

1 Building community builds mental health

A community is a healthier, happier, and safer place when people feel connected. Knowing that you are not isolated or alone, that there are people who share a similar situation as yours, makes you feel better about yourself and your community.

Connecting with others also leads to more people helping each other out in small ways as well as joining together to fix bigger problems. Starting out can be as simple as gathering to clean up the school yard or creating an event for neighbors to meet. Building community can also include ongoing efforts to end violence, fight discrimination, prevent hunger, and stop evictions. Large or small, any improvement in housing, jobs, schools, and the conditions to lead a dignified life allow people to worry less, and suffer fewer hardships.

Community organizing is mental health work

People may not think of organizing or participating in community activities as mental health promotion work. Yet all these efforts clearly support community mental health—they help people get to know their neighbors better, develop their abilities to change things for the better alongside others, and make the community a more enjoyable, fair, and safe place.

There are many ways to support and grow a stronger community, including:

- Find spaces in urban areas to create parks where children can play, adults and teens can relax and socialize, and groups can gather for tai chi or dancing, or to grow food in community gardens.
- Celebrate culture by holding events with food, music, dance, different types of art and artists, presentations and films, and spiritual practices or rituals.
- Invite and support young people to participate in music, the arts, and sports, and to have time outdoors and in nature.
- Reclaim and celebrate community history by marking or restoring sites with historical meaning, and involving elders to pass that history on to youth. Removing or replacing monuments symbolizing harmful or incomplete ways of telling history is sometimes a first step.

Back to the garden: Domestic workers care for each other

Joining together for mutual support is incredibly powerful. This is especially true for domestic workers because it's not easy to find one another. Domestic workers are nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers each working for one or two employers. Domestic workers are not properly appreciated despite so many in US society depending so much on them. The stressful work, low wages, and long hours make other parts of life difficult too. *Domestic Workers United* (DWU) in New York City was founded to push back against the invisibility and isolation of domestic work, and to help workers know their rights.

DWU members discuss shared challenges and organize to improve working conditions. They show how creating community heals and brings hope, directly improving everyone's mental health and showing the pride and beauty of Caribbean, Latinx, and African cultures.

DWU activities help domestic workers gain power and respect, but the shared sense of community is what helps people get through each day. Members connect over text and meet Saturdays at a local community garden under a giant willow tree to lift up, encourage, and support each other. When someone is facing a tough time, a member tells them: "Come back to the garden."

"Community is each of us and our families. It is our cultural networks, neighborhood networks, and ties to our home countries."

"Community is food: gathering where it's grown, handing out bags of fresh produce, and sharing herbs that heal and foods we prepare with flavors from the islands."

"Community is finding the artist within us, sharing stories, dancing, and joining public theater and writers' workshops. All ways of telling our truth to power."

"We are building a movement. Together, change is possible and feels good!"



Community connections build power—and mental health

Most of us are part of several communities. Where we live is the most common kind of community. We may or may not know our neighbors well, but we share neighborhood experiences such as breathing polluted air or feeling frustration when public officials do not respond to community needs. Busy streets that are dangerous to cross, fear that people we know will be harmed by violence, and lack of good public transportation to get where we need to go are other examples of problems we may share with neighbors.

Other kinds of communities include families who send their children to the same school, those attending the same place of worship, and your co-workers at your job. Many of us also feel part of communities that share an identity (for instance the same race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, health condition), similar values or beliefs (such as religious or political beliefs), or the same problems, interests, hobbies, or talents. While feelings of community connection are often stronger when we can get together in person, connecting online also allows us to create or join communities with others no matter where they live. All types of communities provide opportunities to meet more people, form friendships, and work together on common projects.



Community involvement is good for mental health. The feeling of belonging you get from connecting with others who share similar ideas, needs, or goals can make you feel joyful, safe, and relieved that you are not alone. It can also be a relief to learn how many of your experiences are shared by others.



