

LIFEMAKING:

**AN INCLUSION
SEEKER'S GUIDE TO
HEALING THEIR WORLD**



DEDICATION

This guide is dedicated to the people who wish to contribute to stronger and more connected communities worldwide.

This is for you. You mean the world to us.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The source of the energy for this guide comes from our experiences working with and for human beings with developmental disabilities and their families.

Over the years, working together, we have learned an important lesson: What makes life difficult is not simply experiencing a disability. Our culture, and how it treats people with disabilities, is perhaps the biggest factor.

Living with a disability, having a child with a disability, or working in support of a person with a disability would be easier if our culture were more inclusive for everyone.

While this started from learning from people with disabilities, this is for everyone.

Whether you're feeling lonely, know someone who is, or simply want to deepen the relationships you already have, you belong here. Every person—regardless of age, background, or life stage—can benefit from exploring how we show up for one another. Even those who feel well-connected can use these practices to widen the circle and help others feel included.

Our deepest hope is that everyone will be interested in building a more inclusive culture in their little corner of the world: their neighborhood, their workplace, their family, their faith community, their clubs, their schools, their lives.

We stand in deep gratitude and humble appreciation of all the contributions people with disabilities and their families have made toward building a more inclusive culture for us all, and offer this as another way to take action toward that end.

INTRODUCTION

WHY DOES THIS LITTLE BOOK MATTER? BECAUSE CONNECTION MATTERS.

Loneliness has become one of the defining challenges of our time. The U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, has called it a public health crisis – one that affects our well-being, our communities, and even our sense of who we are.

This guide is an invitation to do something different. It's short on purpose. Not because the topic is small, but because we want you to act on it. Each page is designed to spark action, conversation, and imagination.

The ideas here are simple – Be Together, Turn Toward Gifts, Invest in Rhythms, Create Sensory-Rich Memories – but they carry lasting implications. These are bigger than theories and go beyond practices. They are curiosities, inviting you to try them out and learn more about them. When you experiment with them, even in small ways, they begin to shift how you see yourself, your neighbors, and your community.

We encourage you not to go through this guide alone. Invite a friend, a family member, or a small group to walk through it with you. Read it out loud. Try the exercises together. Talk about what works and what feels hard. Connection grows faster when we practice it side by side.

This isn't just a guide to read, it's to use. Circle pages. Make notes. Sketch in the margins. Try things. Fail. Try again. Over time, you'll begin to see how these small experiments add up to something powerful: a way of living that brings more connection, belonging, and joy to everyday life.

As you move through these pages, you'll find ideas for building stronger, more inclusive communities – places where people look out for one another, where differences are welcomed, and where belonging becomes a shared responsibility. These practices help us heal the culture of isolation and exclusion that so many people experience today.

LIFEMAKING

is the practice of taking action and shaping life with intention, connection, and care. It's about remembering what makes us human: our need to belong, to contribute, to be seen, and to see others.



CHAPTER ONE

BE TOGETHER

BELONGING BEGINS WITH BEING TOGETHER

Belonging begins when someone notices you, welcomes you in, or includes you in something that matters. It grows through small, shared moments that help people feel seen, valued, and connected. Over time, these simple experiences build trust, create lasting memories, and lay the foundation for a real sense of community.

CONNECTION STARTS WHEN WE:

- > Share meals
- > Do projects side-by-side
- > Show up in each other's daily lives



FOUR COMMITMENTS

A helpful framework for designing community experiences where everyone belongs.

[READ MORE >](#)

“What can neighbors do together? Almost anything they imagine.”

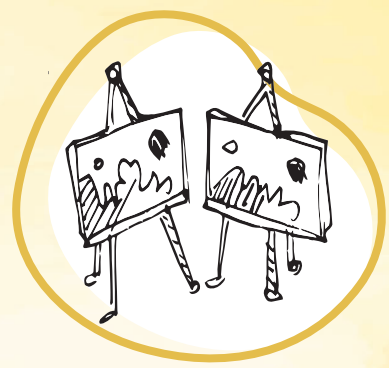
HERE ARE SOME IDEAS!



