



Urgency of Loneliness & the Opportunity for Libraries

Urban Libraries Summit
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Who is this guy really?

Jeremy Nobel, MD, MPH

- Gets up way too early
- Lifetime worrier
- Sometimes lonely
- Loves coffee and bike riding



Questions

Everyone is lonely from time to time, desiring better social connection than they feel they have.

- **Question One:** In the last year, has someone you know been often or very lonely?

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- **Question One:** In the last year, has someone you know been often or very lonely?
- **Question Two:** In the last year has anyone said to you: “I feel lonely?”

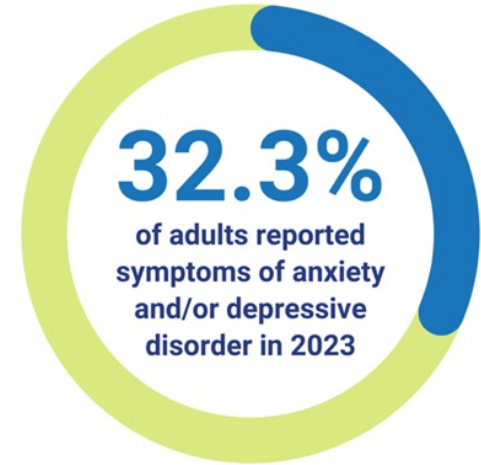
Questions

Everyone is lonely from time to time, desiring better social connection than they feel they have.

- **Question One:** In the last year, has someone you know been often or very lonely?
- **Question Two:** In the last year has anyone said to you: “I feel lonely?”
- **Question Three:** Do you think loneliness is more of an issue now than before March 2020?

3+ Years Into COVID, the Community Loneliness Challenge Continues . . .

- Continued uncertainty (at work and at home)
- Many are struggling; financially, with political divides, community violence, fear and distrust
- Stress, burnout and loneliness at unprecedented levels
- Any GOOD news?



Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation



2023

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



Surgeon General Vivek Murthy's recent advisory raises alarm about the devastating impact of the loneliness epidemic.

**Loneliness corresponds to
the discrepancy between desired
and actual social relations.**



How Loneliness Matters to Health



Mental

Depression
Addiction
Suicidality



Physical

Cardiovascular
Metabolic
Immunologic



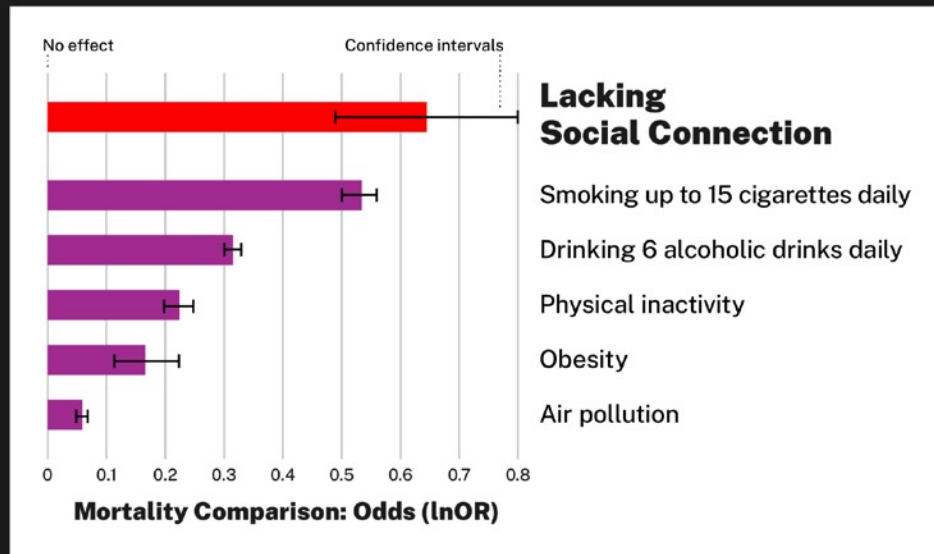
Social

Engagement
Collaboration
Flourishing



WARNING: LONELINESS CAN BE AS LETHAL
AS SMOKING 15 CIGARETTES PER DAY.

Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.



Comparison groups: Complex measures of social integration: high v. low; not smoking v. smoking < 15 cigarettes daily; alcohol abstinence v. drinking > 6 alcoholic drinks daily; physical activity v. inactivity; low BMI v. high BMI; low air pollution v. high air pollution.

Source: Holt-Lunstad J, Robles TF, Sbarra DA. Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States. *American Psychology*. 2017;72(6):517-530. doi:10.1037/amp0000103. This graph is a visual approximation.