We were upset that hateful graffiti directed at the Muslim community began appearing on walls in our town. We discussed how fear and hate come from people who don't know much about you. We looked at The Islamic Networks Group website for ideas on how to plan a "Know Your Neighbor" get-together. They had sample flyers and step-by-step instructions for a storytelling night, a tea party, and other ideas. We decided to hold a cook-off contest at the school featuring local restaurants that serve Halal food. The students all attended with their families, we played some group games and printed recipes to take home. There is something really basic about eating together that builds trust. It was a fun way to get people to mingle and to learn a little about our Muslim neighbors, their faith, and their food.

When you create community where it wasn't obvious "a community" existed—for example, when you begin working with people from different economic or cultural backgrounds because your kids go to school together—you help overcome what previously seemed to be unbridgeable differences or divisions. Learning about each other's struggles and achievements can help forge shared solidarity and common purpose. The world needs more of this, as does our mental health.

Ideas for bringing people together

Think about how to fully welcome those who will have the most difficulty participating.

- Is the gathering place easy to get to? Is there access for people with disabilities? Is safety an issue for people arriving alone?
- Does the timing work for family and work schedules?
- Will families with young children feel welcome?
- Will the activity work for people whose first language is not English?

Try gathering where people are already comfortable meeting (such as places of worship, schools, community centers, or senior centers). Although alcohol is often available at many celebrations (especially fundraisers), events without alcohol can be more supportive for people in recovery from alcohol or drug use (see page 97) or those whose traditions do not allow alcohol.

Health promoters create and sustain community

Latino Health Access (LHA) in Santa Ana, California, focuses on community participation as the best, most long-lasting way to make communities happier and healthier places. While acting on specific mental health issues, such as supporting people with grief and loss, adjusting to diabetes, overcoming older people's isolation, and creating supports for women facing domestic violence, LHA's activities bring people together to spark community change. This makes everyone feel better about where they live and get along better with their neighbors. Adapting the Latin American *promotor* model of community leaders reaching out and connecting individuals and groups who otherwise might not find each other, the LHA *promotor* becomes a person to turn to in a crisis.

LHA's *promotores* are community members helping other community members make things happen. *Promotores* organize the community for civic participation and political actions that can create or change policy. They organize the community, including young people, to rally for peace within homes and across neighborhoods, advocate for parks and safety, and create healthier environments for all families. *Promotores* help their neighbors access different services, programs, and systems to become more independent, yet the *promotores* always remain a constant, friendly part of people's lives. *Promotores* identify and befriend people who are isolated, advocate alongside them, and offer ongoing support for them and their families.



People in the community have learned to believe in the *promotores*. They see how they have consciously and successfully improved their own lives, so they gratefully accept their help as role models and teachers.

Green is life: Detroit urban farming and greenways

The fact is, people feel better in green space; they respect themselves more. People want to live in a place that has beauty and is healthy. Greening supports that from the ground up.



Our health, including our mental health, suffers in urban spaces without places for children to play, for sports, for families to enjoy time together, or for people to walk, bike, or use wheelchairs or strollers. Growing food in an empty lot, adding plants to a traffic median, and lobbying for bike paths are activities that bring people together twice: first, to pursue a common goal; and second, to encourage even more people to “harvest the fruit” of using the new space.

The Detroit, Michigan, non-profit, *The Greening of Detroit*, started in 1989 with one part-time volunteer. To date, 1,350 local residents have graduated from their workforce development programs, 30,000 youth have participated in year-round programs, and 150,000 trees have been planted. Growing the urban forest and creating skilled green jobs brings positive community change. Since 2016, *Keep Growing Detroit* envisions a city where the majority of fruits and vegetables consumed by Detroiters are grown by residents. By supporting beginner gardeners in becoming engaged community leaders and food entrepreneurs, they have created a network that provides urban growers with opportunities to sell the fruits and vegetables they grow at local markets.

Another organization, the *Detroit Greenways Coalition*, organized to make biking feel safe and attractive. In 2006, the city had only 6 miles of bike lanes. By 2023, there were more than 150 miles of bike lanes and marked shared lanes. Bike paths not only help people get exercise and reduce car pollution, they also get people outdoors. By encouraging cycling and walking, greenways connect people of different backgrounds and promote friendlier, more neighborly communities. Detroit’s bike paths have paved the way for regular events such as Thursday-night group rides and Monday-night Slow Rolls that attract hundreds of people of all ages, races, and class backgrounds.



