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HUMAN CONNECTION & COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Rediscovering Connection: A Simple Framework to Reduce Disconnection in Senior Services



PROPRIÉ

genwell HUMAN CONNECTION MOVEMENT x HEALTHY AGING CORE Collaborative Online Resources & Education BRITISH COLUMBIA

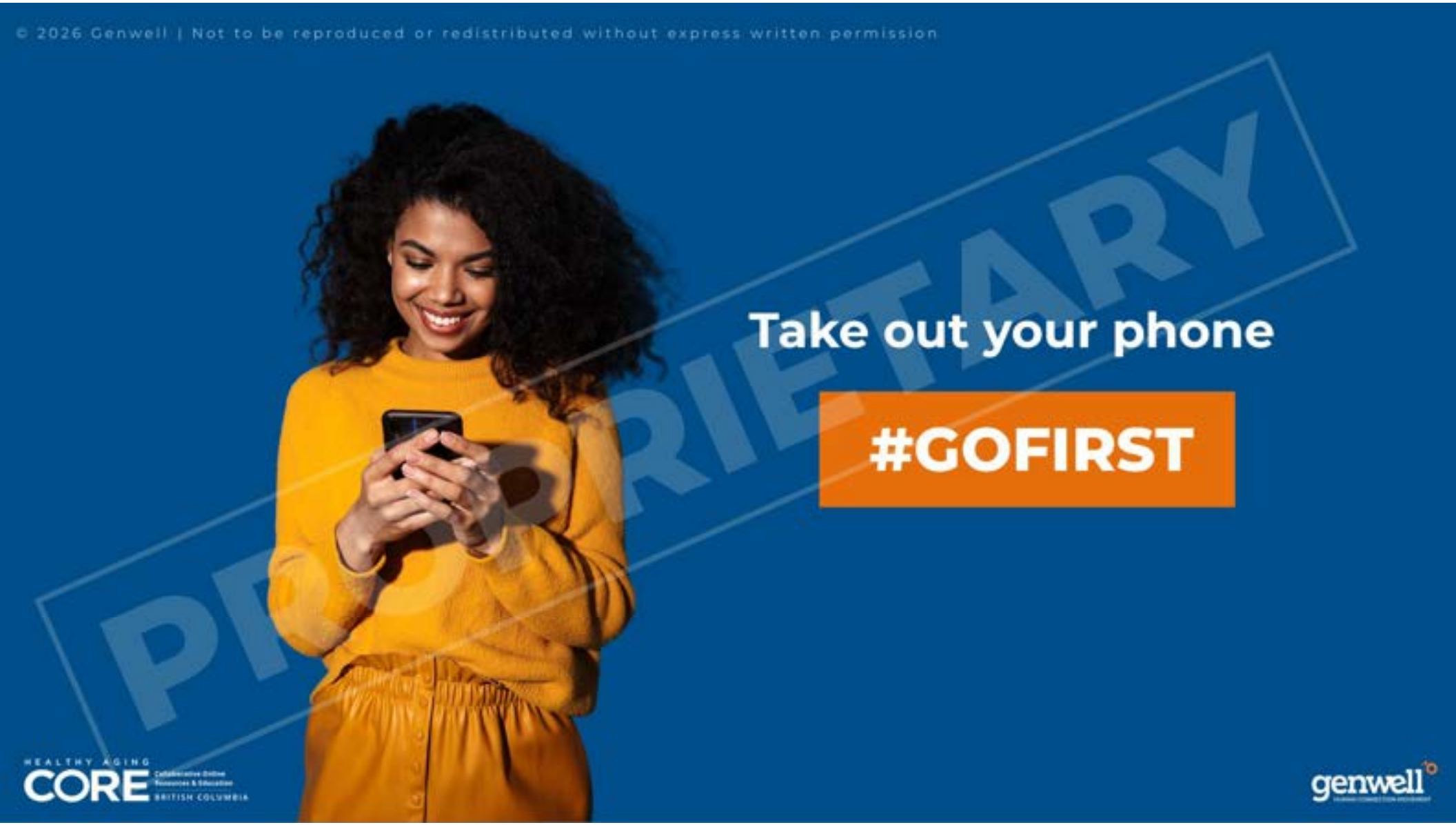
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ROUGH AGENDA

1. Intros & Context (5 mins)
2. Why Does Human Connection Matter? (10 mins)
3. Who Is GenWell & What Do We Do? (5 mins)
4. Principles & Ideas to Promote Connection (15 mins)
5. Reflection, What Now? + Q&A (10-15 mins)

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Send a quick text to someone you've been meaning to see.