Office of the
U.S. Surgeon General



The Foundation for
Art & Healing





**SOCIAL ISOLATION AND
LONELINESS ARE
ASSOCIATED WITH A
30% INCREASED RISK OF
HEART ATTACK, STROKE,
OR DEATH FROM EITHER.**

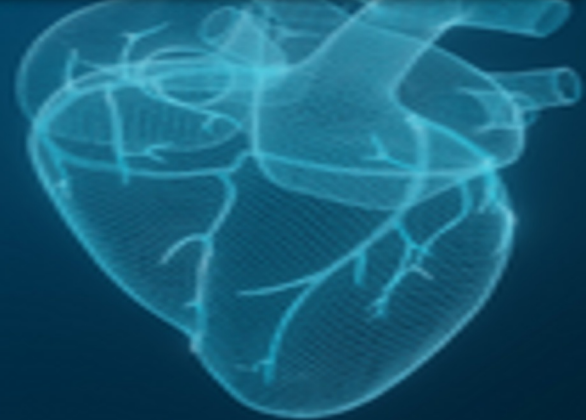
Journal of The American Heart
Association, 2022

Journal of the American Heart Association

AHA SCIENTIFIC STATEMENT

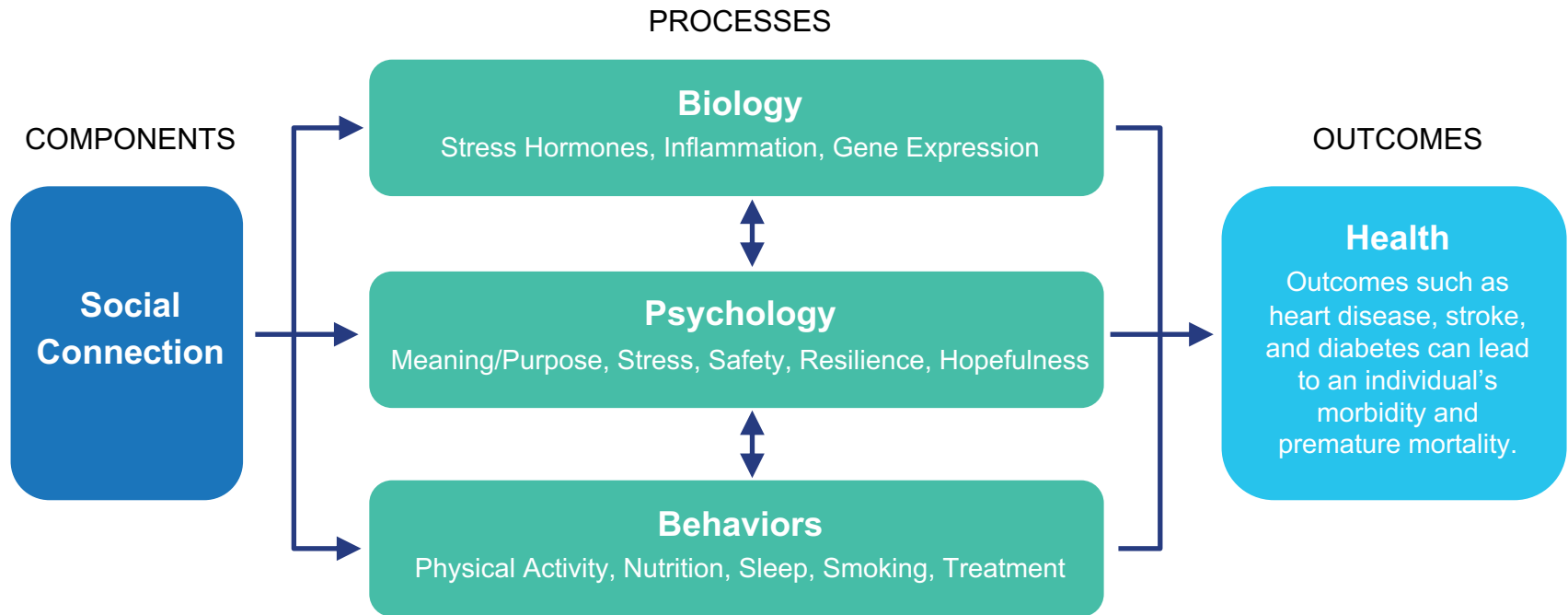
Effects of Objective and Perceived Social
Isolation on Cardiovascular and Brain
Health: A Scientific Statement From the
American Heart Association

Crystal W. Cené, MD, MPH, FAHA, Chair; Theresa M. Beckie, PhD, FAHA, Vice Chair; Mario Sims, PhD, FAHA;
Shakira F. Suglia, ScD, MS, FAHA; Brooke Aggarwal, EdD, MS, FAHA; Nathalie Moise, MD;
Monik C. Jiménez, SM, ScD, FAHA; Bamba Gaye, PhD; Louise D. McCullough, MD, PhD; on behalf of the



How Does Social Connection Influence Health?

Social connection influences health through **three principal pathways**: biology, psychology, and behavior.



