



The Importance of Connection and Belonging

Social connection is critical for both our physical health and our mental and emotional well-being. Research shows that strong social connection leads to increased longevity, stronger immune systems, and faster disease recovery, as well as lower rates of anxiety and depression. Yet often people with disabilities are isolated and alone, lacking the connections and sense of belonging from which others derive multiple benefits.

In fact, people with disabilities experience loneliness, low perceived social support, and social isolation at significantly higher rates than people without disabilities. Those with disabilities often become separated from community not by choice, but due to lack of options. Physical barriers (e.g., building accessibility, transportation challenges, etc.) and social barriers (e.g., bullying, harassment, and micro aggressions, along with difficulty asking or knowing who to ask for help) can lead to imposed isolation.

Caregivers are also often excluded. They, too, need social supports for well-being, including good friends, understanding family members, support groups, and for many, a supportive faith community.

Researchers recommend connections with family and friends (e.g., phone call, Zoom, or face-to-face) on a daily or at least weekly basis. Similarly, to develop a sense of belonging, engagement in group activities once a week or at least once a month is suggested.

What is social connection? The subjective experience of feeling close to and a sense of belongingness with others. (Emma Seppala, Ph.D.)

A landmark study showed that lack of social connection is a greater detriment to health than smoking, obesity, and high blood pressure.

In fact, low social interaction is similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. The reverse is also true: close social ties are a protective factor regarding health. Social connections have been proven to improve the life and health of people with diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease, and mental illness.

40% of adults with a debilitating disability or chronic condition report feeling lonely or socially isolated.
50% of young adults with autism don't get phone calls or invitations.

The value of virtual connections: Many individuals with disabilities, along with their caregivers, are not able to attend events in person. This makes virtual opportunities for connection vital. Consider creating a virtual greeter role for welcoming virtual participants to services or other events.

Ways to build connection and belonging for individuals with disabilities and caregivers:

1. Personal invitations to connect.

Often, individuals with disabilities are left out of social gatherings. As one mother of a child with disabilities shared, “we are never invited anywhere for Passover.” Shabbat dinners, Passover Seders, and holiday celebrations are all opportunities to extend a personal invitation to those who may not receive many. If someone is homebound or your house cannot accommodate their needs, offer to bring the celebration to them. For those who are immunocompromised or have other limitations regarding in person contact, invite them to attend your celebration virtually. Additionally, inviting individuals with disabilities and their family members and/or caregivers to join you for in-person or virtual events, such as Shabbat services, is another way to connect.

2. Small groups that meet regularly over time.

Participation in small groups that meet regularly (e.g., havarot, book clubs, Hebrew classes, social groups) is one of the best ways for people to feel connected. Be sure to invite individuals with disabilities and caregivers to these groups and ensure they are accessible and welcoming to all.

3. Discovering and utilizing an individual’s skills and talents.

Feeling valued is an important aspect of belonging. Too often, we neglect to learn about the skills and talents of individuals with disabilities or capitalize on the ways they can contribute to our communities. Take the time to discover the talents of individuals with disabilities and then determine ways in which they can share those gifts with others.

4. Volunteer opportunities with accommodations.

Volunteering has been shown to have huge health benefits and creates a sense of connection and purpose. Feeling needed is one of the best ways to create a sense of belonging. Assess the various volunteer opportunities that are available in your organization (e.g., committees, chesed, mitzvah day, etc.) and make modifications to accommodate those with a variety of disabilities (e.g., physical disabilities, mental illness, chronic health conditions, learning disabilities, intellectual and developmental disabilities, etc.).

5. Support groups.

Individuals with disabilities and caregivers may benefit significantly from connecting with others with similar experiences. Consider possibilities for creating Jewish-centered support groups within your organization or across the broader Jewish community in your area.

Pirkei Avot 2:5 teaches, “Do not separate yourself from the community.”

Yet, some individuals with disabilities and their families are separated not by their own doing.

Let’s commit ourselves to bringing people into community and ensuring ALL members are connected.