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NICE TO MEET YOU!

- Chief Strategy & Partnerships Officer, Canada's Human Connection Movement
- Torontonian (and adopted Kamloopsian)
- Waterloo Math graduate
- Coping with aging parents and an older neighbour struggling with the loss of her husband
- Parent, pet parent, boy band enthusiast, crossword lover & avid sports fan



Paul Estey

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ABOUT GENWELL

- Founded in 2016
- Registered Canadian charity
- Passionately committed to addressing the issues of social isolation, disconnection, and loneliness through the power of human connection.
- Our vision: A connected Canada where everyone thrives.



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WHY WE'RE HERE

1. Share how human connection supports our individual, community, and societal health & well-being.
2. Recognize the vital role that each of you plays in building connection and community.
3. Acknowledge that many of us are struggling in our day-to-day and with the pace and uncertainty of the world around us.
4. Identify opportunities to deepen connections with each other, for older adults, and in the community.
5. Encourage and support you in strengthening your own social health and sense of belonging.

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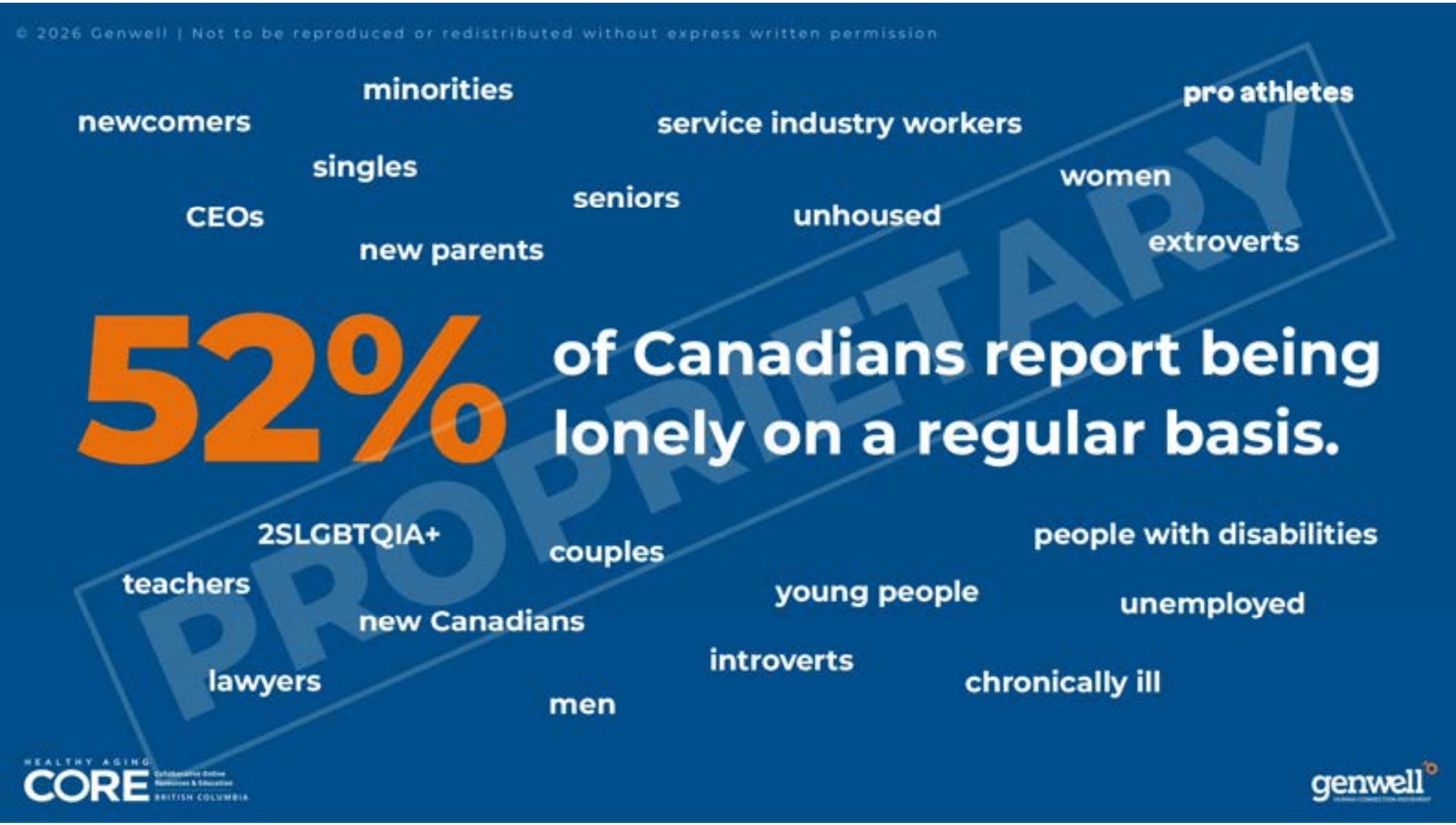
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52% of Canadians report being lonely on a regular basis.

