

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.

Learning Objectives

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.

Why is
Connectedness
Important?

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 Toepoel)*

**Who is at
risk for
social
isolation?**

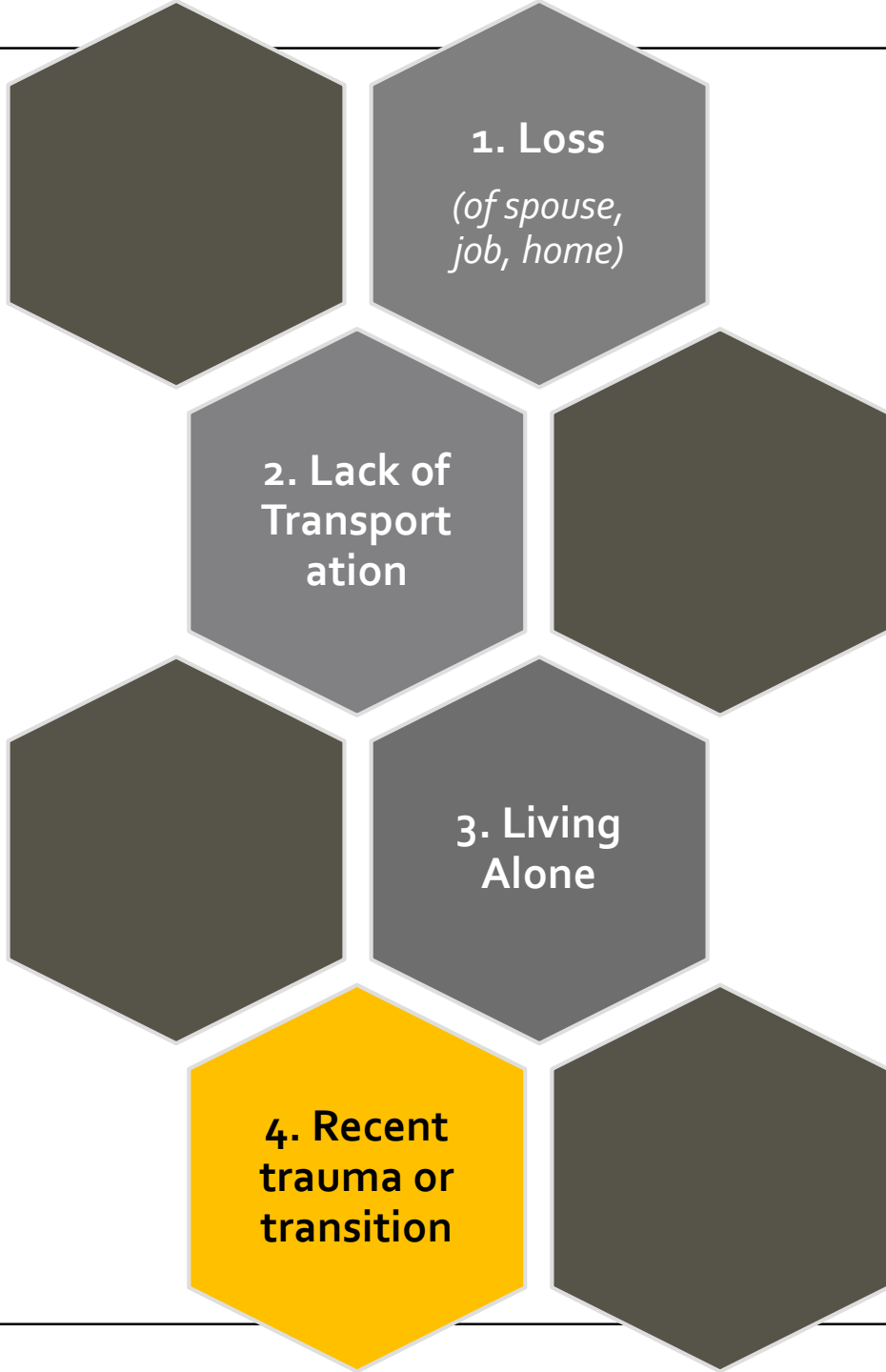
1. Caregivers

2. LGBT Older Adults

3. Minority Older Adults

4. Trauma Survivors

5. Everyone



Risks for Social Isolation

TRANSITIONS

FOUR PILLARS OF OPTIMAL BEING

(HOLLY NIEMELA)

Physically Fit

Emotionally
Sound

Mentally Strong

Living With
Meaning

Physical Health and Connectedness

1. Immune system

Loneliness activates a double whammy: increases inflammation, suppresses fighting off viral infections (Cole, 2015).

