



Vermont Department of Mental Health

# MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH

Week Two 2022

## Connections and Community are a Recipe for Wellbeing!

### What is social connection?

Social connection is the experience of **feeling closeness and belonging** through supportive relationships with those around us. Human beings have a natural need for social connection — a need to feel valued, cared for and supported by others. We thrive by connecting with others. We feel stronger and nourished after engaging with each other.

Social connections include our family, friends, colleagues, and community members. It can include anyone who is available to listen and give support when needed; someone we can confide in and who understands our problems.

### What are the benefits of good social connections?

Numerous studies demonstrate both the importance of human connection to our overall wellbeing and the risks of social isolation and loneliness to our mental health. Supportive social ties have a positive impact on mood and stress levels and may lessen existing symptoms of mental illness.

#### People who feel connected to others have

- Improved mood with lower rates of depression and anxiety
- Reduced stress
- Higher self-esteem
- Greater empathy for others
- Lower rates of suicide and suicidal behavior

A 2018 study by researchers with the American Cancer Society (ACS) looked at data from more than ½ million adults and found that social isolation can contribute to depression, insomnia, and cognitive decline. **Research has shown that the risk of dementia is lower in those with good friends and family relationships.**

#### Connectedness also improves physical well-being and longevity

Supportive social ties can reduce blood pressure, heart rate, and stress hormones. Social isolation has been shown to increase chances of death (mortality) by at least 50%. **A lack of human connection was found to be more detrimental to longevity than obesity or smoking.** One study linked social isolation with up to 39% increased chance of stroke and heart disease. Another study found that social isolation may also be associated with a lowered immune system, increasing vulnerability to viruses and other diseases.

Being part of a community has a positive effect on mental health and emotional wellbeing. Community involvement provides



a sense of belonging and social connectedness. It can offer meaning and purpose to everyday life as people pursue common goals and activities.

Social connection is key to being resilient. Socially connected communities and their members respond better to crisis and disaster, and they rebound better afterwards.

## Create connections to support your mental health

**It is never too late to engage in human connection.** There are many activities that can increase our sense of connectedness and belonging. The connections we make through relationships and social activities will build a safety net for our mental health.

Social connection can look different for different people. For example, introverts and extroverts may connect in very different ways. Try cultivating social activities and connections that feel comfortable for you. Consider connecting with others in activities that relate to your spirituality or cultural heritage. These connections can be a source of comfort and meaning as you face challenges in your life.

### Additional suggestions for connecting with others.

- Chat over coffee with a friend.
- Schedule regular walks or other outside activities with one or more friends.
- Plan to connect with at least 2 people per day. Phone calls, video calls, and other digital technologies offer excellent opportunities for connecting when physical contacts are not possible.
- Consider volunteering at a nonprofit near you. Helping others is a rewarding way to build friendships and connect with others.
- Join a local interest group like a book club or hiking group that meets regularly. Routine interaction is a great way to get comfortable with socializing. Common interests are a great way to bond and form relationships.
- Visit local community centers, libraries, fitness centers.
- Attend town meetings or school board meetings.
- Participate in social justice activities.

### Tips for improving social connections

- **Listen:** When engaging in conversation, actively listen. This demonstrates interest and appreciation of the other person.
- **Offer mutual support:** This strengthens social bonds. It says that we are here to support and help each other.
- **Practice gratitude:** Expressing gratitude dramatically improves social connections and increases happiness.
- **Engage with vulnerability:** Showing vulnerability by asking for help creates an opportunity for stronger social connections. This requires a culture of trust and safety.
- **Offer kindness and being generous:** A profound and simple way of increasing a sense of social connection is to be kind. Practicing generosity makes others feel cared for and increases their happiness and ours.
- **Be hospitable:** We are social creatures. Cooking, eating, (and cleaning up) together increases social connection.
- **Avoid canceling:** Doing this repeatedly delays connecting and engagement with others.



## Get help if you are having difficulties making social connections

If you are experiencing a mental health condition, you may want to avoid connecting with others. But isolating could make it harder to cope and recover.

If thinking about joining a group or starting a conversation with a stranger gives you extreme anxiety, consider reaching out to a **mental health professional**. They can work with you on strategies to help manage your anxiety and stress.