Social Connection Survey, 2024

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60% of Canadians feel disconnected from their community.

YMCA Canada & Angus Reid, 2024

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57% of seniors (50+) experienced loneliness in the past year.

National Institute on Ageing, 2026

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43% of older adults are at risk of being socially isolated.

National Institute on Ageing, 2026

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25% of older adults have expressed a desire for more social connection.

Angus Reid, 2019; National Seniors Council, 2014 and 2017

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61% of adults who have felt lonely have never told anyone.

Marmalade Trust, 2025

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81% of lonely adults report anxiety or depression and 75% feel little purpose in life.

Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2024

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30% of workers in Canada have felt disconnected from each other in the last year.

Angus Reid Institute, 2025

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58% of nonprofit employees and 71% of nonprofit leaders are experiencing burnout.

YMCA WorkWell, 2024

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Loneliness is the
second-highest predictor
of burnout, after insufficient sleep.

Card, K. G., et all, 2022

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NEW NORMS AREN'T HELPING







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WHY THIS ISSUE IS COMPLEX

SOCIAL ISOLATION

Social isolation is a lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with on a regular basis.

DISCONNECTION

Disconnection is the lack of belonging.

The human emotional need to be accepted as part of a group or community.

LONELINESS

The difference between the relationships you have and the relationships that you desire.

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3 COMPLICATING FACTORS



>50%

More than half of the people we saw each day before the pandemic were not in our calendars.



42% of Canadians are burnt out, and amongst those who are most burnt out,

92%

are lonely.



65%

of people felt others were either "definitely" or "probably" not aware how lonely they felt.

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3 KEY INSIGHTS

1. A complicated, difficult, fast-paced and ever-changing world has made many people vulnerable, increasing loneliness, isolation & disconnection.

2. We've never been formally educated on the importance of human connection for our individual, collective, and societal well-being.

3. Human connection is a superpower we all possess, and the foundation for happy, healthy humans, workplaces, communities, and society.

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WE ALL EXPERIENCE LONELINESS

THIRST



HUNGER



LONELINESS



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HOW WE OVERCOME LONELINESS

HUMAN CONNECTION

"The energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued ... and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship."

- Brené Brown

It includes:

- Deep meaningful connections
- Casual conversations and interactions with strangers
- Both verbal and non-verbal communication

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WHAT IS SOCIAL HEALTH?

SOCIAL HEALTH

Our ability to positively and proactively interact, build, and maintain meaningful relationships with others.

It includes:

- The number and types of relationships we have
- The frequency of our interactions
- The perceived quality of our connections with others
- How we communicate with others and navigate social situations

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MORE BROADLY...