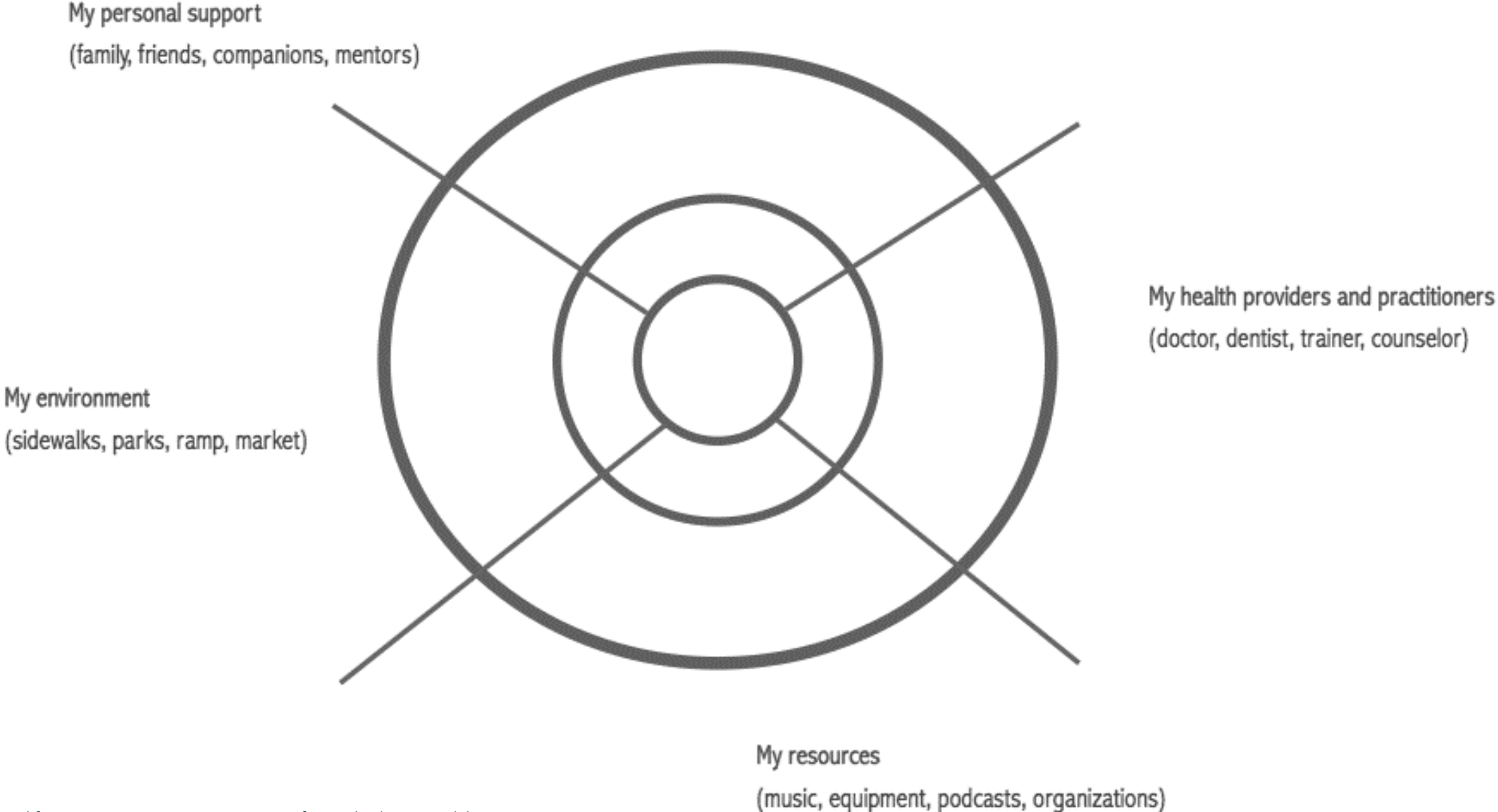
2. Chronic disease

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



“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

1. Happiness

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

2

2. Self-esteem

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

3

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

Soul Friends: 6 Mechanisms of Transformation

(Stephen Cope)

1. Containment

- A safe holding environment within which you relax and expand.

