WHAT IS COMMUNITY?

What do we mean by deepening community? Let's first look at what is meant by the word *community*.

When we research the definition of community, we see that it's a catch-all word that, depending on the context, can mean many things. Drawing on the expertise and research of the change catalyst firm Community Science, there are a few central things we know about community in the practical sense:

- **It's about people:** People form and maintain communities to meet common needs. Members of a community have a sense of trust, belonging, safety and caring for each other.

- **People live in multiple communities:** People participate in multiple communities within any given day. Meeting common needs is the driving force behind the creation of associational groups.

- **Communities within communities:** There may be many communities that live within a single neighbourhood, such as faith communities, hobby communities, gardening communities and dog communities, to name just a few.

- **Community has formal and informal institutions:** Communities form physical institutions to help members meet their needs, such as schools, community centres, libraries, food banks and credit unions. Just as important as the formal are the informal institutions (associations), such as garden clubs, babysitting clubs, dog walkers and neighbourhood associations.

- **Communities are organized in different ways:** Culture, religion, age, and purpose all help to shape and form community. The assortment of communities that exist are determined by people's needs and desires for that sense of trust, belonging, safety and caring for each other.

HOW HAS COMMUNITY CHANGED?

In 2019, the Ontario Chief Medical Officer of Health's annual report was titled Connected Community Healthier Together. The report states that to create change at the community level, we need to understand how community structures have shifted over time and how this might affect a person's sense of belonging to their community.

Here are the elements of change that is happening in our communities:

- **Change in family and social structures:** Families are smaller and more spread out, both geographically and across generations. Increases in separation and divorce rates lead to single parent households that can cause smaller and weaker networks.

- **Work and time pressures:** There has been a shift in the stability of the workforce coinciding with the rising cost of living, resulting in more two-income families and more precarious work such as contract work or the need for multiple-part time jobs. These demands can lead to decreased involvement in all forms of social and community life.

- **Costs associated with being socially connected:** The costs of social activities have become higher, and they are less accessible. It is cheaper to stay home. The realization of these costs has become more pronounced during the pandemic.

- **Time spent in their cars:** Urban sprawl and community design have led to an increase in drive time, leaving less time for social activities.

- **Technology:** Before access to personal, digital tech devices (TV, smartphones, computers) became popular, people would often spend more time socializing at the movies or gathering at each other's homes. Personal digital devices, a product of consumer culture, are problematic when they are approached as a substitute for authentic social connection.

- **Individualism – From 'We' to 'Me':** In her book, Who Do We Choose To Be, Margaret Wheatley writes, "A culture focused on individual freedom can only result in narcissism, polarization, conflict, estrangement, and loneliness. What is the meaning of life when it's all about me?"

  As societies have allowed individualism to trump collective interests, and we have lost sight of what unites us as humans, the fabric of community has frayed badly. Robert Putnam's work on social capital highlights how our increasing disconnection from our friends, families, neighbours, and civic institutions weakens communities and diminishes well-being.

- **The 'Consumer Way' has overshadowed the "citizen way":** As Peter Block and John McKnight discuss in The Abundant Community, consumer culture prioritizes a scarcity mindset and fosters over-reliance on institutions to provide care and solve problems. The result has been a growing alienation and declining sense of empowerment. Consumer culture has diminished the practice of neighbouring and the understanding of what it means to be part of a community of care.

WHEN IS A LACK OF COMMUNITY A PROBLEM?

Over the last 25 years, several leading thinkers have offered in-depth diagnoses of, and prescriptions for, the decline in community. It is for the reasons above that we need to rethink how we see community.

Today, we have systems and institutions – two of the core components that make up a community - which have led to the decline in the capacity of citizens to participate actively in community. According to John McKnight, community is a term that describes what occurs outside systems and institutions.
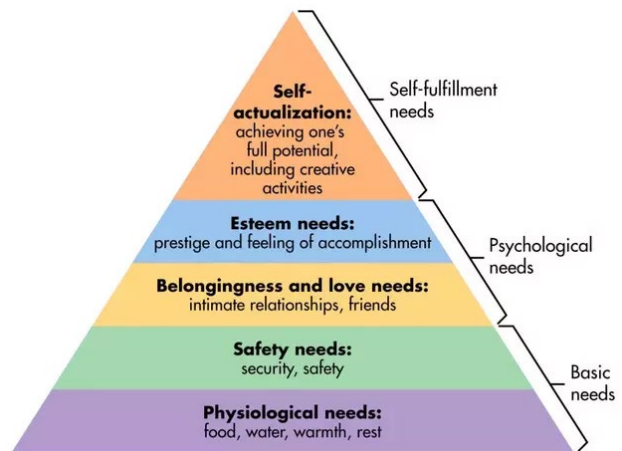
Source: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Strengthening social ties is the necessary foundation for positive community change: it contributes to community resilience, and positively impacts individual health and well-being. The complex challenges facing communities require deep community.

The process of deepening community is about empowering citizens to form the trust and connections necessary to create and sustain vibrant, inclusive neighbourhoods. It is about harnessing the inherent assets and capacities of citizens to work collectively to solve the problems that matter most to them.

LEARN MORE

- Article: What Is Community? (Seth Kaplan)

- Article: What does community even mean? (Fabian Pfortmüller)

- Book: Who Do We Choose To Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity (Margaret Wheatley)

- Book: Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (Robert Putnam)

- Book: The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighbourhoods (John McKnight and Peter Block)

- Report: Connected Communities: Healthier Together (Ontario Chief Medical Officer of Health).

WHY DEEPENING COMMUNITY?

The catalyst for creating Deepening Community was Paul Born's bestselling 2014 book, Deepening Community: Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times.

In it, he says:

> *We live in community. We need one another. Community has the capacity to improve our physical, mental, and economic health as well as our overall sense of happiness and fulfillment. It has the power to unite us in a common bond as we work together for a better world.*

JOIN THE DEEPENING COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP

Members deepen their collective understanding of the power and possibility of the community by developing strategies at the neighbourhood, town or city level. They also connect with peers, showcase their work nationally and get individualized coaching and mentorship.

Learn more at deepeningcommunity.ca

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