

THE PATH AHEAD

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CREATING CONNECTIONS EDITION

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tmg[®]
Let's clear the path ahead.

BUILDING HEALTHY CONNECTIONS



The Importance of Connection

Feeling connected to your family, friends, and community is one of the most joyful things a person can experience. Connections with others and the sense of belonging make people feel happier and healthier.

Sometimes it can be hard to find those meaningful connections. Carleigh Olson, the Coalition Manager for the Wisconsin Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness, says that many people struggle to connect with others. As a result, they may experience social isolation, which means they aren't spending as much time in their community or with other people as they would like.

There are many factors that can play a role in how much contact we have with others. Research has found that certain things increase the likelihood of social isolation, including having a disability, being an older adult, being part of a minority group, not having access to transportation, or living alone. Social distancing during the pandemic also played a role in feelings of loneliness and being disconnected.

When people experience loneliness for a long time, it can cause other health problems. Studies have found that people with disabilities and older adults who experience social isolation have a greater risk of illnesses such as dementia, heart disease, stroke, increased blood pressure and depression.

“There are different things that put you at risk for having social isolation or loneliness,” says Carleigh.

“However, what’s important is that having a disability or being older doesn’t mean you will automatically be lonely.”

The good news is there are many ways that you can begin to develop connections with others and be a part of your community!

Making Connections and Finding Friends

There are many ways to build connections in and with your community. If you're ready to be more social but aren't sure where to start, talk to your TMG IRIS Consultant to identify some next steps. Think about the things you enjoy doing, your hobbies, and your interests. Explore classes, clubs or groups in your community or online that you might be interested in joining. You can also meet new people by working or volunteering in your community.

Carleigh says that while everyone needs to socialize a bit, there is no "right" amount of how often you should be out in your community or with friends. You get to choose the amount of socializing that feels good to you.

Connecting with other people who have shared interests can lead to great friendships. If you met someone in your community – perhaps at work or a club you both attend – start by simply talking to them. Asking questions about them is how friendships begin to happen naturally.

You might ask your coworker who likes art if they want to go to the museum with you. Perhaps you can invite your neighbor for coffee or remember to say "hello" to the people who matter to you.

"One really simple way to feel less lonely is to reach out to people you haven't heard from in a while," says Carleigh. "I think there's a lot of power in seeing a text from somebody you haven't talked to in a little bit, and they're asking how you're doing."

So don't be afraid to share yourself with the world. You might make some wonderful connections when you do!

Dealing with Loneliness

If you are experiencing loneliness, one of the first steps in dealing with this is to know it's ok to ask for help. Letting people know that you'd like to make new or stronger connections might feel uncomfortable at first, but almost everyone has experienced loneliness at some point. Sharing how you feel can be a powerful way to connect with others. "There can be shame about being lonely, and sometimes people feel embarrassed to talk about it," says Carleigh. "However, know you're not alone in that feeling." If your loneliness has caused you to become depressed or has created other health issues, your doctor or mental health professional can help you. And if you need immediate help, call or text 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline to talk with a crisis counselor 24/7.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: BEING A GOOD FRIEND

Being involved in your community and making friends is apart of living a meaningful life. But sometimes, it's hard to know how to do that. Here are a few ways people who partner with TMG get involved in their communities and build good friendships.



Melissa Rademacher

For Melissa, staying connected with friends helps her to live a happy life. One of the ways she does this is through her two jobs. Melissa says she enjoys going to work

because she gets to see her friends there, especially her special friend, Jesse. There's always a lot of fun and laughter on the job.

When she's not at work, she keeps up with friends on social media and by calling them. She and Jesse also FaceTime with each other twice a week. Melissa knows that sometimes her friends are busy with other things, but she's learned to be patient. She understands that even if she can't immediately connect with her friends, they still care for her and will make time for her as soon as they can.

Melissa's Words of Wisdom: "Be patient, and don't give up. Find ways to reach out because it's worth it. Having friends makes me happy, and life is better when someone is happy!"



Ashley Mathy

Ashley knows that being positive and trying new things can help make life more fulfilling. Her self-advocacy, public speaking and work on different disability rights boards have been a great way for her to get out into the community and connect with different people.

A natural social butterfly, Ashley is always open to making new friends. Thankfully, she says there are a lot of ways to meet them. She's met friends through work, through friends of friends and even online. Even though making friends can be challenging, she says it's worth it when she meets a great new person. Ashley says that when she connects with friends and is involved in community events, she feels whole.

Ashley's Words of Wisdom: "Not all attempts to find friends work, and it's easy to become sad and give up. But once I work through the disappointment, I try other approaches to finding friends. Don't give up. You will find someone who appreciates you and everything you offer in this world!"



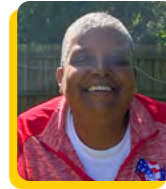
Jake Casper

Finding your team can be a game changer! Jake used his joy of bowling to be more involved in his community, leading to some great adventures. He

not only met new people who shared his love of the game, but he also became pretty good at bowling. In 2000, he became involved with Special Olympics, and in 2022, he earned a spot on Team Wisconsin's bowling team. This allowed him to compete in the 2022 Special Olympics USA Games, which were held last summer in Orlando, Florida.