2. Twinship

- Inspires deep feelings of belonging and a sense of likeness.

3. Noble Adversity

- Challenging or confrontational to your benefit.

4. Mirroring

- Sees something special in you, reflects you back to you.

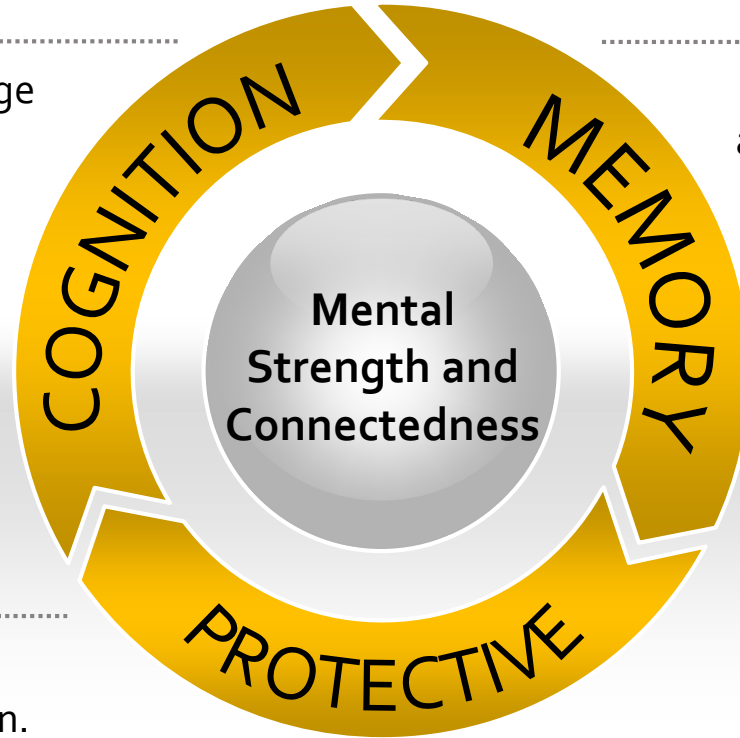
5. Mystic resonance

- A mysterious, mystic kinship.

6. Conscious partnership

- Irreplaceable companion in your struggle to make meaning and express yourself.

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



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).

Across the lifespan, good relationships protect the brain.

Meaning, Purpose, and Connectedness

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graph LR; A[Meaning, Purpose, and Connectedness] --- B[1. Ask for Help. When we ask for help it makes person we ask happy and helps them to feel connected and needed (Seppala).]; A --- C[2. Volunteering and Lifelong Learning. Community ties = richer lives (Ertel).]; A --- D[3. Belonging. A sense of belonging is an important driver of meaning. Being excluded causes pain and conflict (Smith).];
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1. Ask for Help. When we ask for help it makes person we ask happy and helps them to feel connected and needed (Seppala).

2. Volunteering and Lifelong Learning. Community ties = richer lives (Ertel).

3. Belonging. A sense of belonging is an important driver of meaning. Being excluded causes pain and conflict (Smith).



Lucille Clifton
American
Poet

EASE

(Cacioppo, J.)



E

Extend yourself

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



A

Action plan

Acknowledge it's difficult and why. Be intentional and plan to seek out connections.



S

Seek collectives

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



E

Expect the best

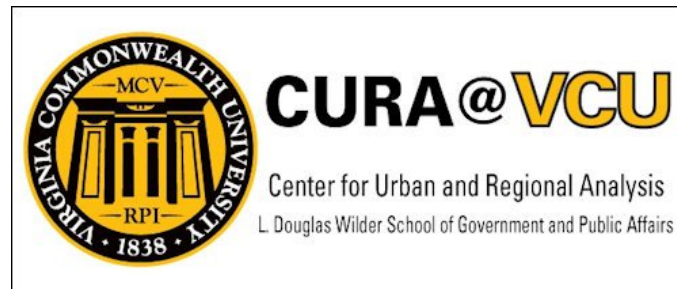
Expect warmth and connection.



“When other people think you matter and treat you like you matter, you believe you matter, too.”

Emily Esfahani Smith

Thank you!



United Way of Greater
Richmond & Petersburg

THANK YOU

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