Turning a book into a play
(weekly rehearsals
built trust)



**Sharing coaching a
youth sports league**



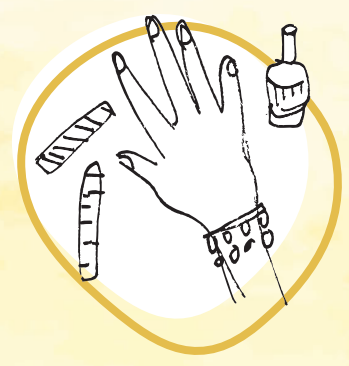
**Painting together
with music** (instead
of painting alone)



Brewing beer —
200-person party!



**Planning a neighborhood
rock concert**



Painting Nails: Ladies' night at
the nail salon (same color,
unique designs)



**Cutting tiles for a
community mural**



**Designing a
neighborhood flag**



**Creating a pop-up
monthly dog park**

These ideas and challenges are simple, but can feel unique and uncomfortable initially. Take the next step anyway.

Be bold. Small actions can lead to meaningful connections.

BE TOGETHER PRACTICAL STEPS

Welcome newcomers with warmth. A simple greeting or introduction can go a long way. Highlight what makes people shine and offer small roles, like bringing snacks or helping greet others.

If someone declines your attempt to connect, there are always more people that will gladly accept. Don't give up! And maybe the person who said "no thanks" will come around one day.

Ask about their interests and look for ways to connect them with others. Turn solo hobbies into shared moments.

INCLUSION SEEKERS CHALLENGES

*Intentional moments of connection
can create something beautiful.*

A simple "hello"

An open invitation

**Invite someone who has
never joined before**

A shared experience

*Keep planting seeds of
belonging, rain or shine.*

WHY IT'S GOOD FOR US

1

When we spend time with others, laugh, give gifts, or express gratitude, our bodies release oxytocin and other "feel-good" hormones. These chemicals reduce stress and deepen connection.

2

Research shows that strong, positive relationships are the single strongest predictor of health, happiness, and well-being.¹

3

Communities with strong ties and a shared sense of purpose consistently see longer, healthier lives.²

4

Communities where people know each other are safer.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

When have you felt a strong sense of belonging?
How can you replicate that in your community?

What solo activity could you share?

How can you create more opportunities to connect? Who
could you help feel like they belong in your community?

Why not be the one to reach out first?

Can we find out what we have in common?

Belonging isn't just "nice to have." It literally helps us live longer, happier lives.



THE DOG PARK

Neighbors came together to turn a simple idea into a pop-up dog park that brought connection and community to life.

WATCH HERE >

CHAPTER TWO

TURN TOWARD GIFTS

INCLUSION BEGINS WHEN WE RECOGNIZE EACH OTHER'S GIFTS

Everyone has something to offer. Communities grow when we focus on those gifts instead of what's missing. Too often, people are defined by labels or needs. But when we notice what lights them up, everything shifts. Gifts don't have to be polished. They can be simple or quirky. The goal isn't perfection, it's participation. When we focus on gifts, we invite people to share who they are.

SOME WAYS PEOPLE HAVE SHARED THEIR GIFTS...

- > A neighbor brought classic cars to a block party for rides
- > A water party across neighbors' yards with pools, water balloons, and slip n slides
- > Neighbors refreshed career day by sharing their hobbies and passions with grade schoolers
- > Local historians hosted a slideshow about each home on the block
- > A family hosted a stargazing night with a telescope
- > Church members created a baby board to celebrate new arrivals

GIFT GIVING STARTS WHEN WE:

- > Pay attention to what lights people up
- > Ask about their interests and strengths
- > Invite them to use those gifts with others

ONE WAY TO THINK ABOUT GIFTS...

HAND, HEAD, HEART.

When we see people according to their strengths, possibilities flourish for everyone.

Even if someone says they have no gifts, a few simple questions about what they do or care about can bring them to the surface.

HEAD

Everyone carries knowledge, whether it is about local history, technology, or problem solving. Sharing what we know helps others learn and often sparks curiosity and conversation.



HAND

This is the practical side of our gifts, like cooking, fixing bikes, painting, or gardening. These are often the easiest to spot because they show up in action.



HEART

These are the causes, hobbies, and values that give our lives meaning. Whether it is caring for the environment, loving music, or feeling drawn to kids or animals – these passions fuel energy and connection.



