

The Importance of Community

Communities are helpful to join or create because they provide support to the individuals who are impacted by the daily stress, struggles and chaos of modern life. Consider the five questions that I noted as you determine what type of community you are looking to build or join.

By

Harper Spero

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Suburban residential street with red brick houses

Throughout high school, college and after college, many of us are on a mission to have the highest number of friends possible. For some reason, we think it's quantity over quality. We're certain that we'll be cooler, happier and more popular based on a higher number - especially when social media comes into play. 'How many Facebook friends do you have?' 'How many Instagram followers do you have?' people ask one another. Let's be honest here, 1/3 of your Facebook friends are people that you met once at a party in college or through a friend and would never connect with again (let alone say hi to them if you saw them on the street!) At one point in time it seemed cool to increase your number of Facebook friends.

As we get older, we recognize the importance of having friends who are authentic and genuine - people who love, respect and support us. Most of us are happier with a handful of best friends who we can truly rely on compared to 25 friends who don't really mean as much to us.

As I started my business in 2014, I had been in touch with nine different girlfriends over a period of a few weeks. We were trying to make dinner plans. I decided instead of trying to make nine different dinner plans to host a potluck at my apartment. I asked everyone to bring a favorite dish and whatever they wanted to drink. Everyone was extremely excited and open to this idea. The majority of the ladies had never met before and knew

Each woman arrived with homemade food, a bottle of wine and seemingly everyone had a Whole Foods Market bag in tow. Once everyone settled in, we dug into the delicious assortment of food and chatted about our lives - work, friendships, relationships, family, interests and more. At times, everyone was listening to one person speak. In other moments, there were several one-on-one conversations taking place. I had a few moments of observing and acknowledging that I had put this great group of ladies together and that they seemed to really be enjoying themselves.

The following day, my friend Alyson Valpone said, "Our beautiful vulnerabilities are expressed not only through stories of our successes and struggles but also through the food we consciously or sub-consciously chose to bring that evening: A first-attempt homemade Raw Food recipe; The latest 'fad' condiments; a dish with a personal story just as pure as the ingredients. We come into the evening not knowing how our stories

or our dishes will be received by the group but we end up leaving feeling nourished and delighted by both what we've heard and what we ate."

Shortly after this potluck, I realized how important a sense of community was in my life. This group consisted of both women who were business owners in similar industries as well as others who work in completely different sectors. Each of us share a personal connection to health, wellness, personal development, music and travel.

I was also seeking a group of women who would support, motivate, push and drive me in the direction of making my career as successful, inspiring and motivating as possible. And of course, I wanted them to feel the same about me and other members of the group. I wanted to know I could reach out to them with a business idea and not feel stupid about it if it wasn't the best.

My friend Laura Fisher also shared her thoughts on the group, "Connecting with a community of like-minded women has added a new dimension to my life. I had been feeling like my social life, my spiritual life, and my business life were 3 separate worlds, and suddenly I have a community where I can flow easily in and out of all 3 of those areas and feel understood. Our dinner conversations jump from floating a new business idea to how to kindly dump a guy that we are no longer interested in seeing - and no matter what we are talking about, the lack of judgement that is present is something that I really haven't experienced before, even with some of my dearest friends."

We just had our fourth potluck - we've rotated the location of the potluck from one apartment to another, from Chelsea to Bushwick to Harlem and often have themes or topics of discussion. During the second potluck, several of the ladies recognized that the topics we were discussing were things that they never discussed with their best friends of 10+ years. They brought up things they didn't know other people thought about and even more so, spoke about. Instead of sharing new year's resolutions, we shared three things we wanted to feel this year.

It was quite powerful.

As my intentions in creating a community of like-minded thinkers became more clear, I began to conceptualize exactly what I wanted to achieve.

Here are five questions that I considered in terms of creating or joining a community:

1. What are your values and what values do you want to be aligned within the community?
2. What is the purpose and goal of creating or joining a community?
3. How often do you want to engage with your community (ex: daily, weekly, monthly, etc.)?
4. How do you want to structure your community (ex: private Facebook group, Meetup, Google group, in-person meeting, dinner party etc.)?
5. What do you have to offer the group and what do you want to receive? How can you share and collaborate?

