

CMHA launches resources to help communities combat chronic loneliness

By Brock Weir

Loneliness has been shown to have a negative impact on one's health, exacerbating such issues as mental health and cognitive decline.

In an effort to combat this problem and foster "a community where everyone belongs," the Canadian Mental Health Association of York Region (CMHA-YRSS) and South Simcoe, in partnership with the Laboratory for Artistic Intelligence, have launched a new evidence-based resource to help local leaders take steps to end chronic loneliness in their communities.

Dubbed "Solutions for Belonging," it is a framework to implement community-based strategies to solve loneliness. It underscores that the issue can be addressed "with a community development approach that sets out specific conditions that contribute to a sense of belonging: Presence, Access, Cultures and Place."

"People need someone, someplace and something to belong to," said CMHA-YRSS CEO Rebecca Shields. "We're taking a different approach to what's been done before to address chronic loneliness. The Solutions for Belonging framework presents a community development approach we can do together to address loneliness, by creating the conditions for belonging within our communities."

Added Helen Yung, Lead Researcher for the Laboratory for Artistic Intelligence: "Belonging mitigates loneliness. Feeling supported, seen, accepted and accommodated increases feelings of wellbeing, reducing the negative effects of chronic loneliness. We've seen evidence of this in community arts, we heard it in CMHA's community consultations, and it makes intuitive sense to everyone. The key is for enabling conditions to feel authentic and appropriate."

Focusing on those key pillars of Presence, Access, Cultures and Place, the framework notes that "all people have opportunities to socialize, be vulnerable, express their feelings, feel accepted, feel respected, feel their presence matters, and feel that their humanity is reciprocated (recognized, reflected back, responded to). They have people whom they may share beliefs, experienced and understandings."

Access, in this context, includes ensuring "all people are able to access experiences, events, groups, individuals, institutions, and environments that contribute positively to their sense of belonging, the quality of their social interactions and the development of social connections."

"They feel that they have the means, permission, and ability to choose to develop satisfying connections and relationships," the report finds.

The report also defines Culture as "encompassing the stories, ideas, images, customs, values, beliefs, and practices that exert influence on people."

"In this community, cultures are factored into how people are supported in experiencing Presence and Access. Culture is also the means by which Presence and Access (even Place) are promoted and supported," the framework outlines before moving on to Place, which they define as ensuring "the physical environs of this community support Presence, Access, and cultural differences in how people need to experience Presence and Access."

According to the CMHA-YRSS, data shows that loneliness often rises in young adulthood before declining through middle adulthood, yet begins to increase again in "old age." Young people, they found, voice their experiences with loneliness more so than seniors, and in youth between the ages of 15 to 24, 23 per cent say they were "always lonely or felt lonely" compared to 14 per cent of seniors over the age of 65.

“Communities are unique, and priorities for addressing loneliness and creating belonging vary by community,” said CMHA Loneliness Project Lead Karen Beitel. “Every community needs to address loneliness through a framework that factors in its own unique circumstances. With Solutions for Belonging, we believe we’re provided a path forward for all communities to achieve that.”

For more information on Solutions for Belonging, visit solutionsforbelonging.ca.

“It was developed with the expertise and contributions of many, including an advisory circle with members from across a variety of sectors,” says CMHA-YRSS. “Community leaders are invited to take up the framework to mitigate loneliness and create belonging.”