“ We are better defined
by our gifts, instead of
our problems. ”

TURN TOWARD GIFTS

PRACTICAL STEPS

- > Notice hidden strengths and affirm them publicly
- > Create opportunities for people to contribute gifts at gatherings
- > Add a gift to each person's nametag as they arrive – spark curiosity and conversation



ICEBREAKER

A heartfelt story about how one small, music-filled gathering helped a family find connection, build relationships, and create a true sense of belonging in a new community.

[READ MORE >](#)

WHY IT'S GOOD FOR US

- 1 When people are encouraged and proud of their accomplishments and contributions, self confidence increases.³
- 2 Self esteem and self compassion impact our wellbeing and happiness in many ways!⁴
- 3 Feeling accepted (or appreciated) has a higher impact on self esteem than competence by the individual.⁵
- 4 Positive Feedback enhances motivation and learning skills.⁶
- 5 Studies show health benefits to taking part in "leisure activities" such as hobbies, art, sports, volunteering, etc.⁷

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How can you shift the focus from someone's challenges to the gifts they bring?

How can you introduce people in a way that helps them see something wonderful about each other right away?

How could you invite people to contribute in small personal ways to your next event, party, or project?

INCLUSION SEEKERS CHALLENGES

Instead of focusing on what people need, try noticing what they bring.

Pay attention to the small things.

The way someone shows up.

The things they do without even thinking.

Then name it. Say it out loud.
Send the text. Leave the comment.

You might be the first person to ever reflect that gift back to them.

CHAPTER THREE

INVEST IN RHYTHMS

RHYTHMS CREATE CULTURE

Every community has a rhythm made up of moments people return to. These gatherings and routines shape belonging.

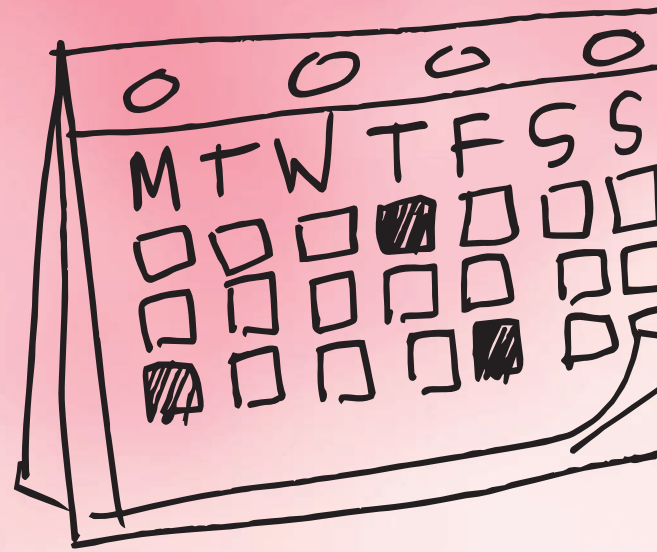
When something happens consistently, it begins to matter. People show up, recognize each other, and trust grows.

Rhythms can be big or small, from annual events to weekly walks or coffee with a neighbor. Both matter.

Over time, these rhythms become the soundtrack of community life. They help people feel grounded and connected. They give us something to look forward to on tough days.

Without them, life can feel scattered and distant. With them, people recognize each other, conversations come easier, and belonging begins to grow.

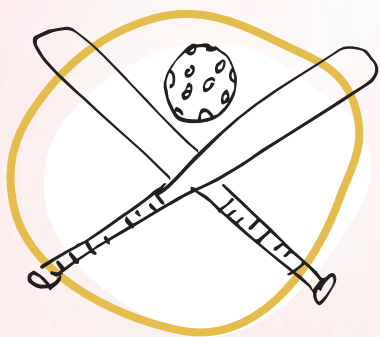
They give us shared stories and something steady to return to, especially when life feels uncertain.



RHYTHMS START WHEN WE:

- > Keep showing up, even in small ways
- > Make it easy for people to join and come back
- > Create moments that feel worth returning to

OTHER RHYTHMS WE'VE SEEN...



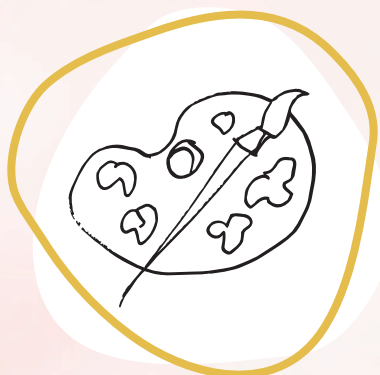
WHIFFLE BALL TOURNAMENT

Neighbors celebrate baseball season with an annual tournament. A playful tradition that grows every year.