With these questions answered, a plunge in creating or joining a community can become a reality. It's important to feel a commonality between yourself and the other members of your community. It can help you grow and expand your business and/or career goals,

make new friends, get turned on to new hobbies and interests and more. There's no requirement to having too little or too many people in your group, it can be as big or small as you'd like.

On top of my monthly potluck, I'm part of a group of young active New Yorkers who meditate and meet once a month. I'm also in several private Facebook groups - people that I completed my coaching training with, people with my immune deficiency and people with chronic illnesses. Each of these groups and their dynamics are extremely different, serve distinct purposes and are beneficial to me and the other members in their own way.

Communities are helpful to join or create because they provide support to the individuals who are impacted by the daily stress, struggles and chaos of modern life. Consider the five questions that I noted as you determine what type of community you are looking to build or join. Going in with a clear intention allows you to garner exactly what it is that you want to gain from having a group of people that you can trust and rely on.

Create a Sense of Belonging

Finding ways to belong can help ease the pain of loneliness.

Posted Mar 24, 2014 psychology Today

[Karyn Hall Ph.D.](#)

Having a sense of belonging is a common experience. Belonging means acceptance as a member or part. Such a simple word for huge concept. A sense of belonging is a human need, just like the need for food and shelter. Feeling that you belong is most important in seeing value in life and in coping with intensely painful emotions. Some find belonging in a church, some with friends, some with family, and some on Twitter or other social media. Some see themselves as connected only to one or two people. Others believe and feel a connection to all people the world over, to humanity. Some struggle to find a sense of belonging and their [loneliness](#) is physically painful for them.

Some seek belonging through excluding others. That reflects the idea that there must be those who don't belong in order for there to be those who do. Yet a single instance of being excluded can undermine [self-control](#) and well being and often creates pain and conflict.

A sense of belonging to a greater community improves your [motivation](#), health, and [happiness](#). When you see your connection to others, you know that all

people struggle and have difficult times. You are not alone. There is comfort in that knowledge.

Building a Sense of Belonging

To build a sense of belonging requires active effort and practice. One way to work on increasing your sense of belonging is to look for ways you are similar with others instead of focusing on ways you are different. Someone is much older than you? Maybe they have wonderful stories to tell and you love to listen to their experiences. Maybe you value making a difference and can contribute to their lives with your youthful strength. Someone has a different [belief](#) system than you? Maybe you both enjoy a good debate or you both value faith in God. Sharing your differences and still accepting the person creates peace. Acceptance does not mean agreement.

Another way to build your own sense of belonging is to work on acceptance of others. To accept others and views that are not the same as yours may require that you open your thoughts to the idea that there is value in everyone's thinking. You can find truth in even the most difficult-to-understand even though you may not agree. One of the best ways to communicate acceptance is through validation. Validation builds a sense of belonging and strengthens relationships. Validation is the language of acceptance. Validation is the acknowledgment that someone's internal experience is understandable and helps you stay on the same side, with a sense of belonging, even when you disagree.

Try saying yes to opportunities to be with others and then throw yourself in to whatever the activity is. Let go of your judgments. Judgments build walls. Focus on people. At a dinner and annoyed because you don't like the food? The food is not the goal. Connecting with others is far more important than the food or the noise in the restaurant. Gained weight and don't want others to see? Stop isolating until you believe you are worthy. No one is perfect. Others have their struggles with their health too.

Watch your words and your way of thinking. Some words create separateness and others promote togetherness. Other people don't need "fixing." They have strengths and offer their own unique contributions. Think community and acceptance.

If you are emotionally sensitive, remember that in general people suffer the same emotional pain you suffer, just not as intensely (most of the time) or as quickly. Also, there are many other emotionally sensitive people who struggle as you do. Being emotionally sensitive does not mean you don't belong. Work on not blaming yourself or others.

