

Social Connection is Medicine:

How Making A Connection Plan Can Mitigate Loneliness

Kim Van Orden, PhD

Co-Director, Center for the Study & Prevention of Suicide

Director, Postdoctoral Fellowship in Suicide Prevention Research

Director, HOPE Lab (Helping Older People Engage)

Department of Psychiatry

University of Rochester Medical Center



MEDICINE *of* THE HIGHEST ORDER





Introduction

Social connection is medicine

Social connections that create a sense of caring, contributing, and community have a range of benefits for health, well-being, and longevity at all ages. Social connection remains malleable throughout our lives.

Learning objectives

1

Identify at least two reasons social connection is medicine.

2

Learn about what Connection Planning involves and how it might help.

3

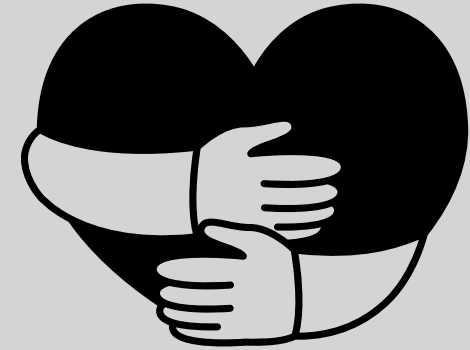
Try out making your own connection plan.

WHAT IS SOCIAL CONNECTION?

Social isolation
& loneliness (SIL).
Holt-Lunstad &
Perissinotto (2023),
NEJM



**Humans are social
creatures.**



**We have a need to
belong.**

Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation

Key takeaways from the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community

Humans are wired for social connection, but we've become more isolated over time

Social connection is as essential to our long-term survival as food and water. But today, loneliness is more widespread than other major health issues in the U.S. Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation is a major public health concern.

Social connection significantly improves the health and well-being of all individuals

Social connection reduces the risk of premature mortality. It can predict better physical and mental health outcomes and ease stress. Higher levels of connection can influence health-related behaviors. Educational and economic achievement are even impacted by connection.



Office of the
U.S. Surgeon General

Social connection is vital to community health and success

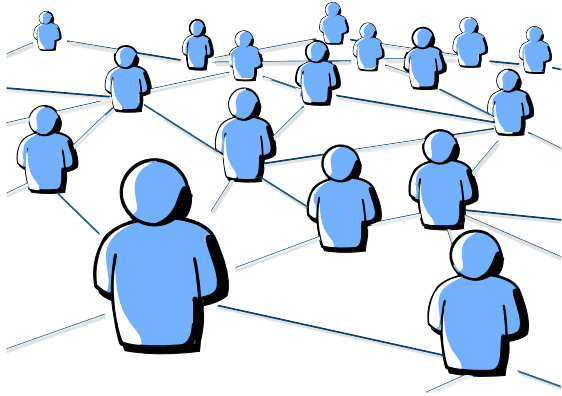
Socially connected communities enjoy better population-level health. They are more prepared for — and resilient in the face — of disaster situations. They also experience greater economic prosperity and reduced levels of crime and violence.

Together, we can advance social connection and improve our nation's public health

Fostering social connection requires that we each commit to our relationships and communities. Our actions today can create sustainable changes to society and bring better health to all.

We all have a role to play in supporting social connection. Learn how you can take action by reading the advisory at: surgeongeneral.gov/connection

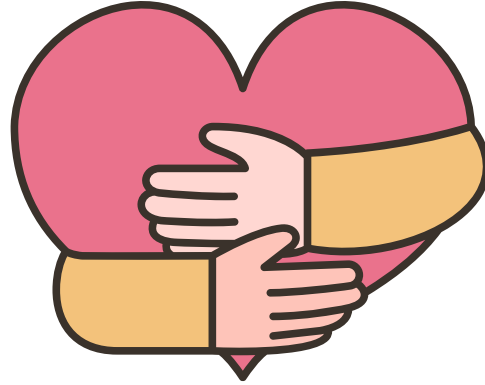




1

Structure:

How often & who
you connect with



2

Function:

The support you
get from your
connections



3

Subjective:

How you feel
about your
connections

Social isolation vs. integration



**Not able to leave
your home**



**Not talking to
friends and
family every day**



**Not joining
groups**

Social support



**Help with daily
tasks**



**Emotional
support**



**Information &
advice**

Loneliness vs belonging



**Lacking
companionship**

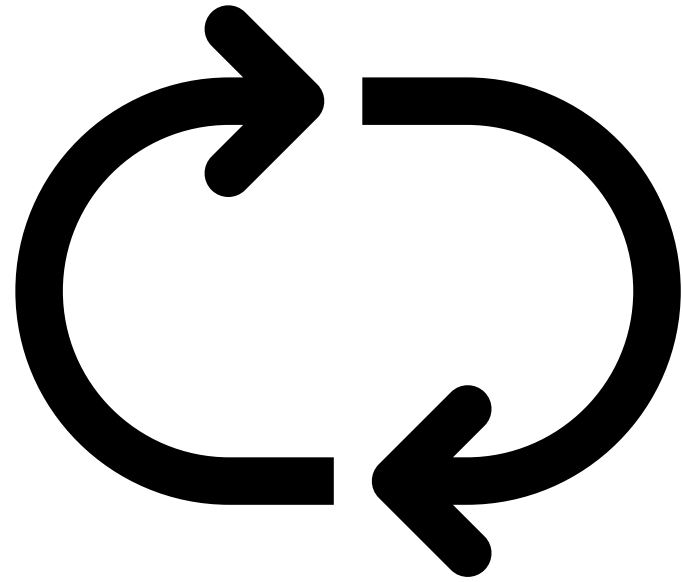


Feeling left out



Feeling isolated

Social
isolation
& loneliness



Brain
health



1

Memory

2

Executive
functioning

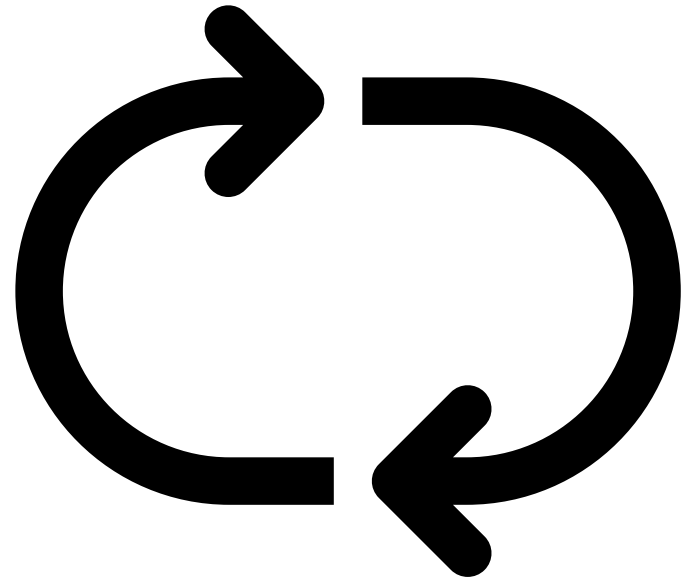
3

Dementia

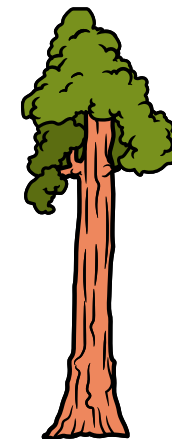
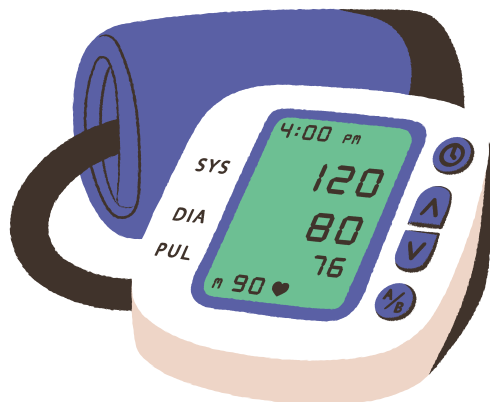
Having strong social connections was associated with a 46% reduced likelihood of developing dementia in one prospective study

Saito T, Murata C, Saito M, Takeda T, Kondo K. Influence of social relationship domains and their combinations on incident dementia: a prospective cohort study. J Epidemiol Community Health. 2018;72(1):7-12. 10.1136/jech-2017-209811 PMC5753026.

Social
isolation
& loneliness



Physical
Health



1

Health conditions
(e.g., high blood
pressure,
cardiovascular
disease)

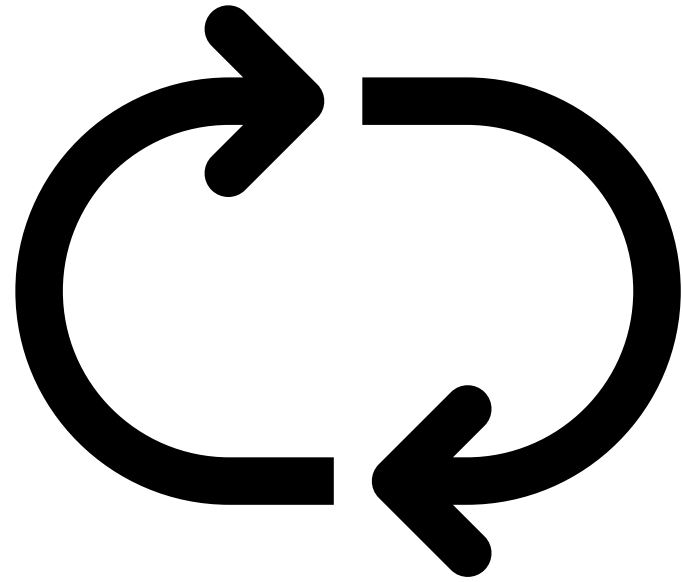
2

Self-rated health

3

Longevity

Social
isolation
& loneliness



Mental
Health



1

Depression &
anxiety symptoms



2

Poor quality of
life & low
meaning in life



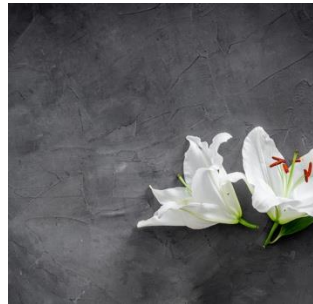
3

Suicide ideation,
attempts, and
deaths

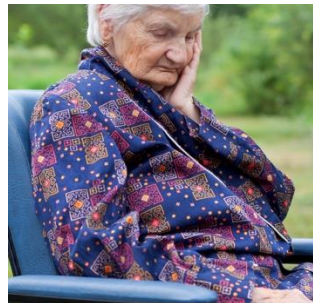
Challenges to staying connected



Barriers: Working remotely,
physical illness or mobility
difficulties, hearing/vision loss



Transitions: Retirement,
caregiving, bereavement



Mental health concerns:
depression, anxiety, guilt

How does connection help?