SOCIAL HEALTH



MENTAL HEALTH



PHYSICAL HEALTH

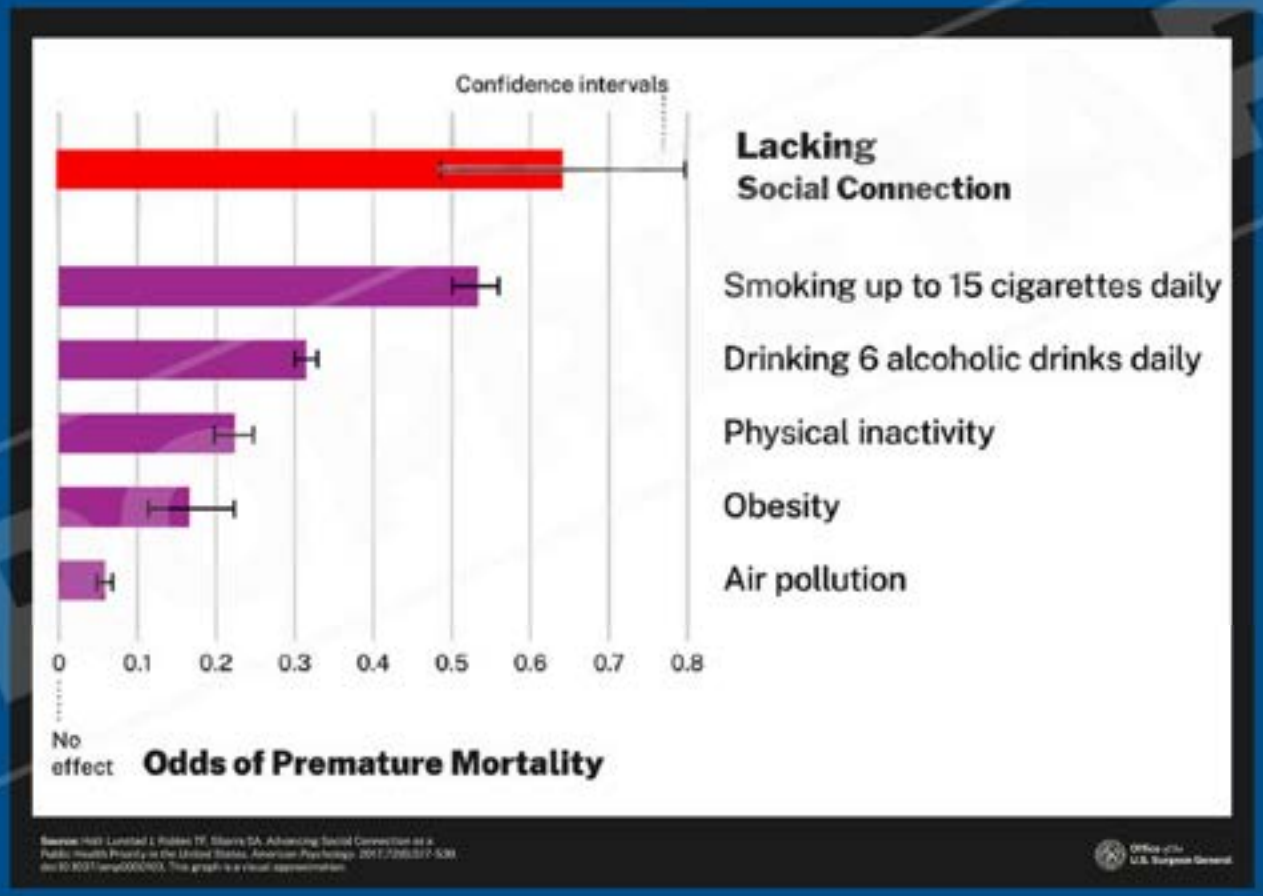


SOCIETAL WELL-BEING

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WHY THIS MATTERS



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IMPACTS ON ADULTS



+50%
risk of early onset dementia



+29%
risk of heart disease

+32%
risk of stroke



higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide



2X
risk of Type 2 diabetes after age 50



+68%
risk of hospitalization

+57%
risk of emergency room visits

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IMPACTS ON YOUTH



persistent & cumulative detrimental effects on adult health



higher rates of stress, anxiety & depression



impairs development of the brain's structure



can have a negative impact on academic performance

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IMPACTS ON HEALTHCARE & SOCIETY