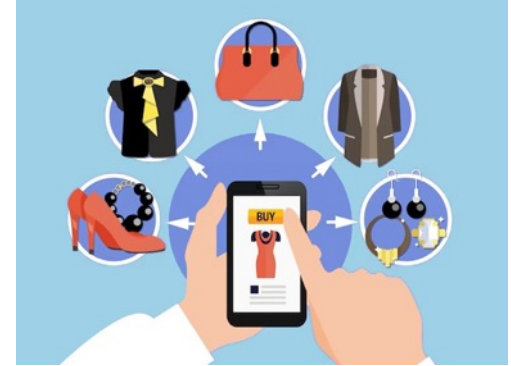
Another reason why loneliness matters: The lonely brain drives lonely behaviors



Hyper-sensitive to threat



Non-rational/Emotional



Impulsive

Factors That Can Shape Social Connection



Individual

- Chronic disease
- Sensory and functional impairments
- Mental health
- Physical health
- Personality
- Race
- Gender
- Socioeconomic status
- Life stage

Relationships

- Structure, function, and quality
- Household size
- Characteristics and behaviors of others
- Empathy

Community

- Outdoor space
- Housing
- Schools
- Workplace
- Local government
- Local business
- Community organizations
- Health care
- Transportation

Society

- Norms and values
- Public policies
- Tech environment and use
- Civic engagement
- Democratic norms
- Historical inequities

Source: *The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*

New Idea: There Are Three Types Of Loneliness



Interpersonal • Psychological

“Does someone have my back?”

“Is there someone I can tell my troubles to?”



Societal • Organizational

“Am I welcome and valued?”

“Am I safe?”

