which the individual experiences a satisfying number of social gatherings, close relationships and/or satisfaction with social contacts and reports that these experiences maintain their quality of life. (based on Toeppoel)
**Who is at risk for social isolation?**

1. Caregivers
2. LGBT Older Adults
3. Minority Older Adults
4. Trauma Survivors
5. Everyone
Risks for Social Isolation

1. Loss (of spouse, job, home)
2. Lack of Transportation
3. Living Alone
4. Recent trauma or transition
FOUR PILLARS OF OPTIMAL BEING

(HOLLY NIEMELA)

Physically Fit

Emotionally Sound

Mentally Strong

Living With Meaning
1. Immune system
Loneliness activates a double whammy: increases inflammation, suppresses fighting off viral infections (Cole, 2015).

2. Chronic disease
Strong social bonds are as good for you as quitting smoking. Weak social circle carries a health risk equal to smoking 15 cigarettes daily (Holt-Lunstand).

3. Built environment
People want to “age in place,” yet only 1% of U.S. housing stock is equipped with universal design features that make engagement easier.
Physically Fit and Socially Connected

My personal support
(family, friends, companions, mentors)

My environment
(sidewalks, parks, ramp, market)

My health providers and practitioners
(doctor, dentist, trainer, counselor)

My resources
(music, equipment, podcasts, organizations)
“We forget that some of the oldest medicines that we have are, in fact, love and compassion. When these medicines are deployed, they can be deployed by anyone. When they are deployed they can provide an extraordinary source of healing.”

Vivek Murthy, former U.S. Surgeon General
Emotional Soundness and Connectedness

1. Happiness
70% of our happiness comes from relationships (Murray & Peacock, 1996).

2. Self-esteem
Positive relationships help us thrive emotionally, increase our self-esteem and self-acceptance (Pinker, 2016).

3. Affinity
Singing in groups has been shown to improve happiness and well-being and to spark rapid social bonding (Pearce, Luanay, & Dunbar).
“Good relationships keep us healthier and happier. Period.”

Robert Waldinger, Harvard University
<table>
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<th>Soul Friends: 6 Mechanisms of Transformation</th>
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<td>(Stephen Cope)</td>
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<td>• A safe holding environment within which you relax and expand.</td>
<td>• Inspires deep feelings of belonging and a sense of alikeness.</td>
<td>• Challenging or confrontational to your benefit.</td>
<td>• Sees something special in you, reflects you back to you.</td>
<td>• A mysterious, mystic kinship.</td>
<td>• Irreplaceable companion in your struggle to make meaning and express yourself.</td>
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More frequent social activity is associated with reduced risk of cognitive impairment. Higher social integration is associated with less cognitive decline and slower memory loss (Ertel).

Isolation and loneliness change the brain (Wilson, Cacioppo).

Across the lifespan, good relationships protect the brain.

Mental Strength and Connectedness
Meaning, Purpose, and Connectedness

1. Ask for Help. When we ask for help it makes person we ask happy and helps them to feel connected and needed (Seppala).


3. Belonging. A sense of belonging is an important driver of meaning. Being excluded causes pain and conflict (Smith).
Lucille Clifton
American
Poet
1936-2010
EASE

(Cacioppo, J.)

**Extend yourself**
Send out small social signals. Take tiny steps in small doses of positive sensations that originate with social interactions.

**Action plan**
Acknowledge it’s difficult and why. Be intentional and plan to seek out connections.

**Seek collectives**
Connection is not about being interesting, but rather: be interested.

**Expect the best**
Expect warmth and connection.
“When other people think you matter and treat you like you matter, you believe you matter, too.”

Emily Esfahani Smith
Thank you!
THANK YOU
References


Pinker, S. (2014). *The village effect: How face-to-face contact can make us healthier, happier, and smarter* (First ed.).