It's not only healthy for people and the environment, but it also gets diverse people mingling in ways they wouldn't otherwise. When people are on foot or on bikes, they're meeting and engaging. That's important in this region. The more people meeting and mingling, the better.

Build support and solidarity

When a group of people facing similar problems comes together to identify the stresses and harms affecting their community, doing something about it is their logical next step.

- Making the harm go away or become less harmful can improve the well-being of group participants and neighbors right away.
- Achieving one change can open the door to other changes and inspire people to think about what might be possible.

Another benefit of taking on a community project is how people themselves change as they get involved in organizing. Even if they lose in the short-term, they win something in the long-term. They develop new relationships, new insights into their own power, and new ideas about what is possible and what is blocking their desired changes. Group action and community organizing build support and solidarity. People grow their strengths as individuals and power as a group by working together.



I'd like to think that I will be around to one day see the better world our struggles are trying to create, even though I know change doesn't happen overnight and we are up against deep and historical injustices. But I have a different thought as well: these are struggles that have to be fought. Not because we know we will win them, but because it is the right thing to do.

There is no question that these projects can take a great deal of effort and hard work. Working with others to make change is fulfilling, but long hours, setbacks, and a sense of too-slow progress is usually part of it as well. Often there are no shortcuts to things that take time. Staying in it for the long haul means reminding yourself that lifting up collective mental health ultimately will prevent—as well as repair—many problems people experience as individuals. And an affirming and positive process to get there is part of the cure.

Preventing violence: Start with a street corner

Sometimes a group has to challenge power structures and create alternatives to the way things are. Taking action by being present and strong together can challenge harmful policies and practices and at the same time model how problems affecting a community could be handled differently.

Mothers and Men Against Senseless Killings (MASK) started as a small group of volunteers in a Chicago neighborhood known for high levels of gang violence, police violence, and other problems. The group set out to break the cycle of violence by occupying a central street corner. They wanted a neighborhood where everyone, especially children, could be safe and could flourish.

They started with volunteers bringing chairs and sitting outdoors on the block every evening. The group also began to cook and hand out food to support neighbors, which also got more people to spend more time outside on the street and helped the adults to get to better know each other and connect with young people.

Building relationships with youth and a more constant presence on the street helped to calm problems that arose among young people. Neighbors could also watch out for police, protecting anyone the police might stop and harass.

Looking back after years of work, we could pinpoint how change occurred. People began to notice neighbors were watching out for each other, and that was contagious. Now this method of injecting good vibes into troubled areas is catching on in more communities.



MASK has had setbacks along the way—some of their members were lost to the gun violence they work to eradicate. Rather than giving up, they expanded to meet more needs, setting up counseling and guidance for community members. They provide a listening ear for people who need it. And to try to address some of the deeper causes of violence, MASK connects neighbors, especially youth, to city services, educational opportunities, economic support, and professional skills training.

Getting to the roots of problems to improve community mental health

When people right in front of us are showing distress or having a mental health problem, of course we want to help them right away. We focus on them, what they are going through, and what might help them feel better. Some mental health professionals (including social workers, nurses, counselors, religious leaders, and others) skillfully do that time and time again. They help a succession of people heal.

To improve community mental health, we need to make sure people get the person-to-person help they need, and we need to identify and change the conditions that create and worsen mental health challenges for entire groups of people. These conditions may be social, economic, or political, and many started long ago. These deep and ongoing sources of stress and hardship also make it more difficult to recover from hard times, such as a death in the family, a relationship ending, or losing a job or a home.



In our work supporting the health of Native Americans, we ask if the person or their parent went through the trauma of being sent to boarding school, a US policy for decades. The resulting loss of cultural ties, forced family separation, and unresolved grief may still impact the mental health of a Native survivor or their child today.