Social interactions are cognitively stimulating



Relationships promote healthy behaviors



Buffer stress

Introduction to Connection Planning

My connections plan



1. Ways I can change my perspective:

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

2. Ways I can change how my body feels:

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

3. Ways I can connect:

- a. _____
- b. _____

Connection Planning

An evidence-informed brief intervention

- Analogous to Safety Planning for suicidal behavior
- In primary care, akin to a robust form of ‘Social Prescribing’
- Social prescribing is a person-centered approach to address health-related social needs (i.e., social determinants of health, including SIL) via linkage with community support services.
- Connection Planning includes linking patients to community support services, but does so in a specific, systematic way to personalize services to individual needs while also increasing motivation for follow-through.

Developed in collaboration with Dr. Emily Bower


Van Orden, Bower et al. (2021), Am J Geriatr Psychiatry. 2021 Aug;29(8):816-827.

doi: 10.1016/j.jagp.2020.05.004. Epub 2020 May 18.

Online training in Connection Planning

<https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/medicine/geriatrics/flgec/online-training>

- Via Finger Lakes Geriatric Education Center
 - Connection Planning in Long Term Care
 - Connection Planning in Primary Care





IN PROGRESS

Connection Planning in Long-Term Care

No Expiration
CEUs Earned: 0 / 0

LAUNCH



NOT STARTED

Connection Planning in Primary Care (CME)

No Expiration
CEUs Earned: Not Available

LAUNCH



Connection Planning Includes ‘EAR’ Components

EAR Framework for Addressing Social Isolation and Loneliness.

E	Educate	Social connection is part of a healthy lifestyle. Social connection, isolation, and loneliness affect risks for illness and death. Social connections help patients maintain their health, manage existing medical conditions, and adhere to medical regimens.
A	Assess	Document social support, isolation, and loneliness in the electronic health record. Identify patients at risk with the use of validated measures of social isolation and loneliness. Track risk and progress over time.
R	Respond	Reinforce the need for social connection alongside other health risks and protective factors. Integrate psychosocial support from all members of the care team (e.g., clinicians, volunteers, family or caregivers) into patients’ treatment. Offer referrals tailored to patients’ needs and partner with local community resources. Reassess patients regularly for changing circumstances and needs and respond accordingly.



Perspective

Social Isolation and Loneliness as Medical Issues

Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Ph.D., and Carla Perissinotto, M.D., M.H.S.

In the spring of 2021, one of us (J.H.-L.) lost both her parents, within 17 days of each other — but Covid-19 was not the direct cause of either death. As is the case for many families trying to protect loved ones during the pandemic, the couple had been isolated despite their family’s desire to be together. Their doctor visits had grown less frequent and were often brief or remote. Despite regular calls, the lack of regular in-person contact made it hard for their children to see how much their health was declining. The father was physically exhausted, while the situation took more of an emotional toll on the mother, and neither was eating much or getting much physical activity. These seemed like normal responses to being confined to one’s home for nearly a year — everyone seemed tired and frustrated. By the time the children realized their father needed urgent medical attention, physicians found he had late-stage cancer. He died 2 weeks later. Grieving the loss of her companion of nearly 60 years, their mother was surrounded by family and no longer socially isolated but was profoundly lonely. Reaching for him out of habit, she fell out of bed, fracturing her shoulder and hitting her head. She died 3 days later, 17 days after her husband. As in so many other cases, isolation and loneliness may have contributed to both deaths but were never explicitly acknowledged. Health care professionals working in myriad settings and specialties are seeing patients with heightened concerns about their own or family members’ social isolation and loneliness (SIL). Sometimes these concerns are directly discussed; other times, they become evident indirectly — manifesting, for instance, in overuse of clinic services because there is no one to help with medication management or nowhere else to turn for conversation. Social isolation (being alone or having few or infrequent social connections) and loneliness (the subjective and distressing feelings stemming from a discrepancy between one’s desired and actual social connection) co-occur frequently, but not always. Both independently contribute to the risks of poorer health and premature death.¹ Yet a patient’s level of social connection was largely treated as a personal issue until the pandemic forced governments, institutions, and medical systems to reckon with the potential secondary effects of social distancing and other isolating policies. These effects go far beyond psychological and behavioral health. Although psychological distress

Holt-Lunstad & Perissinotto (2023), Social Isolation & Loneliness as Medical Issues. *NEJM*.

Download a
worksheet to
follow along!