SLOW RIDES

Cyclists help nervous riders feel safe on the road. Each ride ends with photos and food.



ART CLUB

Neighbors gather weekly for an art club. Paint, laughter, and shared creativity turn strangers into friends.



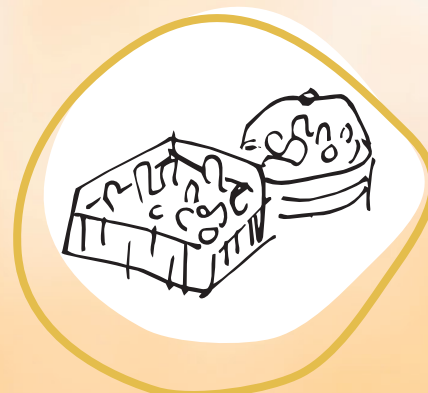
COMMUNITY JOURNALS

Writers leave notebooks in cafés with fun prompts. Each month, neighbors gather to read entries and start new ones.



WELCOME BASKETS

A family who once felt unwelcome now greets each new neighbor with a basket of goodies and a note.



POTLUCK TO BOOK CLUB

One couple hosted a potluck, discovered a hidden book club, and became part of an ongoing rhythm.

INVEST IN RHYTHMS

PRACTICAL STEPS

- > Start small: attend a seasonal festival with neighbors
- > Keep rhythms consistent so people know what to expect.
- > Use familiar spaces: porches, cafés, parks, and community centers.
- > Add rituals: a group photo, a shared toast, or lighting a candle.
- > Invite participation: give everyone a role, however small.
- > Create a rhythm out of a one-time event by hosting a few fun planning sessions.

INCLUSION SEEKERS CHALLENGES

Pick one simple thing you can do with others and repeat it.

A monthly dinner.

A standing coffee date.

A game night that comes back again and again.

Keep it easy. Keep it consistent.

Show up, invite others in, and let connection grow over time.

WHY IT'S GOOD FOR US

- 1** Having something to look forward to helps us navigate difficult seasons.
- 2** Having rituals and habits helps us connect in small ways over time, deepening relationships and building well-being.⁸
- 3** Having a routine helps reduce stress. When there's a plan in place, some decisions are already made, allowing us to focus on other choices and conserve energy.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What rhythms already exist in your community?

Which ones make you feel like you belong?

Where could new rhythms bring people together?

There are all kinds of things that happen when you start doing things together.



DREAMING ORDINARY

A powerful story of one family building a support network through simple, consistent rhythms, showing how connection grows when people keep showing up for each other.

READ MORE >

CHAPTER FOUR

SENSORY RICH MEMORIES

SENSORY-RICH MEMORIES SHAPE HOW WE REMEMBER LIFE

Memories are shaped by the senses.

What stays with us is how a moment felt.

A familiar song, a warm hug, or the smell of something cooking can ground us and become part of our story.

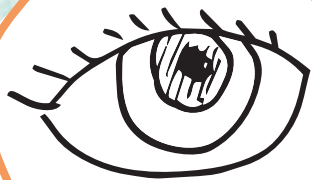
When experiences engage the senses, they last. A shared meal or simple moment can stay with someone for years and remind them they belong. Communities that prioritize sensory experiences create lasting memories.

These memories pile up, building trust and bonds that lead to friendship, love and affection. Moments grow into days, months, years, and become the stories of our lives.

Over time, those memories shape identity and draw people back. Without them, life can blur. With them, it gains texture, meaning, and connection.

SENSORY-RICH MEMORIES START WHEN WE:

- > Design experiences that invite people to feel something
- > Pay attention to the small details that make moments memorable
- > Create space for people to linger, not rush



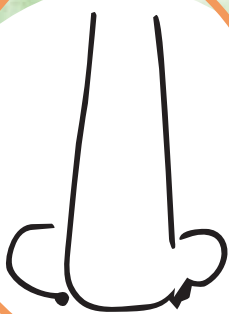
GLOW PARTY

Neighbors brought glow sticks and lights, ending the evening with fireworks.