By helping people identify and work to change these underlying conditions, as well as build skills to cope with stresses, community mental health work can strengthen an individual's ability to withstand the impact of the disappointments and even tragedies that happen in life. Community mental health efforts can also strengthen, support, and sustain groups of people when such events disrupt a neighborhood or community.

ACTIVITY But why?

Finding the root causes of mental and physical health problems means looking at the different parts of our lives and the systems that contribute to those problems. The “But why?” discussion technique helps us look deeper and shows how problems, and their eventual solutions, are usually not caused by individual decisions but by larger social issues. Raising awareness of how these affect us can help us organize effective action for change and build resilience in individuals and communities. “But why?” also helps us sift through complex situations to identify smaller parts that are more easily changed.

You can use “But why?” to discuss a specific problem or situation, or you can make up a story that reflects the conditions in your community.

1. Start by describing the situation and asking the group to share their ideas about why it happened. After each answer, ask “But why?” to explore more underlying causes for as long as people keep thinking of reasons.

Our fifth graders are acting out after school. Neighbors say they are “bad kids” and have called the police on them. But why are they getting into trouble?

They don’t have a safe place to go after school.

Why don’t they have a safe place?

The school playground is locked at 3pm. There are no parks nearby.

But why is it locked?

Budget cuts. Positions haven’t been filled.

But why can’t the kids go home?

At home they would need supervision too, and we work.

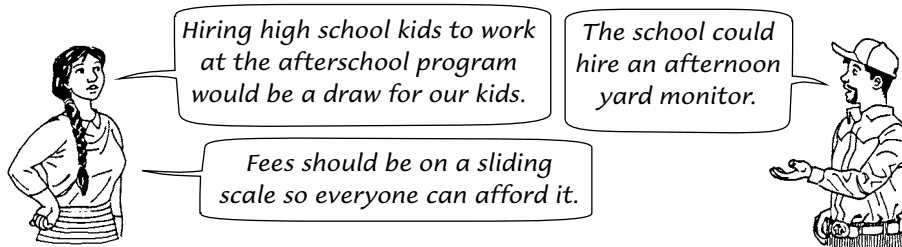
But why aren’t they in the afterschool program?

They think it’s boring, only for younger kids. Also, not everyone can pay.

ACTIVITY **But why?** *continued*

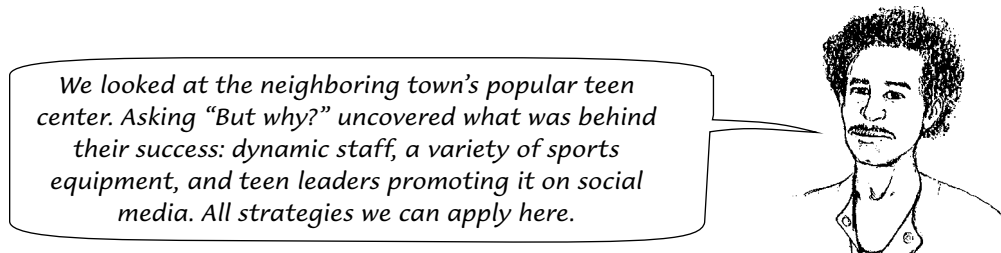
2. Ask the group to reflect on the many underlying causes they found. Talking about all the causes of a problem can help the group decide which causes are the most important, which causes can change, what are possible solutions and who—both inside and outside the group—can work for those changes.

3. Then ask: What actions can address the causes of the problems?



4. To conclude, help the group come to agreements on which action or actions they will start with, and develop a clear plan for next steps.

This “But why?” technique is also good for looking at successes. It can help you think more deeply about what went well and why, and what that might tell you about planning next steps for the group or working on other problems.



Activism, policies, and programs responding to community issues can prevent as well as cure some of the causes of mental health problems. This is the big picture that is sometimes forgotten or overwhelmed in the face of individual mental health needs. Skill-building to prepare us to support people (including ourselves) going through a hard time will improve our effectiveness in meeting our community’s needs and working for change. Recognizing the signs of mental health challenges, paying attention to how we interact with others, and developing listening and de-escalation skills are among the topics examined more deeply in the following 3 chapters.