



How to Build Community for Connection

By Carrie Bowers, CAS

A recent report from the Making Caring Common Project at Harvard University reveals that over one in five adults in the United States experience feelings of loneliness and/or isolation. This percentage of respondents said that they not only feel socially lonely, but they also feel existentially lonely and disconnected from a sense of purpose in this world. Technological distractions, lack of time for family and friends, and the feeling that work leaves them exhausted and drained were the top three reasons given in this sample for why they think loneliness pervades their life. As a result, the authors of this report conclude that strategies to combat loneliness will have a greater impact if we look beyond simply increasing social interactions and instead address the deeper emotions that individuals feel about themselves, others, and their place in the world.[1]

More than just an issue of quality over quantity in our social exchanges, there is a meaningful difference between routine interactions and deeper relationships. Routine interactions, such as responding to online posts or small talk with a customer service agent, have increased for most people. In contrast, research indicates a decline in two key types of relationships essential for a sense of belonging and meaning: transactional relationships, those based on each person pursuing their own goal or self-interest, and social relationships, characterized by mutual investment and support. While many of our daily public interactions used to be person-to-person, they are now often online or automated through phone apps. Ongoing transactional relationships have also decreased as participation in third-space activities (like religious services, sports clubs, and mall-shopping), as well as professional or community organizations, has diminished. Similarly, our social relationships are also affected by technology. How many of us have gotten a little too engaged with an online group of people we have never met, or have seen a reduction in real-life interactions with friends due to the ease of texting or connecting over social media? While technology can help us stay connected on a surface level, it does not always promote deeper, more meaningful connections.[2]

What can we do as individuals to help build meaningful connections within our community? Here are a few ideas that address the different types of interactions and relationships we have:



Reach out to old friends:

Research has shown that while adults are hesitant to reach out to friends with whom they have lost touch, most people long for others to make that first move with them. Try it out for yourself the next time you realize it has been a few months (or longer!) since you last met. You may be surprised at how happy the other person is to hear from you. If you are already part of a community, whether in your neighborhood, a hobby, or a profession, consider reaching out to others with an invitation or initiating a collaboration. Most people will respond favorably to being asked to participate.[3]

Meet your neighbors:

If you aren't known to your building or block, try attending or organizing a community event, like a cookout or donation drive. Join a community garden. Or, hear me out, participate in an HOA or renters' association. It's a great way to make common cause and drive changes in your environment. Or, at the very least, it can help refine your calm communication skills and provide an opportunity to learn to work with those who have conflicting opinions.

Shop locally:

Not only can shopping locally help foster regular interactions with other people, but it also helps boost the local economy. In return for your patronage, local shops provide an opportunity for in-person engagement not available through shopping apps and connection with others who may have shared values. Walking to neighborhood businesses may also help increase your step count. Becoming a "regular" at your local shop could lead to relationships or a greater sense of community at a "place where everyone knows your name." [4]

Participate in wider community events:

Attend your local municipality's free outdoor concert or festival. Join the recreation center for access to classes, workshops, and volunteer opportunities. Join a local hobby group if you have a passion or skill that you'd like to share with others. Or join a club for your favorite recreational activity: reading, running, dining, etc. You never know who you will meet or what ideas you might exchange.

Volunteer for organizations or charities whose missions align with your desire to make a positive impact. For personal growth and deepening a sense of purpose, nothing beats the feeling of using your time and energy to assist in a cause that makes a difference in our world. Are there any mutual aid societies that could use your legal knowledge or other skill sets? Do you feel strongly about a social or political issue? Do you have a hobby that can be leveraged to help others, like gardening, building, or teaching a subject? Perhaps you are a great organizer (of people or things), and your talents can help direct or improve how a local organization operates.

Join a professional organization:

If you are not already a member of your local or relevant specialty bar, try it for a period and see what they have to offer. Connecting with other attorneys in your field or demographic can create opportunities for collaboration, networking, and lasting bonds. Depending on your area of practice and professional set-up (I am looking at you, Solo Practitioners), you may not have built-in time or space for collegial interactions outside of court or the office. Joining a professional association, volunteering with a pro bono organization, or the Attorney Mentoring Program at APEX, or helping a local business or social organization can lead to meaningful interactions and help others.



Taking a break from the screen, getting out of the house or office, and taking opportunities to interact with others are all actions that you can take towards socially meaningful connections.

But there is only so much that an individual can do on their own. If you are an employer or organization head, think about your employees' work/life balance. Do they have enough time to recharge and enjoy a life outside the office? Do you? What changes can be made to create opportunities for meaningful interactions between colleagues that meet their needs as human beings?

Technology has altered the way humans interact with each other and how they view their place in the world. That change does not need to be our undoing, however, as long as we keep our focus on the importance of connection and what makes us human as opposed to what makes us merely productive.

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For more well-being related strategies visit the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) website at www.coloradolap.org or contact us at info@coloradolap.org or (303) 986-3345 to request a confidential, free well-being consultation.



[1] Making Caring Common (2024). Loneliness in America: Just the Tip of the Iceberg?

<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america-2024>

[2] How Developing Community Connections Can Enhance Well-being; NIH Record, August 16, 2024 Vol. LXXVI, No. 17, <https://nihrecord.nih.gov/2024/08/16/how-developing-community-connections-can-enhance-wellbeing>

[3] Liu PJ, Rim S, Min L, Min KE. The surprise of reaching out: Appreciated more than we think. J Pers Soc Psychol. 2023 Apr;124(4):754-771. doi: 10.1037/pspi0000402. Epub 2022 Jul 11. PMID: 35816566.

[4] Cheers