WELLNESS & COUNSELING

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

BELONGING

Humans have an emotional need to affiliate with and be accepted by members of a group. This could be a group of relatives, peers at school, co-workers, a religious group, athletic team, or any other cohesive cluster of folks with something in common. Wanting to belong is more than simply being acquainted with these people. Belongingness is centered on **needing to feel their acceptance and support**, and **wanting to give it back** to other members of the group.

> A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to be loved and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to.
>
> **– BRENE BROWN**

THE BENEFITS OF CONNECTION

To belong is to know that **we matter**. Social relationships help give our lives meaning and **connect us to something larger** than ourselves. The benefits of feeling this connection are well documented. Research has shown that bonds with other people can become a source of **happiness** and act as a protective factor against depression. Supportive social networks also **buffer us against stress**. Belonging is known to positively affect motivation and academic achievement in students of all ages. Some studies have found that **attachment** to one's co-workers is even a better motivator than money.

PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER

As human beings we have a natural propensity to seek "something greater" that coheres us. Whether it be connection to one's ancestors, nature and Mother Earth, humankind, God, or the cosmos, there is something comforting and protective about the intuitive feeling that you're being held within a greater whole. In this way, belonging makes us feel safe and offers us peace of mind. Belongingness can also lead us to understanding our place in the world. At Ursinus, we can use the four questions as a jumping-off point for cultivating belongingness. Thinking about ourselves both as individuals and as part of a larger community can guide us to discover what we truly value and how to live accordingly.

> The really wonderful thing that happened to me when I was in space was this feeling of belonging to the entire universe.
>
> - MAE JEMISON

CONNECTING TO YOUR COMMUNITY

Students who are seeking connection, have a desire to give back, or want to integrate belongingness into their everyday lives can start by getting involved with a group on campus that sparks their interest. Community spaces like the Institute for Inclusion and Equity, Religious and Spiritual Life, Prevention and Advocacy, UCARE, and Student Activities are great places to start! For those who want to cultivate healthy relationships but feel they have some internal work to do first, try these journal prompts to better understand what you might be looking for.

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Studies show that belongingness and strong social connections are essential for building communities that can adapt and persist through difficult or changing circumstances. A group's ability to withstand and "bounce back" from a crisis is known as community resilience. Building this resilience should be treated as an ongoing and intentional process, rather than an end goal. Drawing from the current research as well as the wisdom of activists, six foundations for building community resilience can be identified:

People--The power to envision the future of the community and build its resilience resides with community members. That's you! Our individual voices and unique experiences are important in thinking about who we are as whole.

Systems thinking--Systems thinking is essential for understanding the complex, interrelated crises that are continuously unfolding in our society. Understanding broad problems gives clarity and context to what those issues mean for our similarly complex communities.

Adaptability--A community that adapts to change is resilient. Because communities and the challenges they face are dynamic, adaptation is an ongoing process.

Transformability--Some challenges are so big that it's not possible for the community to simply adapt; fundamental, transformative changes may be necessary. A resilient community can recognize this and work with it rather than resist it.

Sustainability--Community resilience is not sustainable if it serves only us, and only now; it needs to work for other communities, future generations, and the ecosystems on which we all depend.

Courage--As individuals and as a community, we need courage to confront our most challenging issues and take responsibility for our collective future.

Source: resilience.org

" There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about. -MARGARET J. WHEATLEY

WHY BELONGING MATTERS IN THE CLASSROOM

By the time we get to college, we've spent a huge portion of our lives in a school setting. Our classmates, teachers, and educational environment form the community where we spend most of our time. The term school belonging refers to the extent to which students feel personally respected, accepted, supported, and included by others in a school setting. How connected we feel to this community is consistently associated with motivation, identity formation, mental and physical health, engagement, psychological adjustment, and academic outcomes such as drop out rates, absence, and academic performance. (1)

What kinds of things make us feel like we belong at our school? Many studies underscore the importance of a learning environment that feels welcoming and inclusive. Policies and practices that value diversity and social inclusivity help to show all students that they belong. A school whose actions emphasize the importance of community can create a culture where belonging is the norm.

Students of all ages follow the examples of leaders, whether they be instructors, coaches, administrators, or peers. The leaders they read about and study in class are important, too! Making sure that students have diverse role models to look up to has an impact on how they will define what is attainable as they grow.

Fostering positive connections between students and school staff is also helpful and shows students that adults are in their corner. Our peer groups can foster belonging as well. Student-led activities and interest groups allow us to find our place within the larger community. If there isn't a niche for a student to fit into, they should be supported and encouraged to create one!

" I long, as does every human being, to be at home wherever I find myself. - MAYA ANGELOU

" The opposite of belonging is fitting in.
- B R E N E   B R O W N

BELONGING TO YOURSELF: RADICAL SELF-ACCEPTANCE

We feel ourselves yearning for **love and acceptance**, but from whom? As social creatures, we may default into thinking that belongingness can only come from outside and therefore **must be given to us**, but this assumption is worth dissecting. While it is true that humans depend on each other to meet various emotional needs, there is **an inward component to belongingness** that cannot be overlooked.

The fears or consequences associated with not meeting our primal need for connection might lead us to look for belonging wherever we think we can get it, including spaces where we feel we must hide parts of ourselves to be accepted. **Healthy belonging should feel inclusive, not exclusive.** If we can't show up as we are without risking ostracization, we may armor ourselves to avoid being hurt. We might hide and suppress our true feelings, dissociate, or develop other coping mechanisms. The catch is that **inauthentic connections** with others will not satisfy the need to belong or fill the void of loneliness. As Brene Brown explains, "the truth is: **belonging starts with self-acceptance**. Your level of belonging, in fact, can never be greater than your level

of self-acceptance, because **believing that you are enough** is what gives you the courage to be authentic, vulnerable, and imperfect."

Self-acceptance is hard work! To practice, try journaling, mindfulness exercises, or meditations that help you tune in to your internal voice.

- Recite **self-validation** phrases like, "I am worthy", "I belong", "I am enough", "I am exactly where I need to be", and "I am good".
- Listen to this ten minute meditation on loving kindness.
- In moments when you notice yourself seeking external validation, pause to ask yourself why. "What about this situation is making me feel like I need to change myself?"

Accepting each other and ourselves when we dare to show up **imperfectly and authentically** models to others in our community that it is safe for them to do the same. Through radical self-belonging, we can show others **that they belong, too**.