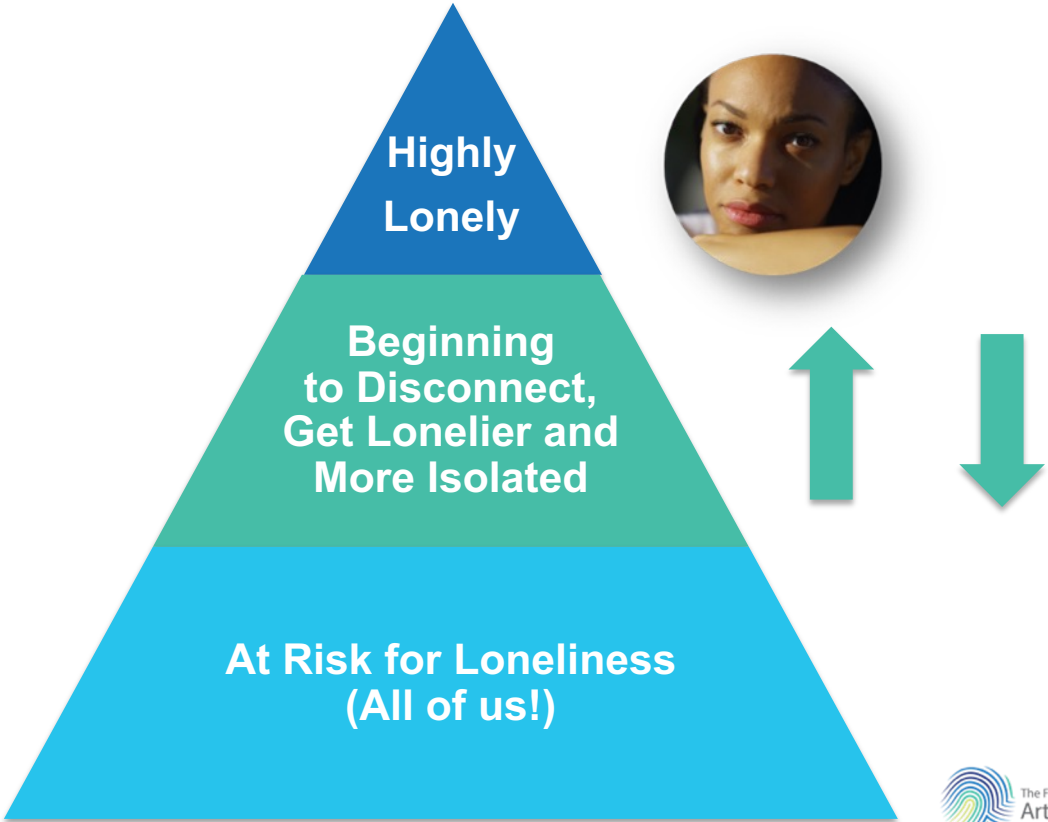


Existential • Spiritual

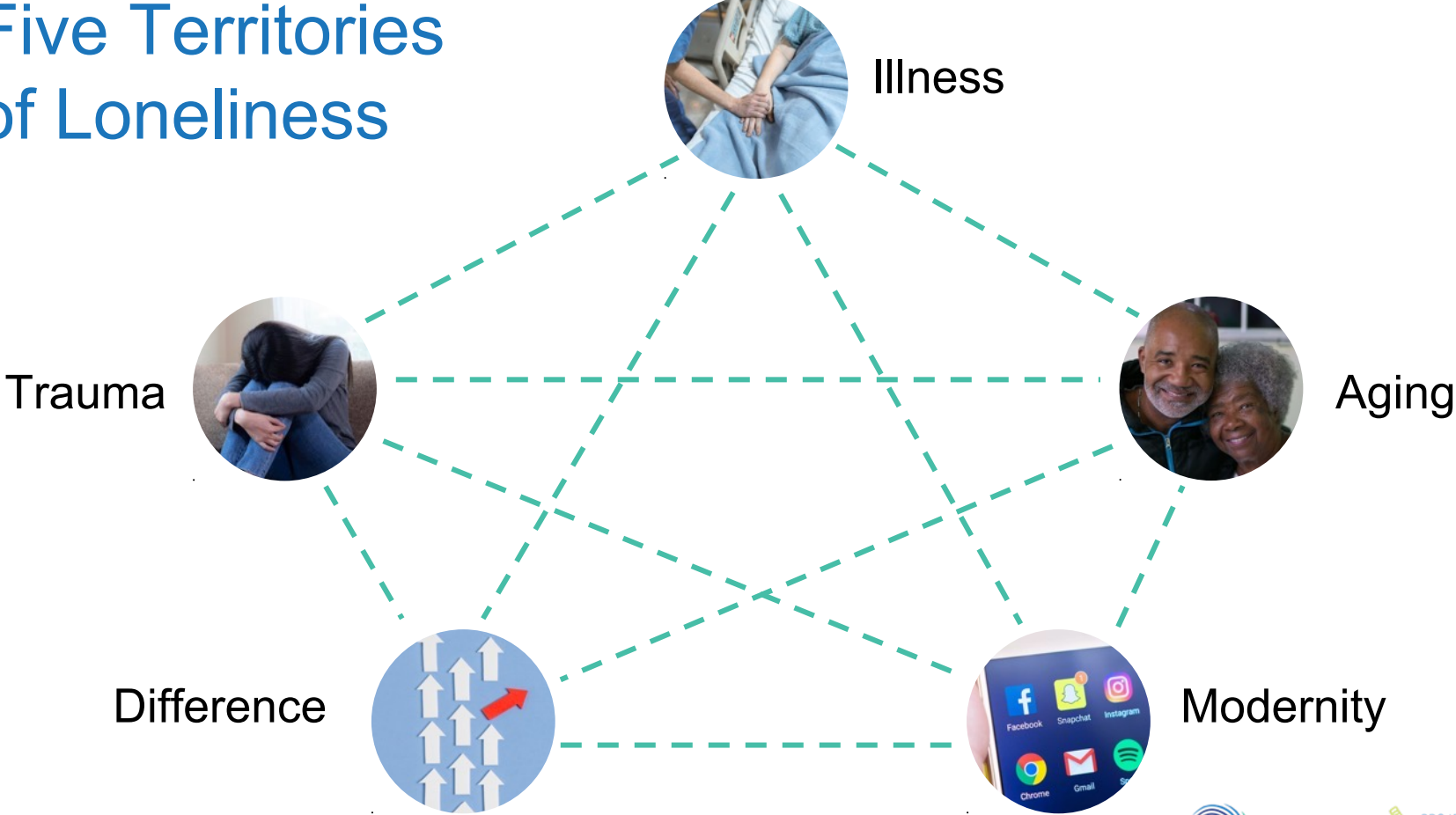
“Does my life matter?”

“Am I disposable?”

Pyramid of Vulnerability to Loneliness: Need to Recognize and Avoid Spiraling Up!



Five Territories of Loneliness



Loneliness and the Community

- A **diverse group** of individuals and circumstances
- A set of **complex** and overlapping drivers, concerns, and solutions
- Consequently, **no “silver bullet”**

Imagine loneliness as a signal, just like thirst.
What is loneliness asking us to pay attention to?



If loneliness is a signal that we need human connection, how is that achieved?



Lonely



Connected

Here's The (Not So) New Idea...

- Why has there never been a culture without art?
- Maybe art, and the storytelling that it offers, connects us?
- Maybe connection helps us survive and thrive?



*Altamira, Spain
20,000 years old*

The Arts Offer A Unique Way To...