My Connection Plan

1. Ways I can change my perspective:

- a. _____

- b. _____

- c. _____

2. Ways I can change how my body feels:

- a. _____

- b. _____

- c. _____

3. Ways I can connect:

- a. _____

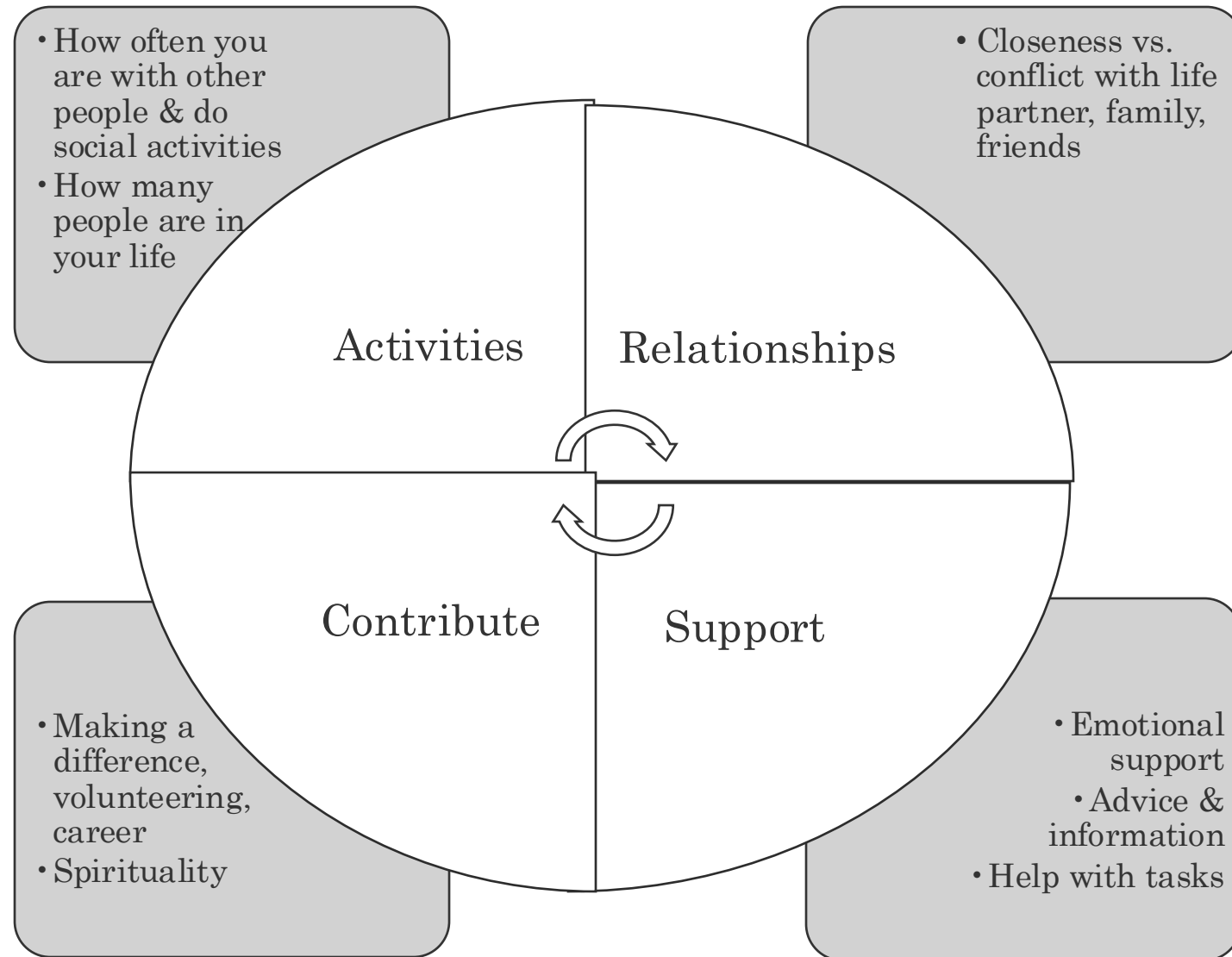
- b. _____

- c. _____

This handout is from Van Orden et al.'s (2020) article "Strategies to Promote Social Connections Among Older Adults During 'Social Distancing' Restrictions."

<https://rochester.box.com/v/ConnectionPlan-Form>

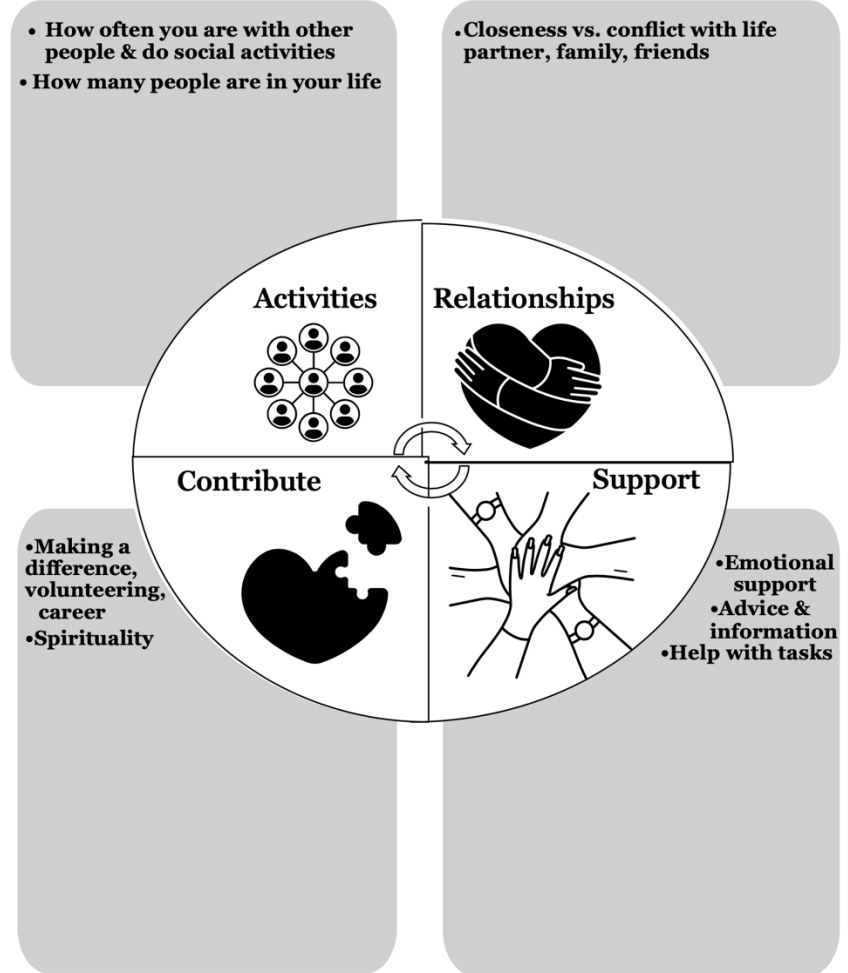
Social pie of life: What matters to you? Barriers?



Download a
worksheet to
follow along!