OBESITY


CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE


DIABETES


DEMENTIA


ANXIETY & DEPRESSION


HYPERTENSION


ADDICTION

$27.6 + $30 + $40.1 + $30 + $48.6 + $20.5 + $49.1

= **$245.9**

BILLION ANNUALLY

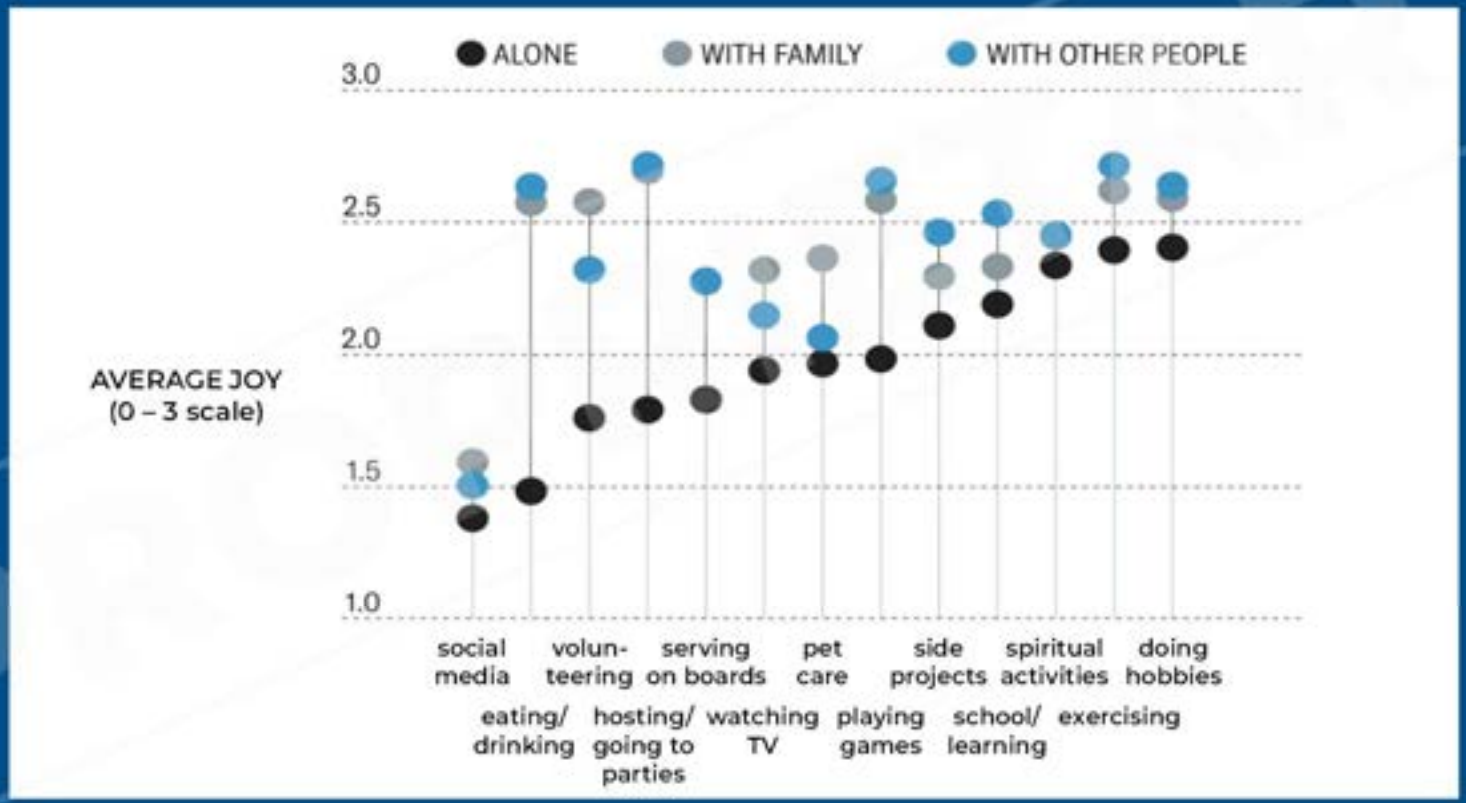
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EVERYTHING IS BETTER TOGETHER



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SPECIAL TIME EDITION



THE SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS

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PERSONAL BENEFITS

- ☑ Single largest indicator of happiness
- ☑ Increases empathy and compassion
- ☑ Builds resilience
- ☑ Strengthens your immune system
- ☑ Improves self-confidence
- ☑ Reduces prejudice and discrimination
- ☑ Increases your chances of living longer by up to 50%
- ☑ One of the most powerful actions we can take to prevent & treat anxiety
- ☑ Single largest preventative action to avoid depression

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SOCIETAL BENEFITS

- ☑ Can prevent & reduce homelessness, food insecurity & domestic violence
- ☑ Assists in emergency preparedness
- ☑ A defense against misinformation
- ☑ Reduces incivility
- ☑ Strengthens interpersonal and institutional trust
- ☑ Creates safer and stronger-knit communities
- ☑ Supports healthy aging
- ☑ One of the most powerful protective factors against suicide

