COMMUNITY HEALTH CONVERSATIONS: BUILDING CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

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FURMAN
INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COMMUNITY HEALTH

Context:

The United States is facing a national crisis of loneliness and social disconnection, with more than one in two Americans reporting feelings of isolation. This is not only a personal concern, but a public health challenge linked to an increased risk of premature death by as much as 50 percent. This event marked the beginning of a three-part series on building socially connected communities. The panel brought together research, clinical, and community expertise to explore what helps or hinders people from feeling connected, purposeful, and well.

Moderated by:

- Dr. Kerry Sease, Institute for the Advancement of Community Health

Panelists:

- Dr. Peter Gyarmati, University of South Carolina School of Medicine Greenville
- Nancy Kennedy, Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Furman University
- Rut Rivera, LiveWell Greenville
- Dr. Yajing Song, University of South Carolina School of Medicine Greenville

Key Challenges:

- Physical Effects of Disconnection: Social isolation can act as a stressor on the body, affecting the immune system, metabolism, hormones, the nervous system, and gut health. Drs. Song and Gyarmati highlighted their research on this topic.
- Life Transitions: Major transitions such as retirement, bereavement, returning home from the hospital, becoming a new parent, or starting college can increase the risk of isolation.
- Structural Barriers: Transportation, walkability, broadband access, language access, and safe gathering spaces can make connection easier or harder.
- Courage to Connect: Joining a new group or entering a new space can require vulnerability, especially after a period of isolation.

Vision for the Community:

The panel outlined a vision where community connection is built deliberately through institutional practice and public design rather than left to chance. In this vision:

- Social connection is prioritized as a vital necessity for survival, equivalent to clean air, water, and shelter.
- Urban planning integrates accessible parks, walkable neighborhoods, and dependable public transportation to facilitate casual and structured daily encounters.
- Intergenerational spaces enable older members of the community to engage in mutually enriching exchanges.
- Environments are designed to cultivate genuine belonging, ensuring every individual feels valued, heard, and purposeful regardless of background or language.

Call to Action:

- Practice Everyday Micro-Connections: Greet neighbors, make eye contact, smile, and engage in brief conversations with service workers and checkout cashiers.
- Reach Out to Isolated Individuals: Intentionally invite neighbors who live alone or are navigating bereavement to go for a walk or share a conversation.
- Adopt Healthy Lifestyle Habits: Make incremental nutritional commitments (such as adding an apple for more fiber daily) and maintain connection routines for at least 21 days to form lasting habits.
- Participate in Local and State Initiatives: Engage with community leadership opportunities such as LiveWell's Community Engagement Coalition and utilize public resources from the Foundation for Social Connection.

Conclusion:

Social isolation is a solvable public health crisis, and social connection must be recognized as essential to human health and well-being. While individual actions such as reaching out to others, building healthy routines, and creating moments of connection matter, lasting change also depends on communities, institutions, and policymakers working together to reduce barriers and foster belonging. By creating accessible, welcoming environments where people feel seen, valued, and supported, we can lessen the harms of isolation and build healthier, more connected communities for all.