Pie of Social Life

Consider the pieces of your social life now, how they were in the past, and what you hope for them to be in the future. What pieces would be smaller? Bigger? Are pieces missing?



<https://rochester.box.com/v/SocialPieofLife-Form>



Examples. Consider your own pie!

Is Connection Planning a good fit?

- Consider loneliness.
 - The Three Item Loneliness Scale is a quick way to do that.
 - If you scored a 5 or more, you may be experiencing loneliness that could have an impact on your health and well-being if unaddressed.
- Other indicators are low social support or isolation.
- Or just feeling unsatisfied with relationships.
- Or being proactive and planning ahead for transitions.

Three-Item Loneliness Scale

The next questions are about how you feel about different aspects of your life. For each one, tell me how often you feel that way.

1. First, how often do you feel that you lack companionship: Hardly ever, some of the time, or often?

1 ☐ Hardly Ever

2 ☐ Some of the Time

3 ☒ Often

2. How often do you feel left out: Hardly ever, some of the time, or often?

1 ☐ Hardly Ever

2 ☐ Some of the Time

3 ☒ Often

3. How often do you feel isolated from others? (Is it hardly ever, some of the time, or often?)

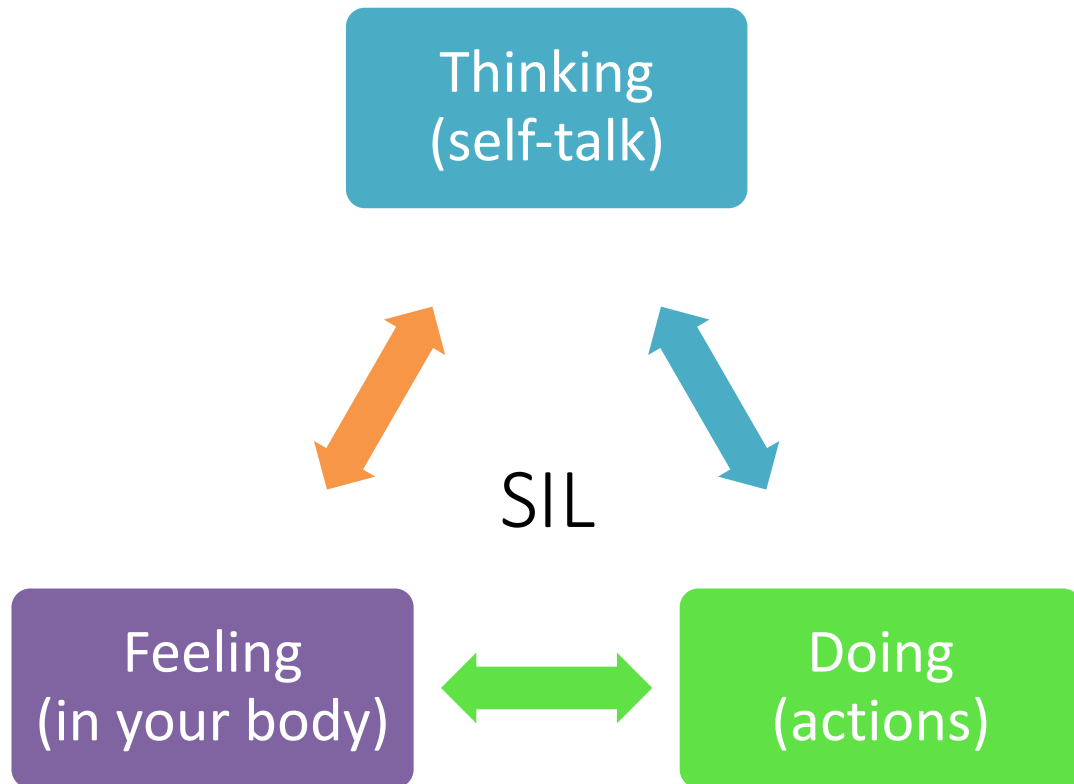
1 ☐ Hardly Ever

2 ☒ Some of the Time

3 ☐ Often

The Cognitive Behavioral Model of SIL:

What's getting in the way & how do we tackle it?



Being aware of the importance of social connection for health is a great first step.

But making a change isn't simple!

Connection Planning can help us increase the likelihood that we follow through with our goals, including recommendations from others.

Example: Kim's barriers

- Here are some of my barriers.
- Think about what might be barriers for you!
- The model on the right was developed for loneliness in later life (because that is what Kim studies) but it can apply to adults of any age.



Thinking (cognition)

Think about a time you felt isolated, like you lacked companionship, or left out this week?

- What thoughts went through your mind when this was happening? What did you tell yourself about why this was happening? What concerns did you have?
 - *Tip:* Pay attention to thoughts that may be extreme or unhelpful that could be targeted in the Connection Plan.
 - *Tip:* Don't believe everything you think!



