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How “6 points of connection” can repair our shared trust

Social entrepreneur Aaron Hurst explains why the decline of social connection is the greatest challenge of our time — and offers a roadmap for restoration.



Maresa Smith / Death to Stock

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Workplace loneliness is a growing issue fueled by the erosion of everyday connection. The decline in connection and trust is the result of more than a

century of technological and social change. In divided times, shared action often builds more unity than shared opinions.

Aaron Hurst

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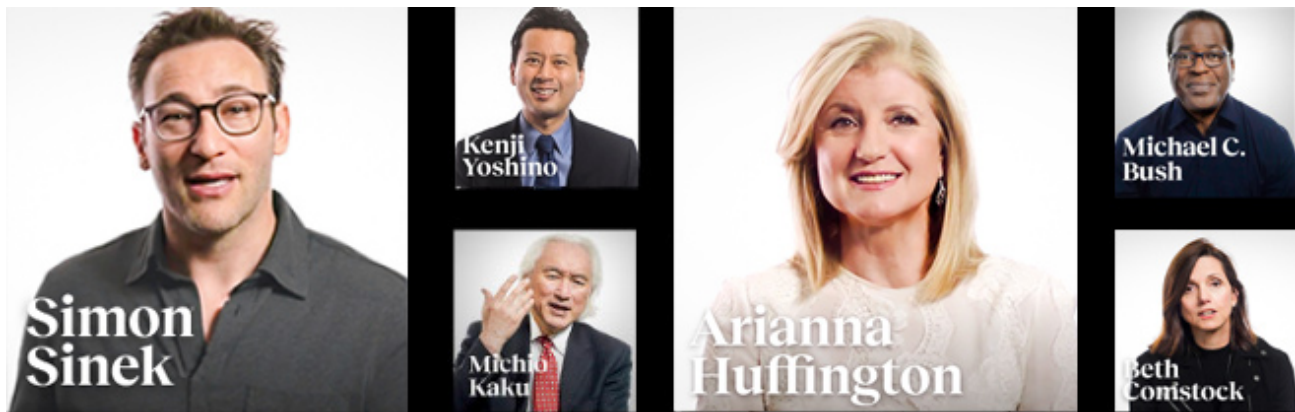
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By now, most of us have seen the data. One in two adults in the U.S. now reports experiencing loneliness, according to the U.S. Surgeon General (Murthy, 2023). Social isolation increases the risk of heart disease by 29%, stroke by 32%, and early death by 60% — a health impact comparable to smoking **15 cigarettes** a day (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). At the same time, trust in neighbors, co-workers, and institutions is at historic lows (Pew Research Center, 2022), and global workplace disengagement is costing \$8.8 trillion each year (Gallup, 2023).

Workplace loneliness is also a growing issue: more than half of U.S. employees report feeling lonely at work, and lonely workers are significantly more likely to miss work, report lower performance, and consider leaving their jobs — contributing to productivity costs upwards of **\$154 billion** annually (Cigna, 2022).

We tend to think of these as different challenges, but when we [at chamberofconnection.org] worked with researchers to understand the root causes we found there is one underlying issue — the erosion of everyday connection.

When I talk to people about the decline in connection and trust they tend to point the blame at social media and COVID. We all saw the impact of the pandemic and remote work as it disrupted our lives and rituals of connection and community, but long-standing conditions were already in place. In reality, the decline in connection is the result of more than a century of technological and social change — from cars and television to the internet, smartphones, social media, and now AI.



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It is easy to give up when we are facing such systemic challenges but the stakes are too high — for our own ability to thrive and for society. We need to take ownership of connection in our lives and support and inspire others to do the same.

I felt overwhelmed when I began this work. Amid a proliferation of frameworks and advice, there was no shared understanding of *what a connected life actually looks like*. What kinds of relationships matter — and how do we build them? Not from an academic perspective, but from a human perspective.

We examined insights from public health, sociology, psychology, behavioral science, and civic design — and identified six key points of connection. Together they form a clear, structural roadmap for rebuilding trust, resilience, and belonging across society. At the U.S. Chamber of Connection we have begun using them to help people start to reverse the decline in connection and trust across the country.

We call them the Six Points of Connection.

1. Know your neighbors

Connection begins close to home. Yet today, only 26% of Americans say they know most of their neighbors, and just 44% say they trust them (Pew Research, 2023; State Farm, 2016). The

loss of these everyday ties is more than a cultural shift — it’s a foundational weakness in how we live together.

To rebuild a connected life, one of the most powerful actions is also one of the simplest: get to know the people who live near you.

That could mean saying hello on the sidewalk, offering to help with a small task, inviting a neighbor to dinner, organizing a block party, or checking in on someone who lives alone. These acts aren’t just neighborly — they’re transformative. They create the fabric of trust, belonging, and shared responsibility that defines healthy communities.

Stronger local ties also build collective safety. Research shows that neighborhoods with higher levels of social cohesion experience significantly lower rates of violent crime (Sampson et al., 1997). When people know and look out for each other, entire communities benefit.

It’s hard to feel rooted in a place — or take ownership of your role in it — if you don’t know your neighbors. That’s why neighborhood connection is the first point in this framework. It’s where community begins, and where rebuilding trust becomes real.

2. Community of identity

One of our deepest human needs is to feel seen. That happens most powerfully in communities where we share a core part of our identity — whether it’s culture, ethnicity, gender, faith, queerness, caregiving status, disability, or a personal experience that shapes how we see the world.