**Support groups** can also be helpful. Knowing you are not alone, that others have similar concerns and have been able to form social connections, can improve your hopefulness about forming your own connections. Support groups are a great way to learn coping strategies and gather suggestions about different ways to connect with others. Support groups are offered by both mental health professionals and peer support programs. See the Vermont Department of Mental Health's [peer services section](#) for more information.

### References:

- ◆ [Study: Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors](#)
- ◆ [Study: Perceived social isolation, evolutionary fitness and health outcomes](#)
- ◆ [Study: Social Isolation and Mortality](#)
- ◆ [Resource: Connecting with community](#)
- ◆ [Resource: 7 Practices to Increase Social Connection](#)

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## VERMONT PROGRAMS Supporting Social and Community Connections.

There are many examples of Vermont programs that promote wellness through improved social functioning and community connections. These mental health service agencies have a strong focus on building connections as a pathway to wellness.

### The Counseling Center of Addison County (CSAC)



Has a program called [Ok. you've got this](#) that focuses on building resiliency in children and their families. The project grew after local community agencies noticed low resiliency scores on the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Using a public health approach, CSAC began engaging in numerous activities including parent groups and library campaigns around stories of resilience. Activities focus on connections: making sure that children know they are truly heard (listening), working to strengthen family ties, and widening the circle of connections outside the nuclear family.

CSAC is working to promote community interconnectedness for adults served in their mental health programs through their Community Bridges Project. This program supports engagement in community events through volunteer efforts focused on addressing community needs. Past projects, which involved collaboration between community members, staff, and others, included a community mural project, music and games events for seniors at a local apartment complex, and preparing community meals. During the pandemic the project participants held an online book group and peer support gatherings. Some local musicians generated a series of Friday night online gatherings with live music. The ongoing intention of this project is to operate separately from treatment systems and settings and to hold spaces open to all in the community.



## The United Counseling Service of Bennington County (UCS) UCS UNITED COUNSELING SERVICE

Utilizes a collaborative network approach to work with individuals and families when they first present for help. Their [Find Access to Service and Treatment \(FAST\)](#) program brings together a meeting of the individual, their chosen friends and family members, and UCS staff to listen to and understand the immediate needs and concerns, identify possible solutions, and provide support. This approach recognizes the importance of an individual's existing social network to support their recovery and wellbeing.

There are **two community drop-in centers** that are staffed by people who have experienced mental health challenges and have trained in peer-to-peer support: [Another Way](#) in Montpelier [Pathways Community Center](#) in Burlington. These centers provide peer support to adults who are seeking community, support, and connection around mental health experiences. The centers offer a safe and friendly place to share community, network and learn from each other. Everyone is welcome.

## The National Alliance on Mental Illness of Vermont (NAMI Vermont) NAMI National Alliance on Mental Illness

Works with communities, families and individuals affected by mental health conditions to build better lives. Their programs include free online support groups and educational classes. The [Family-to-Family](#) 8-week course helps families and friends of individuals with a mental health condition understand and support their loved one while maintaining their own well-being, while providing families with a network of individuals who've been there. Other Resources include online peer-led support groups for families and individuals affected by mental illness which bring communities together to support one another and share resources.

NAMI's sponsors [In Our Own Voice](#) presentations for community groups. The presenters share stories about their lived experiences and journeys to hope and healing. Listeners at the presentations have the opportunity to ask questions, learn more about mental health, and challenge misconceptions.

## The Copeland Center for Wellness and Recovery Copeland Center FOR WELLNESS AND RECOVERY

Promotes wellness, recovery, community inclusion and peer support through training, technical assistance and advocacy. The Copeland Center focuses on community and creating social connections by setting the stage with what's working and supporting our wellness rather than coming together as a group through disability and what is wrong with us. Soon after the pandemic hit, Copeland developed a guide: Being Connected, Staying Connected, and Choosing Connection. Direct Link to Connections Guide: [Being Connected, Staying Connected, and Choosing Connection](#) This simple guide takes you through thinking about connections with yourself and others. For many of us, focusing on simple, safe things we enjoy which are easily accessible gives us a way to then reach out to others in our community and share in activities that create natural friendships. The Copeland Center offers programs to Vermonters on Creating Connections, Wellness Engagement, Wellness Support Groups, and, the [Wellness Recovery Action Plan \(WRAP\)](#).