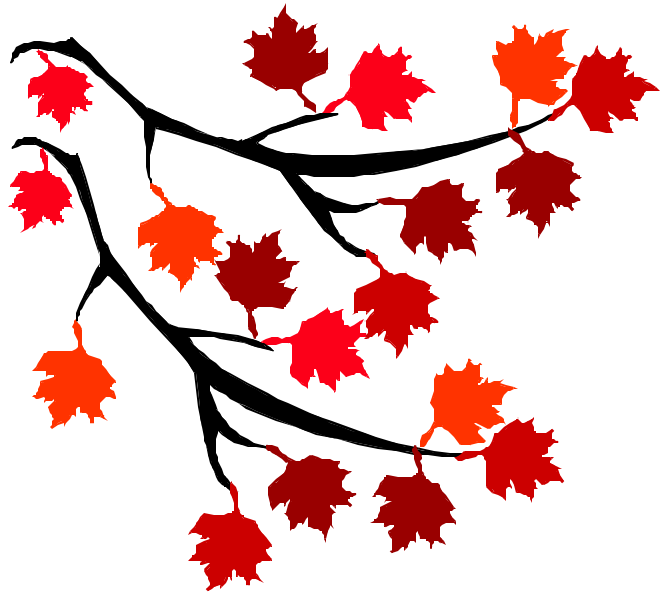


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# The Importance of Belonging

David Pitonyak



*To be rooted is perhaps the most  
important and least recognized need of  
the human soul.*

*Simone Weil*

# i m a g i n e

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Portions of the document are taken directly from other publications:

Pitonyak, D. (2002). Opening the Door. In J. O'Brien and C. Lyle-O'Brien, *Implementing Person-Centered Planning: Voices of Experience*. Toronto: Inclusion Press.

Pitonyak, D. (2002). *Toolbox for Change: Reclaiming Purpose, Joy, and Commitment in the Helping Profession*. Blacksburg, VA: Imagine.

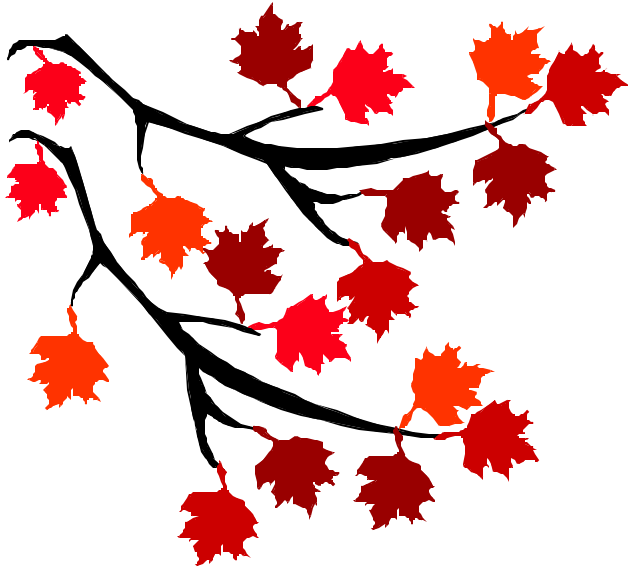
Pitonyak, D. (2002). *What Do I Do Next...? Supporting a Person with Difficult Behaviors After the Workshop*. Blacksburg, VA: Imagine

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## **Printing Suggestions**

*The Importance of Belonging* is designed to be printed front and back. Please, when replicating, save paper by using both sides.

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*We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been — a place, half-remembered, and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community.*

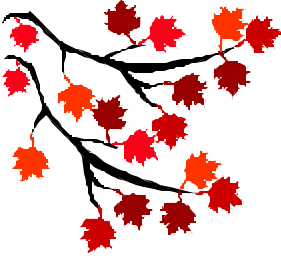
*Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak without having the words catch in our throats.*

*Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.*

*Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends.*

*Someplace where we can be free.*

- Starhawk



## Introduction

Many people who experience disabilities live lives of extreme loneliness and isolation. Many depend almost exclusively on their families for companionship. Some have lost their connections to family, relying on people who are paid to be with them for their social support. Although paid staff can be friendly and supportive, they frequently change jobs or take on new responsibilities. The resulting instability can be devastating to someone who is fundamentally alone.