LUNCHTIME DANCE PARTY

A DJ turned the local arts center into a dance floor, with laughter and music spilling into the street.



WREATH MAKING NIGHT

Families gathered to craft wreaths, with pine needles, candlelight, and music filling the space.



CELEBRATION BANNERS

Two families made giant banners that stretched across the street whenever someone achieved something special — new job, graduation, or homecoming.



FRONT PORCH MOVIE NIGHT

Neighbors set up a projector and blankets, with popcorn popping, kids laughing, and the glow of the screen bringing everyone together under the night sky.

SENSORY-RICH MEMORIES

PRACTICAL STEPS

- > Think in senses. Add taste, sound, sight, smell, and touch to any gathering.
- > Use seasonal cues. Candles in winter, flowers in spring, grilling in summer.
- > Make simple rituals memorable. A shared song, a toast, or a small gift to take home.
- > Bringing things together in a new way makes vivid positive memories. How might sports and art combine? What happens when people who care about gardening collaborate with people who care about history? Surprise your neighbors!

INCLUSION SEEKERS CHALLENGES

This week, add one sensory detail to a moment.

Music. **Lighting.**
Food. **Scent.**

*Keep it simple, but intentional.
Notice what shifts, what people respond to, and what they remember.*

WHY IT'S GOOD FOR US

- 1** Engaging our senses helps us be present in the moment, leading to increased resilience, well-being, and creativity.⁹
- 2** More likely to remember something, the more modalities of senses that you engage.¹⁰
- 3** Engaging our senses helps us make meaning of our lives, including the problems we face. When we can make meaning of our problems, we can more easily incorporate them into our "long story" and move past them, instead of staying stuck in them.¹¹



STIR! COOKING CLUB

Monique finds a place among an eclectic group of foodies, lending her "cool, calm, and collected" personality to the chaos of cooking in community.

READ MORE >



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What sensory memories from your life still feel vivid?

How could you bring one of those experiences into your community?

What sights, smells, or sounds are unique to your neighborhood?

CHAPTER FIVE

THIS IS NOT A CLOSING CHAPTER. THIS IS A RESPONSE.

HEALING OURSELVES, HEALING OUR COMMUNITIES

At its core, Lifemaking is healing. We don't need every detail to make a difference. When we choose connection, burdens feel lighter and hope grows. It's not just about programs or volunteering. It's about showing up, noticing what's good, and being with one another. As we stay curious about people, possibilities, and the gifts around us, we create the conditions for belonging to take root and grow.

Lifemaking is something each of us can do, taking thoughtful action to connect our communities and neighborhoods.



THE FOUR CURIOSITIES REVISITED

1

BE TOGETHER

reminds us that belonging starts with showing up.

2

TURN TOWARD GIFTS

teaches us to see abundance instead of scarcity.

3

INVEST IN RHYTHMS

helps us build trust and culture over time.

4

CREATE SENSORY-RICH MEMORIES

anchors our experiences in joy and meaning.

As you finish this book, don't think of it as an ending. Think of it as a beginning, one more chance to step into connection. Choose one small action this week. Share it. Live it. Repeat it.

Over time, those moments add up. And as they do, you may begin to see what we've seen: Lifemaking transforms not just communities, but lives.





WHO ARE INCLUSION SEEKERS?

Inclusion Seekers...
Empowering
communities to create
more inclusive lives
and local connections
with people with
disabilities and their
families.

INSPIRED BY THE WORK OF

Wolf Wolfensberger

John O'Brien

Bessel van der Kolk

Mary Vicario

John McKnight

People connected to Starfire

Joe Nickol and Kevin Wright of
the Neighborhood Playbook



InclusionSeekers.org



MADE POSSIBLE WITH SUPPORT FROM



& OTHER FUNDERS

THIS GUIDE WAS CREATED IN
COLLABORATION WITH:



MadisonEden.

1. Harvard Happiness Study
2. Dan Buettner's Blue Zones research
3. Foot & Hopkins, 2010
4. Muris, 2023
5. Koch, 2005
6. Matheus et al, 2024
7. Mak et al, 2023; Lancourt, 2021
8. Michael Norton, The Ritual Effect
9. Farb and Segal's book: Better in Every Sense
10. Budson
11. Van der Kolk

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