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How Local Leaders Can Create Socially Connected Communities

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Simple steps, guided by input from community members, can help reduce social isolation and improve health, well-being, and civic engagement.

What happens when young men and boys of color aren't able to be themselves in any setting?

In San Diego, refugees from East Africa commonly experience discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia. Young men and boys, in particular, describe how they have to act one way in school, another way with friends outside of school, and another at home. It is important for the community to find ways to improve social connections, increase opportunities, and build resilience, since their social isolation can lead to unhealthy behaviors that put their health and futures at risk.

Social isolation—the lack of significant social connections interpersonally and within a community—is a "deeply consequential" public health crisis, according to U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy (https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/11/853308193/in-together-former-surgeon-general-writes-about-importance-of-human-connection) . He noted how "During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness."

Indeed, the health risks of social isolation have been compared to those of smoking and obesity, and it is linked to depression, impaired immunity, increased suicidal tendencies, and increased risk of death.

Like San Diego's East African refugees, people who feel that they do not belong to majority social groups because of their race, ethnicity, religion, immigration status, gender identity or sexual orientation, for example, are most susceptible to social isolation. However, people of all ages, demographics, and identities experience isolation. In a 2018 study (https://www.kff.org/other/report/loneliness-and-social-isolation-in-the-united-states-the-united-kingdom-and-japan-an-international-survey/) , more than half of adults had one or fewer confidants. And this was before the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered many of the gathering places that had served as antidotes to isolation.

Social Connection Improves Health

Leaders who strive to create resilient, equitable, and healthy communities often do not recognize the importance of social well-being, which refers to the strength of a person's relationships and social networks. People living in socially connected communities are more likely to thrive because they feel safe and welcome and trust each other. Trusting, meaningful relationships enhance our mental, physical, and emotional health and well-being.

In fact, strong social connections and networks can boost a person's lifespan by 50 percent (https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/relationships-boost-survival/#:~:text=Overall%252525252C%2525252520social%2525252520support%2525252520increases%2525252520survival,%252525252Da%252525252Do .

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To address the social isolation among San Diego's East African refugee population, Prevention Institute and United Women of East Africa Support Team launched the Making Connections initiative (https://www.preventioninstitute.org/projects/making-connections-mental-health-and-wellbeing-among-men-and-boys) . Participants co-developed a culturally- and community-rooted space in which to gather, connect, and support each other. Having this safe space helped them to experience a sense of belonging, and to grow their collective capacity to identify and advocate for solutions to other challenges—like a lack of affordable housing and educational and employment opportunities. They advocated for more diversity training for law enforcement and increased funding for community services, demonstrating how social connection can improve health and well-being.

Taking Action in Your Community

Communities can support meaningful social connection among residents, improve trust between neighbors, and strengthen an overall sense of belonging.

This doesn't require a brand new, city-wide program. Instead, you can weave opportunities for social connection into the fabric of society. After all, social isolation is not a personal choice or individual problem, but one that is rooted in community design, social norms, and systemic injustices—and must be addressed as such.

From architects to educators, faith leaders to health providers, local governments to grantmakers—everyone can help stop social isolation.

Here are five ways to get started:

1. **Design, Maintain, and Activate Inclusive Public Spaces**

Opportunities to promote health and strengthen social connection are endless in parks, community gardens, greenways, streets, sidewalks, libraries, community centers, waterfronts, shared-use schoolyards, and the interstitial spaces around public buildings. Urban, suburban, and rural settings provide equally powerful opportunities to offer places where residents can interact, experience culture, access nature, and gain a sense of belonging.

2. **Prioritize Connection in Transportation Systems**

Safe, accessible, affordable transportation connects people to jobs, education, healthcare, child care, social services, and other resources that foster social connection and advance health. However, the United States' transportation system prioritizes personal vehicles, which creates barriers for those who are unable to drive, cannot obtain a driver's license or afford a car, or fear discrimination during traffic stops. A re-imagined transportation sector can spark conversation, increase engagement, and improve health and well-being.

3. **Construct Housing Environments that Build Community**

Millions of people do not have safe, affordable, stable, and healthy housing. Historically oppressive policies and practices have made homeownership disproportionately difficult for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color. Absentee landlords and discrimination exacerbate negative conditions. Unstable housing conditions weaken social networks. We must design communities with housing options that provide access to jobs and healthy food, create opportunities to build relationships with neighbors, and strengthen the sense of community.

4. **Invest in Inclusive Practices and Community-Led Solutions**

We need community-led solutions that are driven by a belief in the power of people to reshape their communities. That means local leaders who learn from and with residents, and welcome ideas from those most impacted by social systems. The engagement process itself can bring together community members who wouldn't otherwise interact and forge stronger social connections and civic engagement.

5. **Make Social Connectedness a Community Norm**

Every aspect of community life can either enhance or suppress social well-being. All sectors have a role to play, and social connectedness should be a community-wide priority and norm. When community leaders pair a Social in All Policies framework with approaches that are trauma- and resilience-informed, they improve trust between residents and leaders and open the door to a future where everyone experiences absolute belonging and social well-being.

Building Socially Connected Communities

Imagine a socially connected community where people know and trust their neighbors and people from different neighborhoods. Where they are motivated and supported to be civically engaged. Where structures, policies, and relationships connect residents to services, resources, and inclusive spaces. And where, through signals (such as public art and signage), people see themselves represented and feel welcomed.

The Making Connections participants share this vision. They recently organized hiking groups (https://www.kpbs.org/news/2021/feb/24/city-heights-group-young-black-men-pandemic/) to change the perception of who belongs in parks and other recreational spaces. In addition to expanding health-enhancing opportunities, they are now collectively raising their voices (https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/opinion/story/2020-06-04/city-heights-this-is-why-we-protests-commentary) to create a culture of dignity and respect for all, so that everyone experiences absolute belonging.

At this pivotal moment, it is especially important to create socially connected communities. Together, we can address traumas caused by structural and systemic oppression and build more cohesive, resilient, and equitable communities where everyone is able to thrive.

Read Socially Connected Communities: Solutions to Social Isolation (https://healthyplacesbydesign.org/socially-connected-communities-solutions-for-social-isolation/) which describes these five recommendations in more detail.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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