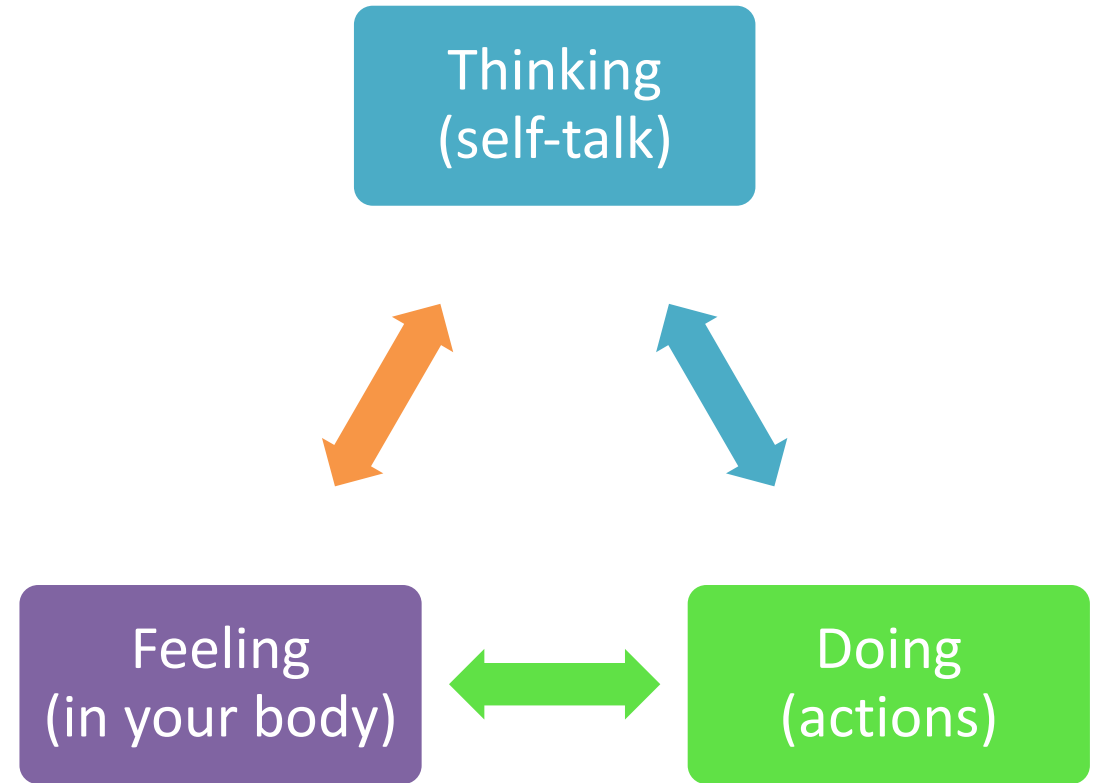
Ways to change your perspective

- Use these 3 prompts to use helpful self-talk:
 - How can I view the situation from a different perspective?
 - Think of someone optimistic whose opinion you highly value: how would they perceive the situation?
 - Remind yourself: Don't believe everything you think!
- Examine the evidence for your thoughts:
 - Write down your thought (e.g., no one cares about me)
 - List the evidence in support of the thought (ask yourself: would this hold up in a court of law?)
 - List the evidence that contradicts that thought (if not sure, ask yourself: what would someone who cares say?)
- “Three Good Things”
 - Think of 3 good things that happened during the day (e.g., The weather was nice, My granddaughter texted me)
 - Ask yourself the following:
 - Why did this happen?
 - Why was this good thing meaningful?
 - How can I experience more of this good thing?
- Engage in a mindful self-compassion exercise to practice self-compassion
 - <https://cih.ucsd.edu/mindfulness/guided-audio-video>
 - <https://self-compassion.org/guided-self-compassion-meditations-mp3-2/>
- Engage in an activity to connect with a sense of our shared humanity (could also be in Connection section)
 - Loving-kindness meditation https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/loving_kindness_meditation
 - Prayer
 - Listening to a symphony

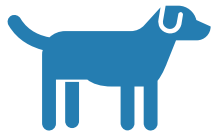
Material courtesy of Dr. Emily Bower

Feeling (body)

- What were you feeling in your body when this happened?
- Did you notice any tension in your body, and if so, where was the tension? Some people notice feeling slowed down, lethargic, or tired when they feel left out - did that come up for you?
- Other people notice feeling nervous, keyed up, or agitated when they feel left out - did that come up for you?
- *Tip: start with a broad, open-ended question and then consider more specific feelings as needed.*



Strategies to change your body sensations



Soothe all five senses

Listen to music, smell freshly baked cookies, pet your dog/cat, look at artwork, taste your favorite food, step outside