Engage



Inspire



Empower

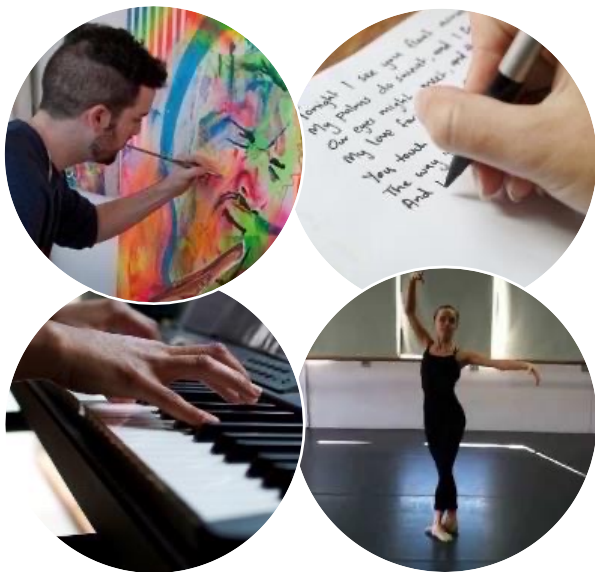


Connect

All the Arts Work!

Traditional Four

Music • Visual Arts
Language Arts • Dance



Big Three

Culinary Arts • Textile Arts
Gardening



Three Parallel Ways that Creative Expression Improves Health

create



“Experience the moment”
allows you to be in touch
with your “self”

share



The act of sharing your
emotions or perspective
with others

reflect



To contemplate and
reflect on messages
and ideas from others

A powerful underlying principle:

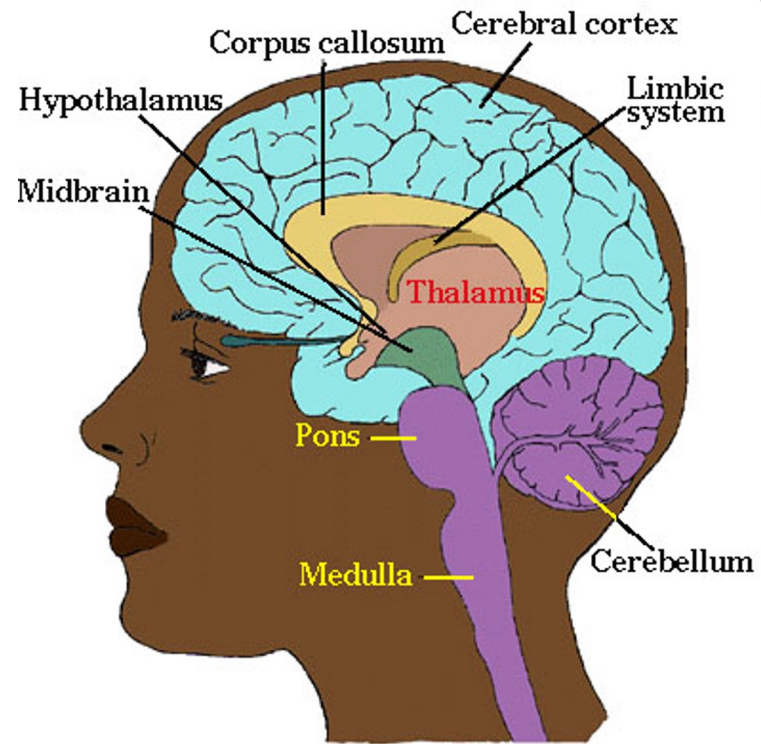
The Arts Rewire Our Brains



The arts stimulate thoughts, moods,
and feelings that change our brains,
our bodies, and our behaviors ...
All impacting our health!

The Arts Have Sustained Physiologic Impact

- **Neuro-endocrine Outflow**
 - Hormonal Regulation
 - Immune System
 - Somatic Organ Function
- **Autonomic Outflow**
 - Blood Pressure
 - Heart Rate
 - Respiration
- **Neuro-peptide Outflow**
 - Neurotransmitter Modulation
 - Mood and Emotion
 - Endorphins



How The Arts Make Us Less Lonely



Impacts our brains



Encourages us to
share our own stories



Invites us to be part
of a larger story

What Does Creative Expression Offer?

- A fun and non-threatening way to engage people of all ages and in any circumstance
- Activates people, emotionally and intellectually; giving people a chance to express who they are and what matters to them
- Promotes a general sense of wellbeing and belonging; changing attitudes and behaviors





Let's make
some art
together!



What Is A Haiku?

- A. The name of the hottest Asian-fusion restaurant in Seattle
- B. A short poetic form developed by the Japanese with three lines; the first line having 5 syllables, the second 7 syllables, and the last 5 syllables
- C. A really great way to impress your friends and appear cultured and sophisticated, without having to do too much work
- D. The way we are going to include you in this talk
- E. All of the above, except for A

Jeremy's UnLonely Haiku

Telling my story,
How arts make us UnLonely.
Eager to hear back!