Attributional Retraining

Dr. Gregory Walton developed a belonging intervention he called Attributional Retraining. Through this intervention, people shift from blaming themselves for painful experiences, such as "I'm flawed," or "It's just me," to seeing that they weren't alone and that other people had experienced the same situations.

The technique is brief. It involves you seeing yourself as an expert on what you have experienced and writing about that experience to help someone else. Here is a [video](#) on how the techniques works for college students. The key is to write suggestions for other people on how to cope with something you have experienced.

If you are not a college student, the issues in the video may not seem relevant. But consider how you would use the technique. For example, what two points would you offer to others about coping with intense emotions or [rejection sensitivity](#)? Your experiences can make a difference for others who also have intense emotions.

What Is Community, and Why Is It Important?

In 2005, the Center asked several people whose work involves community building this simple question, and got some not-so-simple answers.

Riché C. Zamor, Executive Director, Professional Services Division Latin American Health Institute, Boston, Massachusetts

To me a community is a group of individuals connected to each other by one or more attribute(s). The element that links them together is at the core, and is the essence of the group. Just as denoted by the root and the suffix of the word (common-unity), a certain segment of the population is united by a familiar thread. In the field of Public Health, we see community as a group of folks that are at risk of being infected or affected by certain types of diseases based on their demographic, social, and economic status. A community is a familiar thread used to bring people together to advocate and support each other in the fight to overcome those threats. As human beings, we need a sense of belonging, and that sense of belonging is what connects us to the many relationships we develop. Communities are also rich in resources, that is where their collective aspect comes into play. We are all members of many communities (family, work,

neighborhood, etc.), and we constantly move in and out of them, depending on the situation. Community is where we find comfort in difficult times. When things are not going well in one community, we have the option to move to another. For me, the community is where one finds the balance between physical and mental fitness.

Sarah Michelson, Teen Intern with The Food Project Current Program Involvement: Building Local Agricultural Systems Today (BLAST)

Most people in today's world rely on a community for practical purposes. The necessities of life rarely come from one's own hands, but rather from a complicated "web of mutuality," as Martin Luther King, Jr. once phrased it. While most people need to be part of a community for life's necessities, most people want to be part of a community because there is something indescribably lovely about being a part of a group of people who share something more substantial than geographical location. . . something they feel passionately about. Something that, when shared, makes individuals seem less lonely. A community is a safe place.

But there is something potentially dangerous about communities. A community that is safe, comfortable, and trusting can be so enticing that individuals can forget about the world outside of their community, or regard other communities with subtle prejudices.

I am a member of the Sudbury community, an affluent suburb of Boston. While I work to give back to my community, I also need to spend some time away from Sudbury, to know what life is like in Bolivia, in the American South, or in Roxbury, the inner city neighborhood where the Food Project does a lot of its work. I need to go to these places to remind myself that this way of life I am used to is not the only way or the best way. I need to be reminded that, while I give to my community, other communities are no less deserving. I need to be reminded that when I form a connection with someone based on common experience, it is not because that someone is from Sudbury. It is because we are both human beings, and I am part of a global community.

Alan O'Hare, Schenachie (Celtic Storyteller) and Director Life Story Theatre

In the silence of an early morning walk recently, the crystal song of a scarlet red cardinal atop an oak tree awakened me more fully. As I stood listening to him and his mate in a nearby tree serenading each other, a couple walking their dog joined me. Without speaking a word, it was clear we were enchanted by the gift of their song, and we joined together briefly in a community of celebration for the gifts of Nature.

The new light, the morning hymn, and the momentary connection with other travelers evoked images from other communities. Each of these whether for learning, work, healing, prayer, or friendship creates for us a safe experience of belonging, purpose, and shared values. In them, each of us encounters who we are and what our gifts are.

In the Sufi tradition, it is taught that the primary purpose of life is to awaken to the essence of who we are. Once we do so, we are invited to lovingly embrace this realization. The gift of

community is that it offers each of us the fire of affirmation and support to achieve this. . . even on those days when we feel no fire.