Practice calming activities

Mindful breathing
Muscle relaxation
Imagery

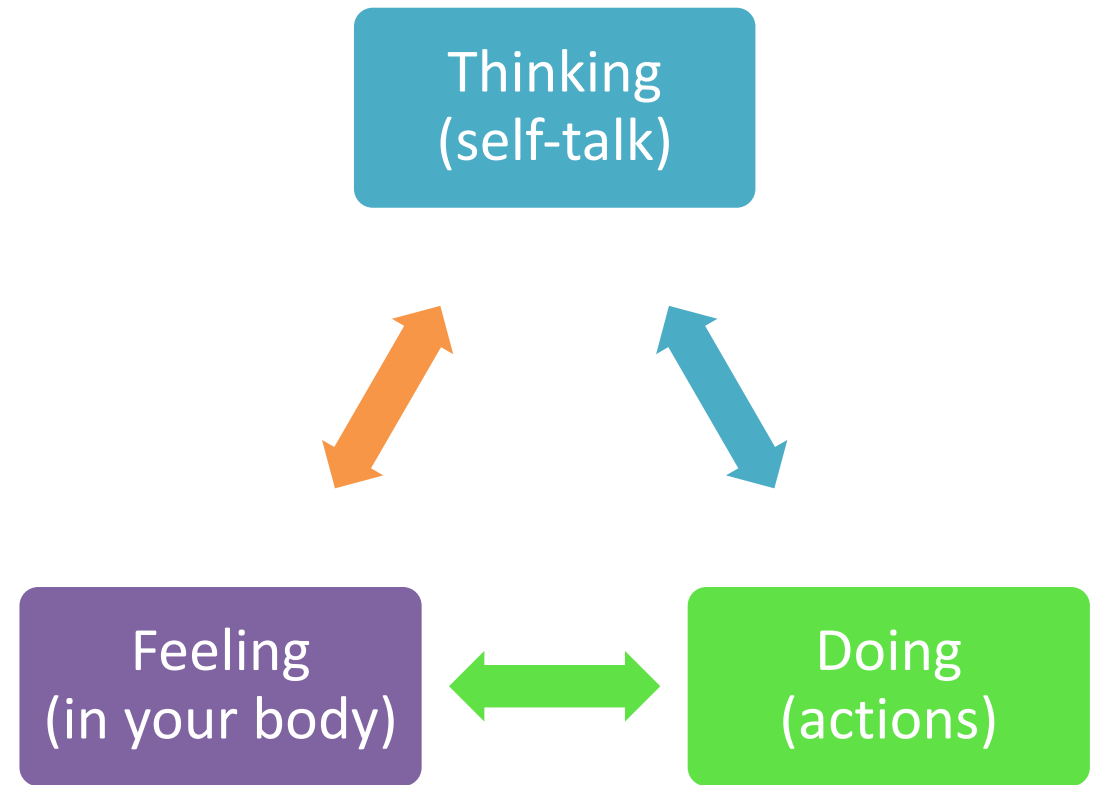


Change your temperature

Warm up by taking a bath or sipping warm tea. Cool down by splashing cold water on your face or holding an ice cube.

Doing (actions)

- What did you do when this happened?
- Did you try to do anything to change how you were feeling?
- Is there anything you wish you did differently?
- Commit to take one small action; create SMART goals



My Connection Plan



Body

Ways I can change how my body feels:

Go for a bike ride or sit in my garden if I'm feeling lonely or stressed about considering adopting a cat.



Mind

Ways I can change my perspective:

"Don't believe everything you think!"
Adopting a new cat will take energy, but it will also give me energy—love!



Connection

Ways I can connect:

Text a friend to meet up for coffee to chat about pros and cons of adopting a cat;
Visit my friend and her cat;
See if a friend will meet me at a cat cafe

Sample Completed Connection Plan

My Connection Plan



Body

Ways I can change how my body feels:

Every day after lunch I will sit in my chair and practice noticing my muscles and relaxing them from my toes to the top of my head.



Mind

Ways I can change my perspective:

When I notice I am having the thought, "Nobody likes me," I will look at photos of myself spending time with close friends and family members who care about me.



Connection

Ways I can connect:

I made a list of 4 people from my church that I miss seeing while church is closed. I will call one of them every Sunday afternoon to say hi and ask how they are doing.

Experiential Exercise

Step 1: Reflect on how often and who you connect with; the support you get from your connections (e.g., physical, emotional); how you feel and how you want to feel about your connections (e.g., lonely vs belonging). Barriers and facilitators (thinking, feeling, doing).

Step 2: Create your Connection Plan! Write down:

- Ways you can change your perspective. (Mind)
- Ways you can change how your body feels. (Body)
- Ways you can connect with others. (Connection)

Take the Surgeon General's Challenge!

Join the 5 for 5 Connection Challenge!

Because we are made to connect

Do you want to improve your mental & physical health? Deepen your friendships? Boost your immunity?

Join the Challenge

One of the important factors for a long-term happiness and health is our relationships. We're asking everyone to take **5 actions over 5 days** to express gratitude, offer support, or ask for help. How will you reach out & connect?

Visit surgeongeneral.gov/challenge to learn more.



Office of the
U.S. Surgeon General



Use this space to reflect on your **5 for 5 Challenge** experience!

	How I connected today	How the connection made me feel
Day 1		
Day 2		
Day 3		
Day 4		
Day 5		

Share your connection story! #MadeToConnect

 @U.S.SurgeonGeneral  @Surgeon_General  madetoconnect@hhs.gov

Sample 5-for5 Connection Challenge Actions:

Visit [SurgeonGeneral.gov/Challenge](https://surgeongeneral.gov/challenge) to find inspiration for your 5 actions. Here are a few examples:

Express Gratitude	Offer Support	Ask for or Accept Help
Call, text, or send a note — tell someone you're grateful they're in your life!	Check in with someone and let them know you're there	Let someone know you're having a hard time
Compliment someone who deserves recognition	Offer to help someone with daily tasks	Tell a loved one how they can better support you
Thank someone for a specific time they helped you	Volunteer with a local organization that's important to you	Reach out for professional mental health support, like calling 988

More Information on the Surgeon General's Social Connection Priority:

[SurgeonGeneral.gov/Connection](https://surgeongeneral.gov/Connection)



Connection Planning Resources

- Free handouts:
 - <https://www.eenet.ca/resource/social-connection-isolated-older-adul>
- Article in *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* (free download)
 - [https://www.ajgponline.org/article/S1064-7481\(20\)30333-X/fulltext](https://www.ajgponline.org/article/S1064-7481(20)30333-X/fulltext)
- VA VISN 5 MIRECC Connection Plans manual:
 - https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/connection_plans.asp
- FREE Training online (Finger Lakes Geriatric Resource Center):
 - <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/medicine/geriatrics/flgec/online-training.aspx>

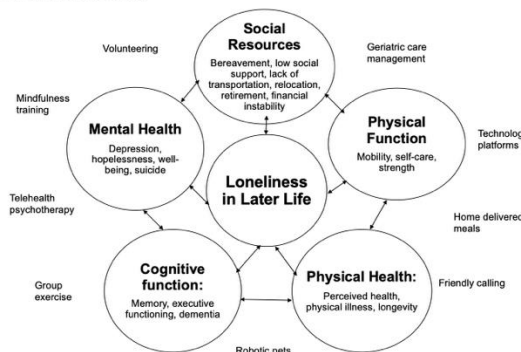


Connection Planning Resources Guide

Connection Planning Resource Guide

The Connection Planning Resource Guide contains national resources as well as spaces to provide local programs to tailor the resources to your community. Clinics providing Connection Planning can personalize this document for their community so that Connection Planning coaches have resources at their fingertips to include in Connection Plans. The Guide assists Connection Planning coaches on identifying resources and programs that may be most relevant to a given patient (personalization).