An ULC UnLonely Haiku

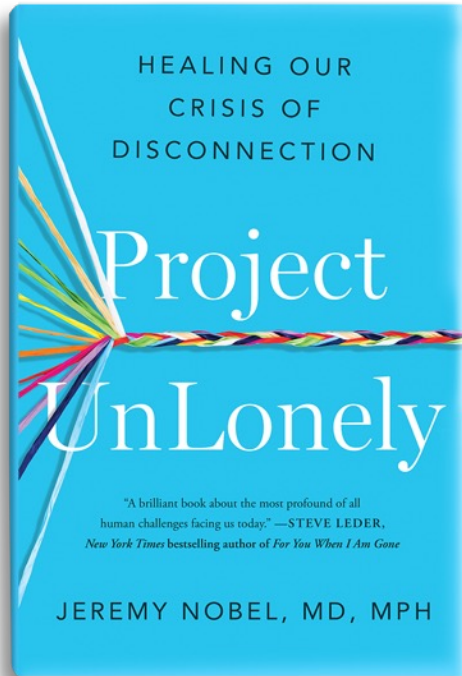
Haiku is a short poetic form, originating in 13th century Japan, with three lines:

- First line, having 5 syllables
- Second line, having 7 syllables
- Last line, having 5 syllables

Recall a moment in your life when making or experiencing something artistically creative (e.g., a song, poem, photo, movie or even homemade cookies) gave you inspiring positive feelings like joy, excitement, wonder, or hope.

As an alternative, recall a time when you were somewhere awe-inspiring in the natural world (e.g., a beautiful sunset or sunrise, a mountain stream or a deserted beach, the view from a mountain top, or the night sky) that gave you those positive feelings.

In your haiku, try to capture that moment and how it felt.



“Your habits of personal creative expression are just as important to your health and well-being as your diet, exercise, and sleep. **Art is a medicine that requires no prescription.**”

— *Project UnLonely: Healing Our Crisis of Disconnection*

What Does All This Have To Do With Urban Libraries?

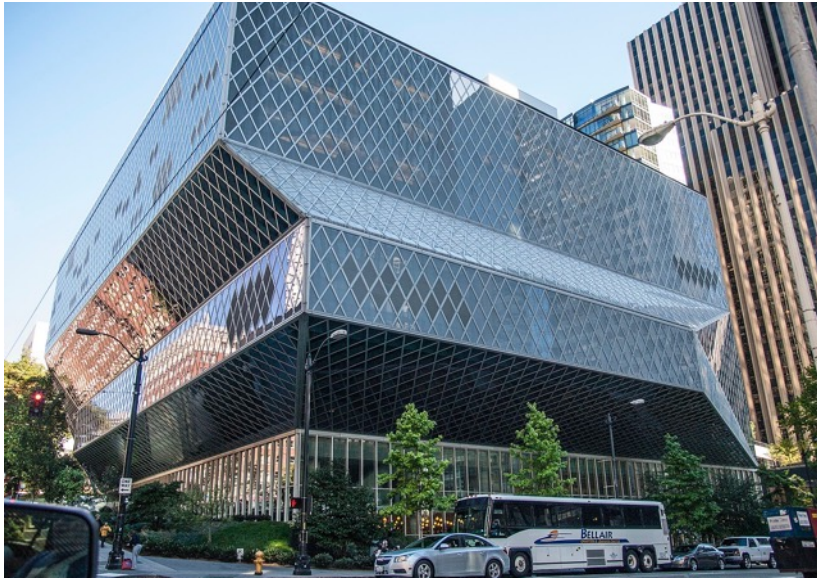


Photo credit: Kenneth J. Gill



Photo credit: Ajay Suresh

Urban Libraries have much in common with other community-based “Catalysts for Connection”!

- Vital to the community with deep roots and multi-generational histories and relationships
- On the front lines of “community engagement” with a commitment to equity and social justice
- Trusted and respected as “sacred spaces”
- Deep commitment by all staff to mission and purpose
- Dealing with almost constant change and uncertainty
- High risk for stress, burnout and loneliness

Timely Opportunity: Libraries as “Catalysts for Connection”