In a time of rapid relocation and societal change, many people lack this layer of grounding. According to the American Survey Center, nearly half of adults under 30 say they don’t feel part of any community at all (2023).

A community of identity provides a sense of home beyond geography. It might be a synagogue, a Black professional network, a queer storytelling circle, a military spouse group, or a recovery meeting. These groups offer something rare: shared language, shared understanding, and fewer barriers to being your full self.

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For some, identity may not be tied to a strong cultural or religious tradition — but can still be found through shared life experiences: where you grew up, where you went to school, your

role as a parent, or even a common turning point in life. What matters is that it feels authentic to you.

Research shows that communities of identity act as buffers against disconnection and stress — while also fostering pride, healing, and belonging (APA, 2022). They are foundational. When you’re deeply connected to at least one group that reflects who you are, you’re more equipped to bridge divides and contribute meaningfully across society.

3. One-on-one connection

In a world filled with followers, contacts, and colleagues, what many of us lack are real, consistent, one-on-one relationships — the kind that sustain us through change, challenge, and everyday life.

Our Chief Friendship Officer, Shasta Nelson, has spent over a decade studying what makes close friendships thrive. She’s found that three ingredients are essential: *consistency, positivity, and vulnerability*. Without regular time together, shared enjoyment, and honest emotional exchange, relationships struggle to grow.

Research backs this up. It takes about six meaningful interactions with someone to start feeling connected — and roughly 200 hours to form a true best friend (Hall, 2018, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*).

Yet in our busy, fragmented lives, many of us aren’t even meeting the minimum. According to the American Time Use Survey, nearly 40% of U.S. adults spend no time with friends in a typical day (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). And Cigna’s national survey on loneliness found that people who see friends or family at least 2–3 times per week report significantly lower levels of loneliness and greater emotional health.

This kind of connection doesn’t require dozens of people. It starts by intentionally investing in just one or two relationships each week. That might mean setting a recurring walk with a friend, a monthly lunch, or simply being the one who reaches out.

These one-on-one bonds are the bedrock of resilience. They anchor us emotionally, create mutual trust, and give us someone to celebrate with — or lean on. You don’t need a huge network. You need a few people who truly know you, and who you consistently choose to know in return.

4. Third places

Strong communities need more than homes and workplaces — they need places where people naturally gather, linger, and connect. These are “third places”: parks, cafés, libraries,

gyms, community centers, farmers markets, barbershops, and places of worship. They're the informal living rooms of public life.

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg called third places essential infrastructure for democracy and belonging. But today, they're disappearing. One study found that nearly half of U.S. adults can't name a single place where they regularly connect with others outside of work or home (American Survey Center, 2023). Without these spaces, neighborhoods grow quieter, more isolating, and less resilient.

When we bring life to the commons, we turn proximity into relationship and space into community.

Third places matter because they invite spontaneous connection — between generations, across cultures, and beyond our usual social circles. They're where we bump into each other, strike up conversations, and build trust without needing an invitation.

The simplest and most powerful action is to show up. Visit your local third places regularly. Stay a little longer. Learn the names of the baristas or librarians. Say yes to the community event. When we consistently support these spaces, we keep them alive — and signal that connection matters.

For communities lacking strong third places, becoming an advocate — asking for benches, plazas, or gathering spots — is a vital next step. But it starts with presence. When we bring life to the commons, we turn proximity into relationship and space into community.

5. Activity-based community

Doing something you enjoy with others is one of the most reliable ways to build a connected, healthy life. And yet, participation in regular group activities has steadily declined. Only one in four U.S. adults belong to a local club, team, or hobby group that meets regularly (General Social Survey, 2022). That loss doesn't just affect our social lives — it impacts our well-being, our neighborhoods, and the local organizations that depend on community support.

Joining or creating activity-based communities — whether it's a dance class, a run club, a game night, a hiking group, or a creative workshop — boosts life satisfaction and reduces stress. It gives us a reason to show up, and the structure to keep coming back. These groups often support third places and neighborhood institutions, creating a virtuous cycle of local connection.

They also serve as powerful bridges. When we participate in something we care about alongside others, trust grows naturally — even across lines of difference. In divided times,

shared action often builds more unity than shared opinions.

We thrive when we do what we love with other people. These regular gatherings ground us, inspire us, and keep our communities alive.

6. Community Service

Helping others is one of the most reliable paths to connection, meaning, and joy. When we step up to serve, we don’t just strengthen our communities — we strengthen ourselves.

After years of decline, volunteering in the U.S. is starting to rebound. But the way we volunteer is changing. It’s becoming more virtual, episodic, and individual, with fewer opportunities for sustained, in-person connection (AmeriCorps, 2023). While flexibility has its benefits, something essential is being lost: the deeper relationships, mutual trust, and shared ownership that come from serving side by side.

■ **Helping others is one of the most reliable paths to connection, meaning, and joy.**

To rebuild connection, we need more of the kind of volunteering that is consistent, face-to-face, and rooted in local community. That’s where the greatest benefits live. Research shows that people who volunteer regularly experience higher levels of happiness, lower stress, and stronger social bonds (CNCS, 2020). They’re also more likely to connect across lines of difference, from generation to race to ideology.

Volunteering at its best isn’t about checking a box — it’s about showing up for each other. One of the most meaningful ways to serve today is to help others strengthen their own six points of connection. When we do that, we don’t just build community — we become it.

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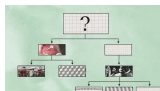
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