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OUR APPROACH







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EDUCATE: WORKSHOPS



- WORKPLACE
- SENIORS
- COMMUNITY
- MUNICIPALITIES
- CLASSROOM



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EDUCATE: THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

CANADIAN SOCIAL CONNECTION SURVEY | SONDAGE SUR LES CONNEXIONS SOCIALES AU CANADA

Canadian Social Connection Guidelines

genwell | SFU | CASCH



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EMPOWER: PUT INTO PRACTICE



Build skills for connection

Create opportunities for real-world interaction





Make it easy to say yes

Normalize connection as a practice



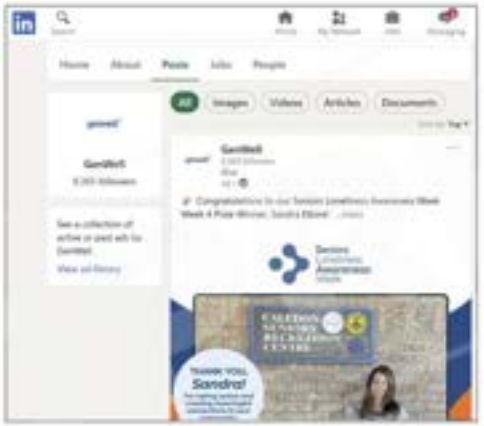
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EMPOWER: TOOLS & RESOURCES



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print/digital



guides

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CATALYZE: PUBLIC CAMPAIGNS



Face-to-Face February

Feb 1-28

A month-long integrated campaign that includes daily challenges and activities designed to help students build healthier connection habits.



GenWell Weekends

May 1-3
Sep 20-22

Catalytic weekends that encourage people to connect with family, friends, neighbours, classmates, and colleagues at times when people benefit the most.



Seniors Loneliness Awareness Week

Jun 15-21

Campaign specifically focused on raising awareness and mobilizing intergenerational attention around the growing issue of loneliness among seniors.



Talk to a Stranger

Nov 23-29

A week-long habit-building campaign focused on engaging Canadians in the surprising and numerous benefits of talking to strangers.