Photo credit: Boston
Public Library

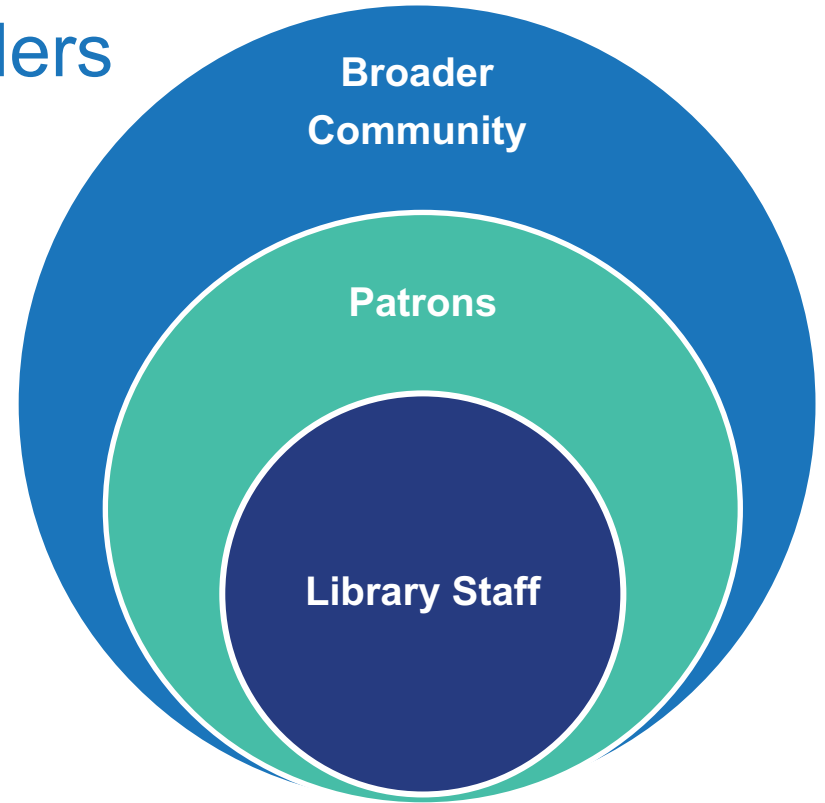
Photo credit: The New York Times

Photo credit: Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh

Opportunity To Address Loneliness Across All Library Stakeholders



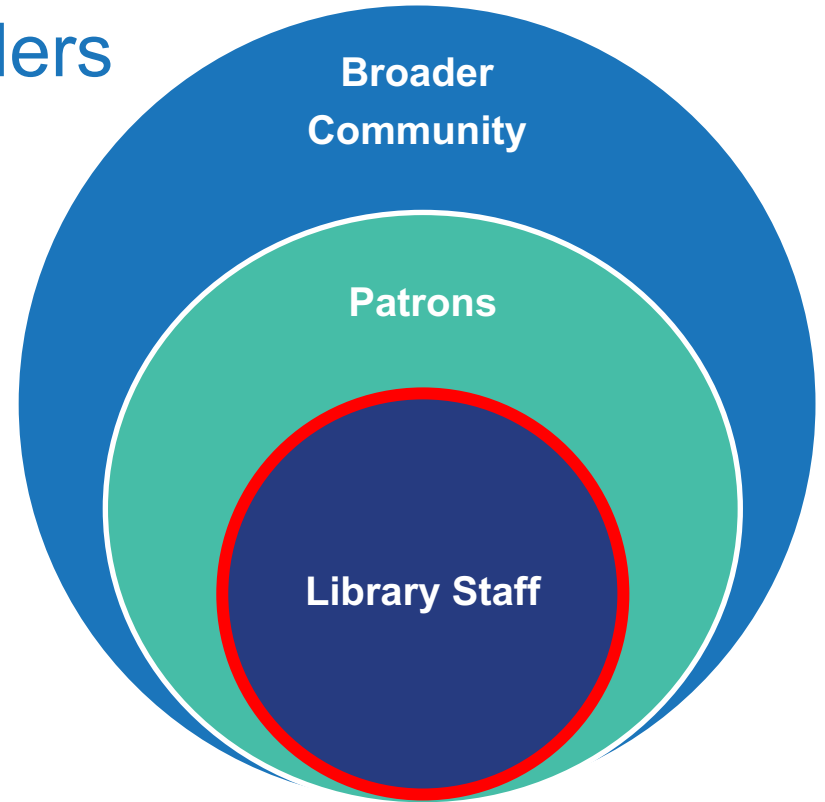
Photo credit: San José Public Library



Opportunity To Address Loneliness Across All Library Stakeholders



Photo credit: San José Public Library






Let's Go To The Movies!: "Agent of Connection"

Three minute film



How Can We All Be Less Lonely?

-  Expand awareness and education that loneliness is a signal and not a person's fault or a sign of inadequacy
-  Encourage personal storytelling, including your own, through creative expression or in any other way
-  Promote a non-judgmental culture of connection at every opportunity and across the life-span



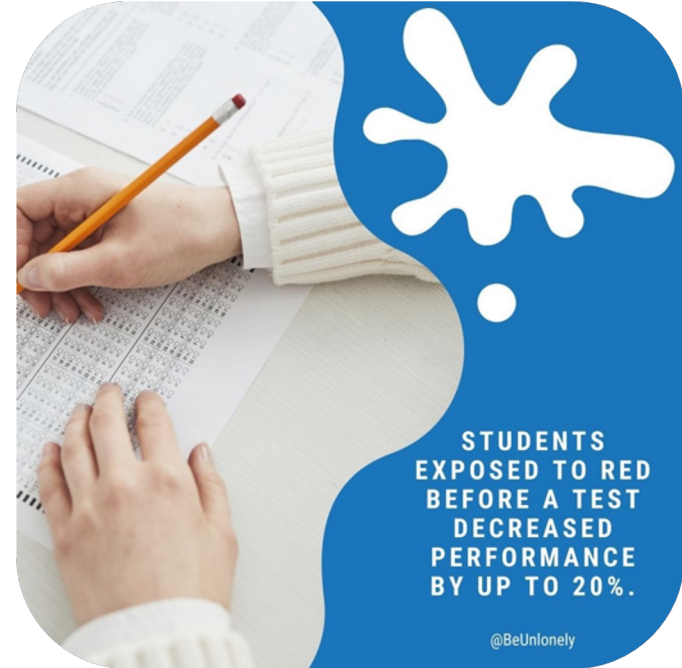
- A multi-faceted initiative that seeks to reduce the burden of loneliness and its stigma
- Pursuing a three-fold goal: to promote awareness, reduce stigma, activate programming