Bob Perske describes how a person whose life is devoid of meaningful relationships might feel:

*"We have only begun to sense the tragic wounds that so many [persons with developmental disabilities] may feel when it dawns on them that the only people relating with them -- outside of relatives -- are paid to do so. If you or I came to such a sad realization about ourselves, it would rip at our souls to even talk about it. Chances are some of us*

*would cover it up with one noisy, awkward bluff after another. And chances are, some professionals seeing us act this way, would say we had "maladaptive behavior." Think about what it would feel like to have even one person come to us without pay, develop a reliable, long-term relationship with us because he or she wanted to... literally accept us as we are. Then think of the unspeakable feelings we might possess if -- when others were "talking down" to us and "putting us in our place" -- that kind person could be counted on to defend us and stick up for us as well! Most of us do have persons like that in our lives. But will the day come when [people with disabilities] have them too?" (1)*

In my view, most people served by the human services industry are profoundly lonely. Loneliness is the central reason why so many are unhappy and distraught. It is not because our instructional strategies are ill-informed or because our planning processes are inadequate. It is not because our medications are in-potent or because staff are untrained. Their suffering results from isolation. As Willard Gaylin has written, "To be vulnerable is not to be in jeopardy. To be vulnerable and isolated is the matrix of disaster (2)."

## The Wrong Questions

For years, the human services profession has been pre-occupied with three questions (3):

What's wrong with you?  
How do we fix you?  
What do we do with you if we can't fix you?

The central function of our human services system, in my view, should be to help people who experience disabilities to develop and maintain "enduring, freely chosen relationships" (4).

Why?

## The Importance of Belonging (5)

"A sense of belonging," writes Dr. Kenneth Pelletier of the Stanford Center for Research and Disease Prevention, "appears to be a basic human need – as basic as food and shelter. In fact, social support may be one of the critical elements distinguishing those who remain healthy from those who become ill." (6)

In their 1996 book, *Mind/Body Health: The Effects of Attitudes, Emotions and Relationships*, researchers Brent Hafen, Keith Karren, Kathryn Frandsen, and N. Lee Smith describe the results of a nine-year study of 7,000 people living in Alameda County, California. "The people with many

# Loneliness is the only real disability

**I thought, for the longest time, that I had made this quote up on my own, and then someone said they heard it from Judith Snow first. I asked Judith if she had coined the phrase and she said, "I wish I had." Years later, someone in Georgia told me that Beth Mount had said it first so I wrote to Beth to see if they were right. She wrote back, "Use it and don't worry about making it mine--so much of what we all say and do has been borrowed from our network...don't worry about crediting me with that which we all know, the power of relationships to heal and make whole. " Looks to me like Beth deserves the nod.**

social contacts – a spouse, a close-knit family, a network of friends, church, or other group affiliations – lived longer and had better health. People who were socially isolated had poorer health and died earlier. In fact, those who had few ties with other people died at rates two to five times higher than those with good social ties.” (7)

Hafren, Karren, Frandsen, & Smith write that “social support is the degree to which a person’s basic social needs are met through interaction with other people. It’s the resources – both tangible and intangible – that other people provide. It’s a person’s perception that he or she can count on other people for help with a problem or for help in a time of crisis.” (8)

Although the reasons why social support leads to better health are not entirely understood (one theory is that belonging improves immune function), the implications are profound for people who experience our services. It may be that a great deal of what we see as pathology (e.g., poor health, mental health issues, problem behaviors, etc.), is, in fact, a symptom of loneliness.

Sidney Cobb, president of the Society of Psychosomatic Medicine, argues that the data supporting a link between

loneliness and illness is overwhelming – that “social support can indeed protect people in crisis from what he calls a ‘wide variety’ of diseases. Adequate social support, Cobb says, has been proven to protect against conditions from ‘low birth weight to death, through tuberculosis to depression, alcoholism, and other psychiatric illness. Furthermore, social support can reduce the amount of medication required, accelerate recovery, and facilitate compliance with prescribed regimens.” People who are suffering from a break down in social support are also more prone to cancer, hypertension, and heart disease (9).

It’s true — you can die from a broken heart.

### **Better Questions**

The field is now moving toward a much more promising set of questions than *What’s wrong with you? How do we fix you? And What do we do with you if we can’t fix you?* Processes such as person-centered planning pose a deeper more illuminating set of questions (10):

*What are your capacities and gifts and what supports do you need to express them?*

*What works well for you and what does not?*

*What are your visions and dreams of a brighter future and who*

*will help you to move toward that future?*

In addition to these questions, I like those posed by Mary Romer. Mary's questions strike me as fundamental to anyone's success (11):

Are enough people engaged in the person's life?

Are there people who are imbued with the belief and hope for a brighter, better future for the person?

If not, how might such people be found or how might that sense of hope be instilled in those committed to walking with the person?