Digital Detox Days

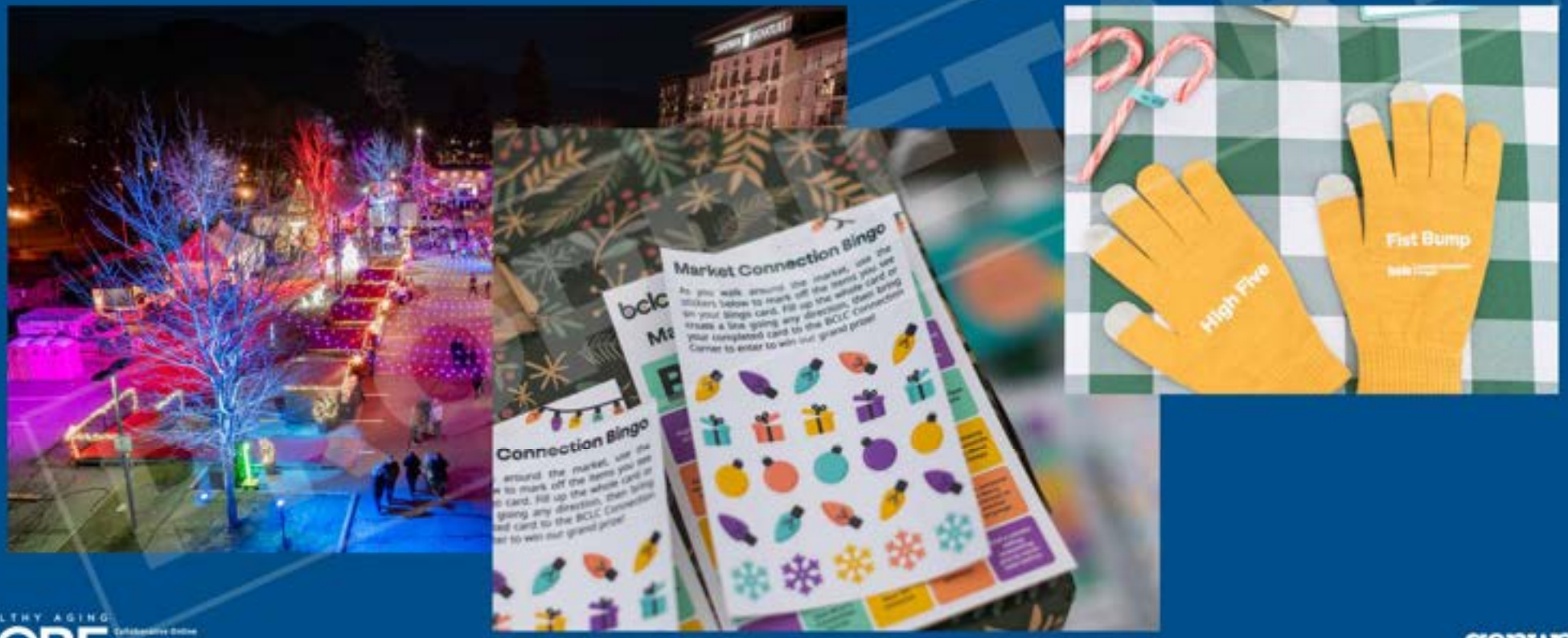
1st Monday of each Month

Days focused on providing tips, tools, and inspiration to help people better manage their digital usage and its role in distracting from human connection.

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CATALYZE: PARTNERSHIP ACTIVATIONS



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A SIMPLE RECIPE

You First + **Commit** + **Then Others** + **Routine** + **Get Help**

- **You First**
  - Show up and nurture your own social health
- **Commit**
  - Prioritize and make time for connection
- **Then Others**
  - Empower people to strengthen connection for others
- **Routine**
  - Promote connection in everyday interactions & behaviours
- **Get Help**
  - Engage your broader caregiver & community network

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THE 5-3-1 RULE

A social fitness framework created by Harvard-trained social scientist Kasley Killam, author of *The Art & Science of Connection*

- Treats social health with the same daily intentionality and consistency required for physical fitness

5 Connect with five different people or social groups every week (to build breadth)

3 Nurture 3 close relationships

1 Aim for one hour of human interaction every day



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CONNECTION TIPS FOR LEADERS

1. **Build understanding**
   - Ensure everyone understands the critical role human connection plays. Action begins with awareness.
2. **Be intentional**
   - Calendar connection and create routines.
3. **Invest**
   - Dedicate time & budget to proactively foster a connected community. Relationship-building is essential.
4. **Be inclusive**
   - Recognize that everyone connects differently.
5. **#GoFirst**
   - Model the importance of connection by actively engaging with others. Your actions will inspire & permission others.

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CONNECTION CONSIDERATIONS

It's important to strike a balance between and variety among:

CONTEXT	FOCUS	FREQUENCY
Individual	New	Scheduled/ routine
1-on-1	Deeper	Episodic/ occasional
Small groups & teams	Broader	Casual/ infrequent
Larger groups		

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DEEPENING CONNECTION

From: How are you today?

To: What's been the best part of your day so far?

What could we do to make you feel more welcome?

Can I share something lovely that happened to me earlier today?

Dig Deeper | **Ask for Feedback** | **Model Behaviours**

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BUILDING STRONG CONNECTION HABITS



Intentionality & Routine



Gratitude



Mentorship & Leading by Example



Inclusiveness & Accessibility

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GENERAL CONNECTION PRINCIPLES

1	Staff as connectors	• Equip staff and volunteers to introduce people, notice regulars and invite them back.
2	Shared ownership	• Invite clients to lead activities, share skills, host conversations and welcome newcomers.
3	Inclusive access	• Address cost, transit, language, disability, culture, technology, hours and caregiving responsibilities.
4	Continuity	• Help relationships grow beyond their visit and point people to future ways to get involved.
5	Measurement	• Track returning visitors, new connections and sense of belonging, not only door counts and participation.

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SPACE DESIGN PRINCIPLES



Physical Cues



Conducive Spaces



Gatherings & Events

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SPACE DESIGN PRINCIPLES

1 Welcoming entry	• Make it clear to first-time visitors where to go, who to ask and that they belong here.
2 Inviting spaces	• Offer movable seating, shared tables and conversation-friendly areas alongside quiet areas.
3 Regular rhythms	• Run programs at the same time and place each week so people start to recognize one another.
4 Shared activity	• Gather people around something to do together: puzzles, games, seed swaps, repair cafés or book clubs.
5 Prompted behaviours	• Leverage signage, wayfinding and conversation prompts so connection doesn't depend on confidence or chance.