How to use this guide: Each section of the Guide contains a category of programming that can be used to target social isolation and loneliness. Each category corresponds to the “Drivers of Social Isolation and Loneliness” Diagram discussed in the training and reproduced below. There are numerous pathways to social disconnection in later life. The figure depicts factors that may function as both causes and consequences of social isolation and loneliness; these will vary across patients, so working with a patient to identify which apply to them is one way to personalize resources provided in Connection Planning. The model includes programs that have shown efficacy (or a signal for efficacy) in either reducing SIL in older adults or reducing psychological distress/improving functioning among older adults experiencing SIL. Programs can be selected based on which driver for SIL they appear close to in the figure. For example, an older person with several chronic conditions (physical health) and functional impairment who cannot leave the home might benefit from a friendly calling program. An older person experiencing loneliness and depression who is able to leave the home might benefit from a group exercise program, such as Tai Chi. A one-size-fits all approach to reducing SIL in later life is unlikely to be most effective or acceptable to older adults. Rather, considering personalized drivers as well as factors that impact ability and willingness to engage in an intervention may result in the best outcomes.



Connection Planning Resource Guide (November 2024), Created by Drs. Kim Van Orden & Emily Bower with support from the Finger Lakes Geriatric Education Center (see last page).

To personalize this guide: A key community resource that cuts across numerous categories is the nationwide network of Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) that offer non-medical programs to support older adults and their caregivers, including information, referrals, and guidance on services to promote social connection—such as congregate meals and senior centers—and provision of care navigation (to address barriers to social connection). Some offer in-home geriatric assessment (a holistic tool that assesses social health, mental health, physical health, financial stability, and safety); assistance with housing; and caregiver consultation and services.

- To find the AAA near you, search the [Eldercare Locator](#) (or call 1-800-677-1116).
- [USAgings](#) is the national association representing and supporting the network of Area Agencies on Aging and advocating for the Title VI Native American Aging Programs.

[engAGED](#): The National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults is administered by USAgings to serve as a national resource to expand and enhance the Aging Network's capacity to offer social engagement programs to older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers. [engAGED](#) also partners and aligns efforts with [Commit to Connect](#), a social connection initiative led by the [Administration for Community Living \(ACL\)](#) and administered by USAgings. Commit to Connect and [engAGED](#) partner on activities such as webinars and office hours, a [Social Engagement Innovations Hub](#) and an annual Virtual Summit. The Center provides training and technical assistance opportunities; their outreach materials provide way to [learn more](#) about how [engAGED](#) can support your organization's social engagement programming. **In particular, the Innovations Hub can be used to find local programs and resources for social connection to add to the Resource Guide provide to Connection Planning coaches.**

Here are national resources to aid in finding programs and strategies tailored to the needs of older adults from marginalized communities:

- [SAGE Social Isolation Resource Finder](#): SAGE is a national agency that conducts advocacy and promotion of services for older adults in the LGBTQ+ Community. Their website includes resources on social isolation in the aging LGBTQ+ community.
- The National Indian Council On Aging, Inc. (NICOA) is a national nonprofit organization focused on aging American Indian and Alaska Native elders. Fact sheets and resources on [social isolation and loneliness](#) are available.
- [National Hispanic Council on Aging Resource Center](#): The NHCOA is a national organization working to improve the lives of Hispanic older adults, their families, and caregivers. The online [Resource Center](#) provides information about resources, including socialization and access to healthcare and is available in English, Spanish and Portuguese. It can be accessed with the Center's chatbot by messaging the hotline number via WhatsApp.
- National Caucus and Center on Black Aging (NCBA): The NCBA provides technical assistance, resources, and support to further advancements and innovations that serve older African Americans and their families. Information and resources are available on topics relevant to social connection, including the [Health and Wellness Program](#).
- National Resource Center on AAPI Aging: The National Resource Center on AAPI Aging is the nation's technical assistance resource center dedicated to building the capacity of long-term service and support systems to equitably serve AAPI older adults and their caregivers. [Education and technical assistance](#) on issues relevant to social disconnection, including elder abuse, financial exploitation, caregiving, social inclusion, and healthy aging are available, as well as toolkits to conduct community needs assessments.

Connection Planning Resource Guide (November 2024), Created by Drs. Kim Van Orden & Emily Bower with support from the Finger Lakes Geriatric Education Center (see last page).

<https://rochester.box.com/v/ResourcesConnectionPlanning>

I realized that when I was
connected to others there
was hope.

COACHING PARTICIPANT

Vivek Murthy, MD

US Surgeon General



“Unlike many other illnesses, what I find profoundly empowering about addressing loneliness is that the ultimate solution to loneliness lies in each of us. We can be the medicine that each other needs. We can be the solution other people crave. We are all doctors and we are all healers.”

Stay connected!



- Kim Van Orden:
kimberly_vanorden@urmc.rochester.edu
- The HOPE Lab
 - <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/labs/van-orden/projects.aspx>
 - Email: HOPE@urmc.Rochester.edu

- Emily Bower, PhD
esbower@pacificu.edu
- Behavioral Health & Aging Research Lab:
<https://www.pacificu.edu/directory/college-health-professions/school-graduate-psychology/research-research-labs/behavioral-health-and-aging-research-lab>