Colors & ConnectionSM



FUN facts about Color and Emotions



Color Meditation

- Pay attention to your **breath**.
- Let's breathe in **calm**.
Let's breathe out **stress**.
- Imagine a **calming color** as you breathe in.
Imagine a **stressful color** as you breathe out.

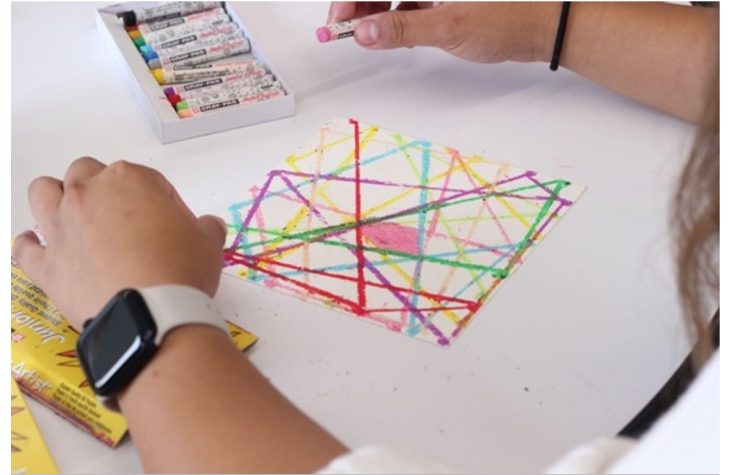


Get Ready to Color!

Imagine a world in which libraries had all the resources necessary to meet the needs of their communities.

Imagine a world of abundance, not scarcity.

- Focus on how what you **imagine** makes you **feel**.
- What **colors express** those feelings?
- Use the oil pastels to **capture and share those feelings** using color.



Express Yourself!



Focus on the feelings that arise



What **colors** do those **feelings** evoke?



Make an image that **uses those colors** in some way!

Now Let's Have A Conversation!

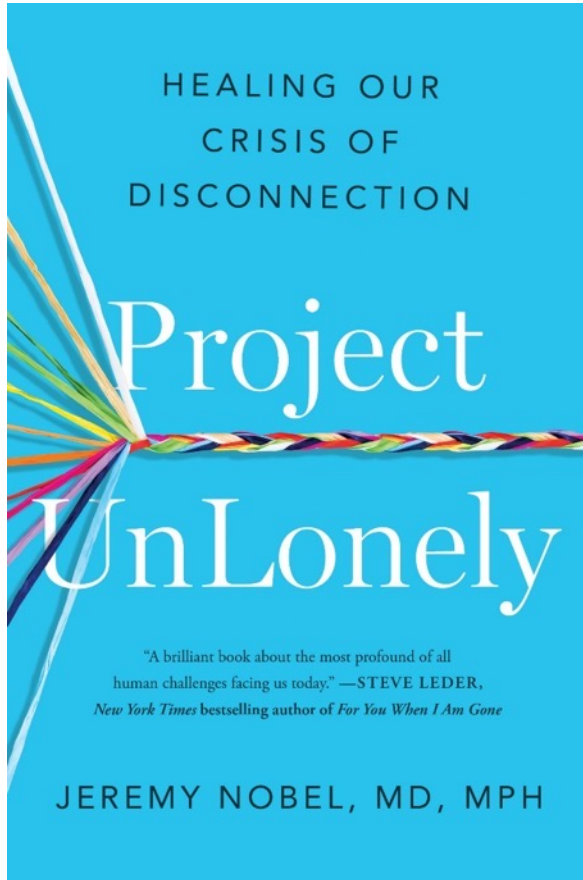
1. Divide into **pairs**
2. Each person **shares** their thoughts about the connection they chose to represent!
3. Make sure to **take turns** so both people can share



Celebrating Our Art Together!

- **Make a “quilt”** by putting your art squares together on a table or the floor
- **Keepsake:** Take a photo and share it!
#LibrariesUnLonely
- Share **one word** or **color** about how you’re feeling now





Design Your Own Project UnLonely!



Be curious



Make things



**Have
conversations**

Thank You!

Jeremy Nobel, MD, MPH
jnobel@artandhealing.org



Challenge of Inclusivity



Photo credit: The Guardian



Photo credit: The Guardian

Traditional Role: Access to Knowledge