### **Ask, "Am I lonely?"**

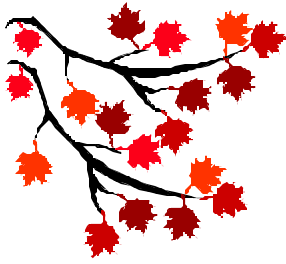
Loneliness affects all kinds of people. Tall and short, rich and poor, black, white, yellow, Republican, Democrat, Catholic, Jew — you name it, loneliness knows no bounds. There are broken hearts everywhere.

The awareness that many people who experience disabilities may be lonely necessitates an awareness that the people who are supposed to help may be lonely too. In order to support the development of relationships for other people, we must examine our own sense of connectedness. Ask yourself, How do I stay in contact with my family? How do my visits home feel? Who are my friends? Who is my partner? Do I see them often

enough? What do I contribute to these relationships? What do I know about relationships and how can I use this knowledge to support the person?

It is also important to examine your relationships with the person's supporters. How well do you know them? How often do you provide them with positive feedback about their contributions? How often do you ask them what they need? And how often do you listen?

You can also ask these and other questions of the general culture surrounding the person. Do people know each other? How often do they support each other? Does anyone listen to what the people who know the person best have to say? If you are involved in the service delivery system, you can ask "Does the organization treat staff in a valued way?" Do staff feel that their superiors are personally concerned with their well-being and that their needs will be attended to? If it is a family home, you might consider the supports available to the entire family? Are the relationships supportive or contentious? It almost goes without saying that an organization of supported and involved caregivers is key if the goal of the organization is to support "belonging." To paraphrase Jean Clark, "A person's needs are best met by people whose needs are met."



## Wake up to the people right next to you.

I BELIEVE THAT ONE OF THE MOST fundamental reasons why professionals have lost touch with the importance of relationships in the lives of the people they serve is that they have lost touch with the importance of relationships in their own lives.

A solid resource for understanding why relationships are important and how they are formed can be found by examining our own relationships. We are brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, Moms and Dads, lovers and partners, etc. We already know a great deal about *how* to be connected.

### Things You Can Do

- ◆ Go home right now and hug your sweetheart like you used to (when her/his hands were too hot to touch). Make a regular date with your partner to spend time with each other (alone). It doesn't have to be complicated. Get Chinese takeout and rent a movie together.

- ◆ Spend time playing with your children. Put aside your worries and To Do lists. Make joy a goal.
- ◆ Go visit your Mom and Dad. Share with them stories of good things they did for you when you were a little boy or little girl. Look through old photographs. Tell stories.
- ◆ Contact your siblings. Make a plan to get together somewhere fun to "reconnect."
- ◆ Call a friend you have lost touch with over the years. You both need to hear from one another.

IT IS ALSO TRUE that people offering support as professionals often do not know each other. Consider how well you know your fellow workers. Do you know how it is that they have come to this work?

It is often the case that we do not know each other in any meaningful sense. And, having failed to know one another deeply, we then try to come together and solve complex human problems. It makes no sense.

### Things You Can Do

- ◆ Find regular time to pause and reflect with your fellow employees.
- ◆ Explore questions such as these, adapted from Margaret Wheatley's (2002) *Turning to*



one another.

*How did I come to this work?  
Do I feel that my vocation is truly right for me?  
What is my faith in the future?  
What do I believe about others?  
What am I willing to notice in my world?  
When have I experienced good listening?  
Am I willing to reclaim time to think?  
What is the relationship I want with the earth?  
What is my unique contribution to the whole?  
When have I experienced working for the common good?  
When have I experienced the sacred?*

### **Make Friends With Yourself**

Finally, consider making friends with yourself. Many of us have become our own worst enemy. We are taking on the needs of others and forgetting our own needs, running ourselves down again and again for what we have not done rather than what we have done.

Ask yourself, "Do I treat myself as well as I would treat a guest in my house?" The answer, sadly, for many of us, is "No." We are far more generous with others than we are with our own selves.

In North America (and I suspect elsewhere), we are obsessed with self-improvement strategies —

things to help us *be* better. I like what the Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron says. She says that "every act of self-improvement is an act of aggression towards the self." The basic idea of self-improvement, after all, is that once you improve, then you will be lovable.

For many of us, the practice of running ourselves down is like an overly-developed muscle. We do it so easily, we don't realize we have done it. Running ourselves down has become a way of life. The encouragement, in such cases, is to "lighten up." Instead of trying to change your habit of "self-injury," just notice it. Be curious about it without trying to change it into anything at all. Invite it in for tea.

### **Things You Can Do**

- ◆ Make a list of those things that bring you joy, those things you never seem to have time for anymore. Grant yourself permission to enjoy yourself. Lighten up. The suffering of others will be waiting for you when you return
- ◆ Read Pema Chodron's *The Wisdom of No Escape And The Path of Loving Kindness*. A most practical book for people in the helping profession.