But at that time we can recall the words of Thich Nhat Hanh: “I ask all of you to hold up your hands and tell me the truth. Do you believe, as I do, that someone in our hamlet is keeping the fire alive?”

Frances Moore Lappé, Author of *You Have the Power: Choosing Courage in a Culture of Fear and Democracy's Edge*

Community — meaning for me “nurturing human connection” — is our survival. We humans wither outside of community. It isn't a luxury, a nice thing; community is essential to our well being.

Inclusion in the social life of society is community's foundation. By inclusion I mean universal access to entry, starting with legal protections against exclusion — racial discrimination, for example — but going far, far beyond. Inclusion means access to jobs with fair pay, decent shelter, effective schools, and reliable health care. If you deprive “a man of a job or an income,” said Martin Luther King, Jr., “you are in substance saying to that man that he has no right to exist...it is murder, psychologically...”

Yet today the ethic in ascendance is exclusion. We have allowed the government to let the minimum wage lose a quarter of its value in thirty years. One out of every five jobs in the U.S. will not lift a family of four out of poverty. And we've allowed health care to become unattainable by so many that America now ranks 42nd among the world's nations in infant survival.

This profoundly disturbing assault on community calls us to accept an irony: We must risk exclusion — alienating or at least disturbing others — to become advocates for inclusion in community. That may mean speaking our minds even if doing so triggers discomfort in others, reaching out to those excluded even when it feels awkward, engaging in visible civic public action such as a vigil or door-to-door education even where we risk angry rejection.

Appreciating that community is essential to human well being calls us to a particular kind of courage: walking with our fear of exclusion in order to stand up for inclusion.

Lisa R. Fortuna, MD, MPH, Staff Psychiatrist, Cambridge Health Alliance, Center for Multicultural Mental Health Research, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Community is about growing with others. I grew up surrounded by a culturally rich and loving community which has shaped my identity and pride as a black Latina woman. I have been blessed to be around young people and families ever engaged in improving the vitality of their community. Now, thirty five years into my life, I am a child and adolescent psychiatrist. Everyday, I get to meet with young people. I have the opportunity to be there in their lives during some of their most difficult and distressing moments. Because of who these young people are,

and because of the love I have received, I strive to be the best physician I can be and to serve those who need me most.

In the process, my spirituality has been a central stabilizing and informing force in my life, one that has been very personal, very quiet and that has nevertheless guided every one of my life choices. This interface between community, medicine, and personal faith started with an early and long-standing fascination with the world around me. My mind was ignited by a love of science and medicine, and reliant on the power of community and deep respect and appreciation for healing. This attitude towards the world was inspired by my grandmother my mother, and the elders around me who took the time to care. This is what community is about... taking care of each other.

Shirley Suet-ling Tang, Assistant Professor, Asian-American Studies & American Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston (UMASS)

I accepted the invitation to write for the BRC newsletter as a way to reflect briefly upon my own questions about community-building after twelve years of teaching and developing Asian American Studies in both university and street settings with students from urban immigrant/refugee communities. I was first drawn to Asian American Studies, and ethnic studies in general, because of its revolutionary commitments to community-building, justice-centered education, and hands-on, practical work. I have always felt that the best places to learn/teach are not behind the closed doors of an ivory tower but where people are experiencing marginalization and exclusion from decision-making power and resource-rich opportunities.

Several years ago, that was all theory. After I listened carefully to how young people and their families experienced problems first-hand and after I realized that they had always been at the forefront in fighting for a just and healthy community for all, I had begun to see things from their perspective and apply myself to keeping their—our—dreams alive. Since I started working at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, I have become a U.S. resident, and like many of the students and community members that I work with, I also found my life becoming more and more tied to the political and social situation of immigrant communities/communities of color in U.S. society.

So, why is community important? Because community saves us from the isolation and alienation we fear. Because in the real world people have no choice. Because community is about finding each other and a place we can call home. But we are also compelled to build community not only because we are survivors in an existing world order but because we bring differences to a society that erases our differences. By dealing with differences we confront the question of the social and economic foundations of our society. By building community we put some order in the fragmented world.