

**PRACTICING CONNECTION TO COMBAT  
LONELINESS AND ISOLATION WITH  
ELDERLY RESIDENTS IN SUBSIDIZED  
HOUSING**

**IASWG Symposium: June 2025**

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# ABOUT US



**Connection Practice  
Facilitators  
SeekHealing.org  
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**Mark Smith  
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# A CONVERSATION FROM LONELINESS... TO CONNECTION

## HISTORY OF GROUP: COMMUNITY OUTREACH

We are firsthand witnesses to the abject loneliness, disconnection and feeling of invisibility in our Elder population. Being an active member and a Social Health Facilitator with **SeekHealing.org**, we suggested the concept of creating a Connection Practice for Elders. After we tested the concept, we were then joyfully granted funding. It has been a most humbling, beautiful love fest. Come share with us...



SOME CORE BELIEFS  
AND VALUES OF  
**SEEK  
HEALING....**



SeekHealing.org, started as an attempt to offer a different approach to addiction and social health.

Based on **Bruce Alexander's "Rat Pack"** model *"the opposite of addiction isn't sobriety it's social connection."*

COVID further emphasized the importance of restoring connection.

**VIVAK MURTHY:** *The loneliness epidemic is making us sick.* Recommended solution is having deeper conversations and connections.

***There is no mental health without social health.***

**US Surgeon General Murthy repeatedly emphasized that “loneliness can have serious negative impacts on physical and mental health, leading to increased risks of heart disease, stroke, dementia, depression, and anxiety.”**

**US surgeon general Vivek Murthy: ‘Loneliness is like hunger, a signal we’re lacking something for survival’**



# WHAT ARE THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF OUR ELDER GROUPS?

Ages 62+ living in subsidized housing, income is below poverty level

Relying on EBT, Medicaid, Meals on Wheels, church groups bringing food

99% live alone.

Many only leave their apartments for medical appointments

Occasional building events, from bingo to informative medical talks.

Since COVID things have been harder as isolation became the norm.





# **This is why we do what we do...**



**We get to bear witness in each of The Elders Connection Practices of ensuring each member is being seen, heard and validated.**

**The magic of this group soothes, uncovers, connects and breaks down barriers. In every Connection Practice, the first words are usually *I am so lonely*. By the end of the circle smiles, love, ease and connection flow like a river. So, we are hopefully changing lives and averting loneliness one heart at a time.**



# ***WHY IS THIS GROUP SO IMPORTANT?***

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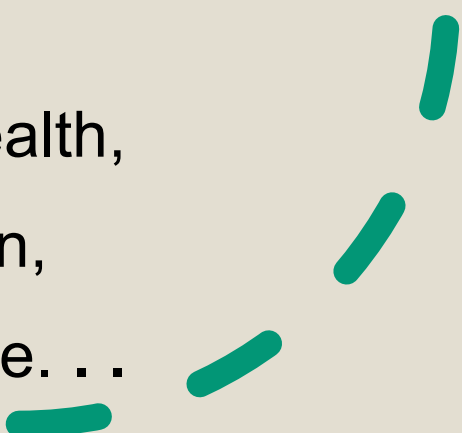
*To confront isolation and loneliness impact*

## **THE PURPOSE OF THE GROUP?**

To inspire connection, freedom to speak, and break down the stigma of loneliness, aging and discrimination within the sharing of common experiences as we age

## **THE GOAL?**

To generate greater connection, better health, mutual aid and the decrease in isolation, loneliness and the sense of being invisible. . .





# ***SETTING THE CONTAINER FOR A CONNECTION PRACTICE***

## **•WHY WE SET A CONTAINER:**

- To give structure, sense of safety, and to set up respect in hearing each other's voices while allowing for flexibility in the needs and wishes of group.

## **•WHAT HAPPENS IN GROUP?**

- Structure of container:
- 3 Listening Tools
- 2 Agreements
- "Space Owls"
- All experiences welcome; no conversation off limits
- Check in
- Grounding
- Longer shares
- Check out
- Ritual ending

- We found we had to accommodate for participant's conditions, such as dealing with hearing dilemmas, turning off AC fan, addressing fear and mistrust.
- Encouraged taking back agency of each member's life.



- Sometimes we forget that behind an aged face and wrinkles is a wealth of a life lived.

- From wisdom to funny life experiences, we have been delighted, surprised, & humbled to hear about professional lives, past experiences, skills, & stories.

- HERE ARE SOME OF THEIR RICH STORIES ...



## Lucy,

87-year-old white female, was our first member to pass away in the group. When she entered the room, she immediately entranced us.

- I even found out we had both lived at the same time in California and knew some of the same people. Lucy even spoke about her friendship with Anais Nin.
- Meantime, I shared that I had used Nin's quote in my dissertation. It was another small synchronicity that causes connections to deepen.
- She told us that she was so lonely she was contemplating suicide, then she saw the poster for Connection Practice, she said it changed her life.
- She shared her poetry with us and her feisty engaging spirit. She constantly surprised us with her wild past including living in Greece and organizing protests.
- She was always eager to share her wisdom and joy and humor; she is definitely missed.





