

Making Connections Core Values

During the course of Making Connections, several values emerged through the hard work and success of the local coalitions. These included a focus on culture as a lens and asset; focusing on community conditions to understand mental health and wellbeing and reduce stigma; shoulder to shoulder action; the importance of coalitions defining their own communities; and the Pillars of Wellbeing.

Culture as a lens and asset

Instead of one-size-fits-all strategies, Making Connections coalitions focus on their community's unique culture as a strength upon which collective mental wellbeing is grown. Cultural practices and traditions provide unifying experiences that underpin connectedness and wellbeing. Some of the cultural groups that make up Making Connections coalitions include young men of color, military service members, multi-generational groups, and indigenous communities. Culture adds a necessary perspective to the initiative through their specific assessing, convening, planning, strategizing, and evaluating efforts. Culture is also an asset, a means of creating buy-in and fellowship within the community which frames lived experience as a gift rather than an afterthought.

Culture

Culture refers to the learned and shared behaviors and interactions of a particular group of people, rooted in things like shared history, common values, language, religion, and time-tested traditions. Cultural characteristics play a major role in promoting health and wellbeing.

Focusing on community conditions to understand mental health and wellbeing and reduce stigma

Focusing on the ways in which community conditions can shape or harm mental health and wellbeing, the 'blame' for experiencing mental health problems shifts away from the individual. Making Connections groups find it's helpful for folks to understand the impact of external community conditions on wellbeing and to realize that individuals are not solely responsible for those conditions. Framing mental health in the context of community conditions helps reduce stigma in communities where mental health challenges might be stigmatized; where communities have faced historical and ongoing trauma due to intentional policies and practices such as slavery and genocide; and where people might face barriers to seeking help.

Shoulder-to-shoulder coalition action

Community members can sometimes feel more comfortable and motivated supporting their peers than they do asking for support. Shoulder-to-shoulder activities rely on peers identifying solutions together – and by working together to improve their community, they can also experience improved wellbeing. These strategies enhance a sense of agency while shifting power and strengthening connections.

Coalitions define their own community

When different sectors come together, such as community organizations and local public health departments, it's important to have a shared understanding of who their efforts will impact. Place-based initiatives usually focus on communities or neighborhoods defined by geographic boundaries. But *community* can also refer to a group with shared identities, such as immigrants and refugees, or veterans and military service members. Initiatives like Making Connections benefit from coalitions defining their population of focus so that strategies can benefit those who have been negatively impacted by inequitable programs, policies, and systems. This is strengthened when community members can define and find strength in their own connections and shared identity.

The Pillars of Wellbeing

Values like *belonging and connectedness, safety, trust, dignity, hope/aspiration, and control of destiny/self-determination* make it possible for people and for communities to flourish emotionally. These values are listed in the order that they were experienced in the Making Connection local communities. Understanding these “Pillars of Wellbeing” can also strengthen community conditions by helping us look beneath any one intervention to understand its impact on people's lives. For example, access to safe, stable housing not only protects mental health and wellbeing in ways related to life stability but can also foster a sense of dignity and belonging.