Jake had some wonderful teammates, particularly his dad, Ken, who was his Unified Partner (a person without a disability who partners with Special Olympians). Together with their two other teammates, they took home the silver medal in the Unified Team Bowling division. Staying involved with bowling, the Lion's Club, going to church and connecting with people online has helped Jake make new friends and live a full life.

Jake's Words of Wisdom: "I participate in many groups. [I encourage people to] join some clubs to try and make some new friends!"



Cindy Bentley

Cindy loves being active in her community. She is the Executive Director of People First Wisconsin and enjoys spending time with her friends while they're out

and about. Cindy has made friends through People First and the other groups she partners with, including Life Navigators, Special Olympics and her church.

With the need for social distancing during the pandemic, she couldn't visit with her friends or caregiver. To feel less lonely, Cindy let her friends know she was there for them. She sent out People First's weekly newsletter to members and connected with friends over Zoom. Cindy took the time to reach out to friends, especially if she knew they were having a bad day. She also encouraged her friends to see mental health professionals when they were dealing with bigger struggles. Cindy found that she didn't feel so alone by being a good friend.

Cindy's Words of Wisdom: "It is important to show up and be there for others. When my friends show up for me, I feel loved."



RESOURCES FOR DEALING WITH SOCIAL ISOLATION & LONELINESS



The below resources can help you with feelings of loneliness, find the supports you need to be in your community more often, and connect with others looking for friends.

Wisconsin Coalition to End Social Isolation & Loneliness — The Wisconsin Coalition to End Social Isolation & Loneliness (WCESIL) is raising awareness about loneliness as a public health issue. They advocate for public policies to help remove barriers that can cause social isolation. The organization is looking for individuals interested in the opportunity to join a workgroup or those who would like to stay informed about coalition activities and advocacy.

Learn more: wihealthyaging.org/initiatives/isolation-and-loneliness

National Institute on Aging: Tips for Staying Connected — For tips on how to feel more connected with your friends and community, check out this great article from the National Institute on Aging! While the article is written for older adults, this information is great for all ages. **Learn more:** nia.nih.gov/health/loneliness-and-social-isolation-tips-staying-connected

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) — Finding employment is a great way to be a part of your community! If you've had a hard time finding a job, keeping a job, or getting a better job due to your disability, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DVR) can help. DVR can assist you in finding supports like career exploration, assistive technology, job experience, work training, and on-the-job supports. To learn more and find out if you're eligible for DVR's services, **visit:** dwd.wisconsin.gov/dvr

Activities for Social Connections — The Wisconsin Board of Developmental Disabilities (WI BPDD) has created a guide to help you can live a healthy life, stay safe, and make meaningful connections. It's a great tool to help you live your best life! **Learn more:** wi-bpdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Healthy_Safe_Connected_V08.22.pdf



Electronic Visit Verification Update

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) has announced that the Electronic Visit Verification (EVV) hard launch will begin on May 1, 2023.

EVV is an electronic system used to verify that you have received any personal care and Supportive Home Care-Routine services authorized under the IRIS program and other Wisconsin long-term care programs. In IRIS, workers who live with you permanently are excluded from EVV requirements.

People enrolled in IRIS have been required to use EVV since November 2020. Starting May 1, people who are not using EVV to track the authorized services for four or more consecutive months will face disenrollment.

If you have questions about EVV or need assistance using EVV successfully, please contact your Fiscal Employer Agency (FEA) or your TMG IRIS Consultant. Also, be on the lookout for an IRIS-specific EVV mailing from DHS before May 1.

To learn more about EVV, visit dhs.wisconsin.gov/evv.



Public Health Emergency Update

During COVID-19, temporary rules were put in place to protect the health and safety of members of Wisconsin Medicaid programs, including IRIS. Normally, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) asks IRIS participants to provide updated information each year, to make sure they still qualify to be enrolled in IRIS. However, during the public health emergency (PHE), DHS has not been asking for this information.

When that change happens, DHS will start to “unwind” the temporary rules, reach out to members, and resume the regular renewal process that was in place before COVID-19.

Anyone who has been a member of BadgerCare Plus or Wisconsin Medicaid programs (including IRIS) since March of 2020 still has coverage. DHS will share information directly with members through mailed notices and email. Members should make sure DHS has up-to-date contact information so that members receive these messages. You can do this by visiting access.wi.gov or [access/wi.gov/es](https://access.wi.gov/es) (Spanish). You can also reach out to your TMG IRIS Consultant if you have any questions.



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TMG PARTNER LINKS & RESOURCES PAGE

Do you know about **TMG's Partner Links & Resources page on the TMG website**? This page provides a convenient list of great organizations and resources to help the people we partner with find the support they need. There, you can find resources for:

Aging Well • Help for Caregivers • Employment and Transition
Financial Planning • Health and Wellness • Accessible Housing
Self-Determination Advocacy • Transportation

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