## ***Lucy:***

***I don't know why we don't all talk more or connect more, having Connection Practice helps me to see myself again as part of the community.***

***We share experiences that are both similar and individual, yet all share our loneliness and isolation.***

***I am surprised to find that I am listening more now. I really am getting used to the tools that make me a more effective listener.***

***I worry that no one will ever know if I die. But now with this group, someone will notice if I am no longer around.***



## George

**72-year-old white male, came to group needing to share with us all of his skills in a somewhat ego centered delivery and in a way that dominated the group.**

**•Since then, he has relaxed enough to share his heart, loneliness, troubles, his physical challenges, and he states he now adores this group for its opportunity to honestly talk through his living situations while feeling connected and less lonely and more authentic.**



## •George

*I just moved into this complex. And I quickly realized how lonely and isolated I am.*

*When I saw the flyer for Connection Practice, I knew I had to come find out what it was about.*

*Now I wouldn't miss a session because it starts my week off with such a sense of belonging.*

*After being sick for so long, this makes me feel part of life again.*



**Grace**, an 80 year old white woman, who uses a walker, is on oxygen and lives with progressive functional palsy that is so intense that eating is problematic. She has a dog that goes everywhere with her, and we believe that is part of what keeps her going.

She shares with us her past and still very politically active moxie, and concerns about her emotionally abusive son.

Her loneliness is so heartbreakingly visible.

In spite of her very limited income, she has squirrled away a bit of money to move to France. As a young adult she felt alive there and wants to feel that again.

She concerns us as we watch her become skeletal, yet it hasn't changed her joie de vivre. She struggles physically to speak as her breathing is so bad barely sound comes out.

Wearing spunk and resilience as a cloak, she is





We were surprised one morning as she plopped down in a chair, very out of breath.

Saying she had overslept, she just threw on clothes and hurried to our meeting.

When asked why... she replied *this Connection Practice is vital to my health. I cannot afford to miss it.*

**GRACE**





**Sam,**

**72 y/o Afro-American male, speaks of the importance of being a Black man and the need to stay out of trouble. He confesses how hard it has been to acclimate to living alone. Living in a senior apartment building, he feels even more alone, as people often do not speak to each other. He says this group makes him feel less dislocated and gives him a place to go.**

**In his younger years, he traveled often, teaching himself to be a chef, musician and DJ. He feels lost, lonely and undervalued.**

**He is living with bone cancer and is often in extreme pain, yet he comes to group with gentleness and smiles.**



## SAM

*I have been feeling so lonely for years. And now that I am coming to this group, I am a part of something. I have others to talk to or even talk about my life.*

*I really look forward to being part of this. It makes me feel less lonely.*





- **Darcel,**
- **67, white female, came to group looking like a scared rabbit, looking for any opportunity to leave the group. Now she stays for the entire session.**
- **Known for avoiding most interactions with other residents, she began opening up, speaking about living with abuse, rape, being part of a gang member, working in a bomb factory, and not being able to trust anyone.**
- **She has now become a staple of the group, and she speaks much more freely now.**







## **Darcel:**

*• I wasn't sure I wanted to be part of this group. I tend to be quite introverted and stay to myself. But now that I am coming, it feels so good to talk. I am not used to talking and sharing. This is a new experience for me. I like coming.*



**Harriet,**

**82-year-old white woman, who used to be a social worker, shared with us information about her lover of 10 years and the joy of elder sex...along with the excruciating pain she felt regarding her estranged children.**

- **She was also instrumental in wanting a professional to address the group about death and end of life options.**





Harriet,

*I am really surprised at how hard it has been to get older. The level of depression and isolation is so hard to live with. Being in this group I feel free to speak while learning new listening tools. And I can honestly say these people are friends now.*



## Vivian

82, spent her early years living off grid, teaches metaphysical modalities, raised two children and lost her father at an early age. Her trauma has invaded trust issues. She is lovely and kind, always ready with a huge hug and yet terribly lonely. Sadly, we believe we are witnessing early-stage dementia.



# Vivian

***Getting older has been quite a surprise. I never expected to be so lonely and isolated. I stay so much of the time in my apartment, watching TV and cuddling with my cat. Now that I have this group I feel empowered to seek out other relationships.***

***As we age, we lose people we love, we don't have the connections we used to have with our children. So now we must find comradery in different ways. Coming to Connection Practice renews my energy and makes me feel younger and less invisible.***







**Let's try it!**

# Setting the Container (our model )

- The purpose of our gathering is to foster connection.
- Everyone is welcome; it's an invitation to be open and genuine.
- Check-in: please share your name, pronouns, and what's currently on your mind.
- **Agreements:** we prioritize confidentiality and respect for privacy.

Avoid fixing, changing, or advising.

- **Three Listening Tools:**
  - Reflective listening
  - Inquisitive questions
  - Sharing personal impact
- Practice attentive listening.
- Check out
- Ritual closing



# **Comments and Questions?**

- **What did you notice about the experience?**
- **What questions and comments do you have?**
- **Would this model apply to your groups?**

*Loneliness  
does not come from  
lack of company,  
it comes  
from lack of  
connection.*

Tahmina Safi



Thank you

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