ARTICLE | COMMUNITY AS THE SUPERHERO

Combatting Loneliness and Disconnection

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In the last decade, Canada – like other western countries – has experienced a troubling surge in loneliness and disconnection. Despite increased technological connectivity, people across the country report feeling more isolated than ever before. And the impacts are real – studies have revealed that loneliness has the same impact on health as smoking fifteen cigarettes per day.

Additional studies, spanning the past ten years, reveal a decline in social connections, tolerance, trust, and civic engagement in our communities. Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, was the initial wake up call for many. It illustrates a steady decline in community engagement since the 1960s. This erosion of community bonds has profound implications for health and well-being.

RECENT CANADIAN SURVEYS UNDERSCORE THE SEVERITY OF THE ISSUE:

❖ A **2015** survey conducted by the [Angus Reid Institute](#) and Community Foundations Canada found that 1 in 5 older Canadians described themselves as "lonely or dissatisfied with life". 32% of Canadians report a strong sense of belonging to their community, with 38% feeling disconnected from their local community.

❖ A **2017** report released by the Ontario Chief Medical Officer recognized Loneliness and social isolation as a public health issue in Ontario. The report called [Connected Community Healthier together](#) highlighted that there was growing evidence that loneliness and social isolation affects our health. Six out of ten residents say they have very or somewhat strong sense of community. Only four out of ten know many or most of their neighbours. People who are lonely are more likely to be in the top five percent of health care users.

❖ In **2019** the Angus Reid Institute, in partnership with Cardus conducted a [Canada-wide study on social isolation and loneliness](#) and the results are concerning. Not only are Canadians spending more time alone, they are feeling lonely even when we are surrounded by others.

❖ The pandemic exacerbated these issues, with a [2020 survey by the Angus Reid Institute](#) showing a sharp increase in mental health challenges and social decline. Compared to the 2019 survey, only one-in-three, compared to one-in-two Canadians in 2019, report having a good social life.

❖ The **2021** [Canadian Social Connection Survey](#) revealed that less than half of participants were satisfied with the amount of time spent with others (46.4%), while 50.1% wanted to spend more time with others, and 3.5% wanted to spend less time with others.

❖ The **2023** [Quality of life framework](#) indicates that 53% of people in Canada said that they trust many or most of the people in their neighbourhood. Participants reported that they spent too much time on social media (34%) and too little time talking with someone who really understood them (39%).

A national reckoning is overdue. To address these troubling trends we need a comprehensive [national belonging strategy](#) that prioritizes community building and local connections. Communities must emerge as heroes in this crisis, as they are the platform to best address the root causes of loneliness and disconnection. A national belonging strategy that starts supporting what we already have and help to rebuild the fabric of our communities by putting our communities at the centre.

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WHY ARE WE SEEING LONELINESS AND DISCONNECTION?

While our hope is to provide antidotes to loneliness, not to explore the causes in detail, we need to acknowledge the trends and changes in our communities to understand and overcome loneliness and disconnection. Here is a brief overview of several key factors that we have seen in our work over the last eight years that could be contributors to a weakened sense of community, connection, and belonging.

Individualism: The shift from "We" to "Me" has prioritized individual interests over collective well-being, eroding trust and polarizing communities. We are increasingly allowing and enabling individualism to trump the collective interests that are so critical to building connectedness, belonging, and taking collective action.

Consumer Culture: As Peter Block and John McKnight discuss in their book, *The Abundant Community*, consumer culture prioritizes a scarcity mindset and fosters over-reliance on institutions to provide care and solve problems; care and well-being have increasingly become commodities that can be purchased, diminishing the practice of neighbouring and the understanding of what it means to be part of a community of care.

Social Media Paradox: Technology is problematic when it is used as a substitute for authentic social connection. While technology promises connectivity, it often falls short of fostering deep authentic human connection, leading to a loss of essential human capacities (e.g., laughter, eye contact). This trend is especially worrying for youth who are more online oriented than any generation in history. This has profound impacts on their mental health, sense of worth, and ability to connect with others "IRL". In Real Life has become an acronym.

Built Environment: The way that most cities are built – or have been over the 20th century – has helped to engineer connection out of our lives, lands, and public spaces. The places where, for generations, humans met up and connected (grocery stores, banks, libraries, etc.) are becoming obsolete with delivery on demand and everything available as an online service. How we build our communities and homes – think urban sprawl, the forgotten front porch – also contributes to loneliness.

Local Policy Making: The way that policy is made at a local level can also contribute to social disconnection and polarization, which can lead to loneliness. For example, housing policy to address densification in neighbourhoods – which is currently an open question in cities across the country – can pit long-time homeowners in established neighbourhoods against renters, with people retreating to their so-called "NIMBY" versus "YIMBY" camps, unable to make and share connections and have conversations across difference.

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With loneliness and social isolation on the rise, connection and belonging are increasingly being recognized as foundational to healthy neighbourhoods and communities. Given the polls and studies we cited above, it's evident that current approaches of treating community as something to "program" are insufficient to address the loneliness epidemic and may be part of the problem. We must transition from viewing community as merely a program or activity, to understanding the essential role of communities and the people and institutions in them to fostering genuine connections and long-lasting resilience.

Connectedness and belonging are essential for addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges collectively. To create the future we want and need for our species and for the planet, it's time for us all – individuals, governments and community organizations – to recognize the transformative power of community in combating loneliness and disconnection. This means that there is a pivotal role for individuals to help their neighbours and strengthen their communities and for policy makers to foster and enable these practices.

WHAT IS BELONGING?