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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT JOURNEY

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Participation

"I attended."

- Make it easy to enter and understand the space

Return

"I came back."

- Make the experience useful and worth their time

Contribution

"I have something to offer."

- Create different ways to participate

Belonging

"I feel like I'm part of this."

- Build trust through listening and follow-through

Ownership

"I made it better for others."

- Create space to shape what happens next

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PROGRAM DESIGN PRINCIPLES

1	Repeated contact	• Bias toward recurring series or ongoing groups rather than one-time activities or events.
2	Stable membership	• Maintain enough consistency for participants to recognize one another and build trust.
3	Shared purpose	• Organize the group around an interest, activity, identity, goal or contribution.
4	Progressive depth	• Use pairs, triads and small-group activities so connection doesn't depend on confidence or chance.
5	Reciprocity	• Ensure everyone can contribute knowledge, care, encouragement or practical help, not only receive services.

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PROGRAM DESIGN PRINCIPLES

6	Participant ownership	• Invite members to shape topics, lead activities, welcome newcomers and influence group decisions.
7	Inclusive access	• Address cost, transportation, language, disability, culture, technology, timing, and caregiving responsibilities.
8	Continuity	• Help relationships move beyond facilitated sessions and provide pathways into future involvement.
9	Measurement	• Assess relationship development, belonging and retention, not only registrations and event satisfaction.

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PROMOTING CARE CIRCLES

A collaborative network of family members, friends, neighbors, and sometimes paid professionals who team up to share caregiving duties

1. Share daily tasks
2. Prevent burnout
3. Use organizing tools



Ontario Caregiver Organization

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ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY

1. Map and nurture a core circle of caregivers & community partners and make communication visible, predictable, and reciprocal.
2. Help them understand the importance of their own social health.
3. Leverage existing programming and activities to expand connection opportunities on both sides.
4. Invite partners into planning and improvement work.
5. Leverage “social prescribing” style referrals.

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FOR REFLECTION

1. How can we build and strengthen connection through gatherings, events, spaces & activities?

   - Making gatherings & events more accessible & inclusive
   - Promoting & incentivizing opportunities for connection
   - Designing, activating & maintaining public spaces to foster safer and more connected community interactions





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FOR REFLECTION

2 How can we help seniors build stronger, healthier connections?

- What role can supporting organizations play?
- How do we educate and engage caregivers on the critical role they play (and support they need)?
- What can we do in communities to promote this issue and opportunity?



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FOR REFLECTION

3 How can we facilitate greater collaboration and sharing of resources across sectors and communities?

- Capacity & space to encourage collaboration
- Cross-promotion & improved utilization of shareable assets
- Mechanisms to share interests & needs





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NOW WHAT?

Personal Actions

Things I can do to build more connection into my day-to-day

- Greet strangers
- Reconnect with old friends
- Schedule it in calendars
- Ensure everyone feels included
- Put on my "connection goggles"



Collective Actions

Things we can do together to build more connection

- Use signage & prompts
- Develop routines & rituals
- Practice gratitude
- Lead by example
- Make intentional connections across teams & with new colleagues





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KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Disconnection is structural:** Changes in how we live, work, and gather have reduced opportunities for everyday connection.
2. **Social health matters:** Connection supports individual well-being, stronger workplaces, and healthier communities.
3. **Seniors' centres are essential connection spaces:** Everyday interactions, shared spaces, outreach, and programs can help people feel seen, heard, valued, and part of something bigger.
4. **Connection can be designed:** Repeated contact, meaningful participation, active listening, calm communication, and clear boundaries create the conditions for trust and belonging in community spaces.

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3 REMINDERS

1. Human connection is essential to our individual, collective, and societal well-being.
2. Everyone in this room can be a “Connection Superhero”.
3. Go first! (we’re here to help)

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ANYONE HEAR BACK?

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WE'D LOVE YOUR FEEDBACK

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- 3 minutes to complete
- Invaluable input
- Helps us tailor future sessions

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LET'S STAY CONNECTED



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