The concept of belonging is getting more attention as a solution to the rise in loneliness and disconnection across Canada. Belonging goes beyond the dictionary definition of an affinity for a place or situation. Author Kim Samuel defines belonging as wholeness; the experience of being at home with ourselves and the social, environmental, organizational, and cultural context of our lives.
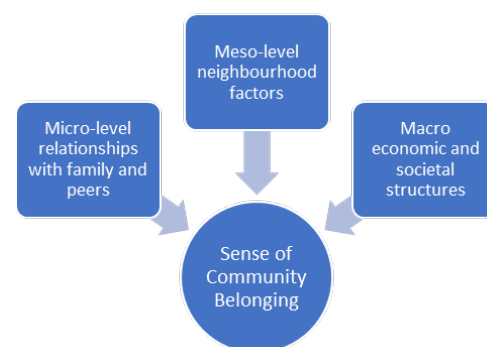
Belonging to a community is to be an active co-owner of the community and foster a deep sense of emotional and communal ownership. A sense of community belonging describes the degree to which individuals are (or judge themselves to be) connected to their community and their place within it.

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HOW CAN WE CREATE BELONGING?

Infrastructure: Parklets in downtown parking spots, inviting inclusive parks and public spaces, libraries, community centres, swimming pools, My Great Neighbourhood Grants, block parties, neighbourhood-led place-making initiatives, neighbourhood asset mapping, shared emergency preparedness initiatives, community and boulevard gardens, community potlucks. All of this infrastructure (both hard and soft/social) puts community at the centre. It creates spaces and opportunities for those critical connections that lead to lasting relationships, that decrease isolation that increase belonging.

Convening: The way we gather people together matters. For local governments and other community institutions working on big, difficult issues like housing affordability, climate change, reconciliation, reducing inequality, creating inclusive prosperity, and other challenges – doing so in a way that brings people together rather than divides them is a way to begin to heal our communities and reduce social isolation and loneliness. Get the appropriate people in the room; this often means having people who may not be in the same room together unless you invite them and are likely to be people who have differences of opinion. Hold space for vastly different perspectives to co-exist. Celebrate small successes along the way. Engage the whole person and all their gifts and skills, not just their job title. Keep a sense of humour. Love people well.

> "If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together".
>
> *–African Proverb*

Connecting though Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD):
A well-known African proverb says "If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together". Collaborative strategies are critical to drive long-term change. ABCD is a powerful strategy for change that equips people to create local opportunities and respond to needs and challenges in their neighbourhoods. ABCD starts from people's strengths and gifts. Connect with your neighbours to assess the resources, skills, and experiences available. Organize the community around issues that move everyone into action. Be inspired by exploring the stories of communities like Stony Plain, AB, Cambridge, ON, and Durham Region, ON that are testing and adapting their engagement activities through an ABCD strategy to create stronger connections and foster welcoming environments.

Community: Networks have the potential to build movements that can tackle the most difficult challenges of our time. Formerly known as Cities Deepening Community, Communities Building Belonging (CBB) is a Tamarack network of

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8000+ learners committed to strengthening neighbourhoods and ending social isolation and polarization in Canada since 2016. CBB is a timely and powerful response to the growing levels of loneliness and disconnection across Canada. Through coaching, knowledge sharing, networking, and cross-sector collaboration, CBB has helped implement a framework to develop positive change in communities and supported the advancement of local efforts. CBB supports over 40 communities in developing strategies to strengthen a sense of belonging for all. In 2024, CBB launched its first Circle of Actions, a learning and action cohort of 13 champions that are committed to addressing the crisis of loneliness by creating plans and carrying out interventions that foster a sense of belonging through an ABCD lens and a Collective Impact approach. The successes, lessons learned, and impact of participating communities will make the case for all levels of government to recognize the importance of belonging and support community-led efforts to foster it. Get involved and participate in one of our communities of practice, join a webinar, or contact us to co-author a publication that can mobilize conversations on belonging in your community.

Strategy: Tamarack is building a pan-Canadian movement to develop a Strategy for Belonging that centres local gifts and aspirations into conversations about the economy and the quality of life for everyone. Through our relationships with communities, we have learned the value of collaborating with local governments to cultivate relationships that pivot from a service-oriented mindset towards co-creation grounded in solidarity to address the crisis of isolation. To magnify the impact of this work, the strategy needs to reflect the diversity of our communities. You can join the conversations on what this strategy can look like by participating and/or co-organizing community consultations this spring and summer. You can also sign this pledge in support of a Strategy for Belonging. To date, over 420 individuals have signed the pledge and the numbers keep growing!

CONCLUSION

As communities continue to navigate through the (unequal) impacts of loneliness and disconnection, we have an opportunity to reimagine how we choose to live together.

- As individuals: How well do you know your neighbours and their gifts and skills? How involved are you in local activities?
- As governments: How are you developing strategies and policies that make community essential?
- As community organizations: How are you celebrating and supporting community aspirations?

Despite observing significant factors that trigger this crisis of loneliness, the promise and potential of belonging is significant and can contribute to improve the well-being of all. We are inspired by the efforts of community superheroes across Canada who are testing solutions to build belonging and we are eager to continue the conversations on how we can collectively build more just and equitable futures.

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- Learn more about Communities Building Belonging and join the movement.
- Find out more about the Strategy for Belonging and sign the pledge.
- Watch this webinar recording with Lisa, Heather, and Jorge on building communities that create a sense of belonging.
- Explore this guide on Asset-Based Community Development at a glance.
- Learn more about the Circle of Actions, Tamarack's first cohort of communities developing plans for belonging.

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