

Nurturing Relationships | eLearning (Transcript)

Hi everyone! Welcome here. My name is Natalie Giesbrecht and I work for Abilities Manitoba- thanks for tuning into our e-learning video! Today I want to dive into the topic of building connection, specifically in terms of relationships, and how we can support people with lived experiences of disabilities to define, develop and nurture organic relationships in their life. This is not always an easy feat, with the hustle and bustle in service world, and today I wanted to walk us through the importance of providing this type of service for people, and also tangible ways to do so!

Often times, when asked, people receiving services will say (or will be said about them) that they know so many people and that they have a ton of friends! Yet when we examine those relationships or friendships more closely, we commonly learn that their closest friends are all paid supports, such as their staff, or their case managers. While there is value in these relationships, they are not the natural, organic relationships that people yearn for. So how can we as service providers begin to prioritize this support and see the value in assisting people to build these connections and to grow and nurture relationships?

Well we need to be intentional- we need to engage people in meaningful conversations surrounding relationships and understand how the person defines that for themselves. This definition may not come easy for people, as they often have been on the receiving end of the relationships... waiting for the calls, waiting for the invitations... or we even CREATE friendships for people, whether reciprocal or not (with good intentions of course). When on the journey of supporting people to identify, build and nurture relationships, we can utilize strategies on three different relationship levels: New relationships, Emerging relationships and Existing relationships.

When we support people to build a **new** relationship or connection, we need to identify some key factors, such as where does this person often go? What are their interests, or their hobbies? Are they a country music fan, or a coffee enthusiast who loves the local café down the street? Relationships are often built on these common interests between two people... As many pioneers in our sector reference, connections are built when people are in the same place at the same time, over and over again. Our role becomes to assist the person to identify familiar people in those familiar settings and the commonalities between them, and then assist the person to use those commonalities as their **vehicle** to building a connection and relationship. It is noteworthy that our world is becoming more

digital every day, and so supporting people to build new relationships online using those same vehicles to connection is encouraged and can be done all from the comfort of people's homes (as some people are more introverted!). Once people are connecting with others, we can nurture those seeds for a new relationship! We have to remember that we cannot create relationships for people... not real or authentic ones... we can only help identify potential relationships and provide the tools and opportunities to expand them!

So then how do we help people expand these relationships to the next level?

Supporting people to build relationships does not only involve initiating new relationships, but also involves developing and nurturing current connections that are somewhat established. From work or community acquaintances, to friends, to maybe romantic partners? First, we need to know how that person defines that relationship and where they want things to go... And is it reciprocal? If so, how are we providing people with opportunity to build upon that relationship?

Perhaps they see the same BAREESTA at the café often and have really good, meaningful conversations- have they exchanged phone numbers, or given each other their social media contacts?

We also need to prioritize maintaining current relationships and what that support may look like- I invite you to ask yourself, are you completely confident that you know all of the important relationships in someone's life that you serve? Do you know how they define that relationship, and if it is felt in return? How do we nourish our current relationships... we text, we call, we make plans, we stay in touch via social media, we send birthday cards, the list goes on and on.

Intentionally mapping out these relationships with the person and providing them the opportunity to initiate these interactions with their current relationships can all work towards maintaining and even strengthening these connections! As I mentioned, often people are just stuck waiting... waiting to be phoned, waiting to be invited over. True connection and relationships are present when both people are invested.

So how can we put this into action? Let's use the example of being a neighbor and how we can define, develop and nurture that relationship. Well, our vehicle to initial connection is we live in the same neighbourhood! We can support people to take incremental steps to deepen that connection, by saying hello when they cross paths and striking up a conversation. Perhaps the person and the neighbor learn from one another they both enjoy taking walks in the park close by and then make plans to do so together. You can see how supporting people to identify that

connection that literally right outside of their front door, and providing them the tools and opportunity to expand on it can lead to an organic relationship. John O'Brien quotes that "the quality of our lives depends upon the quality of our introductions and invitations".

The three levels of relationship building and supports are not isolated from one another, but rather need to be thought about and considered in conjunction with one another. We do not want to become too busy supporting people with new friendships and relationships, that we forget about nourishing those already established ones. We can create documents and records of those important people in their life, so that if and when staff turnover and/or changes within a person's life happen, those connections don't become lost.

Meaningful connections and organic relationships foster a higher quality of life for all people and opens the door to so many more opportunities that can have such a positive impact in their lives! We know that people are safer with a robust network of relationships, they have more knowledge and resources in their toolbelts that are accessible to them, they are more likely to have employment in the competitive workforce and they are less likely to experience loneliness and isolation... and this is not an exhaustive list. Building connection is not a

destination, but rather a journey – as people grow and change, their current interests and connections will too! Active support in this area will look like ongoing conversations with people to understand their definition and desires for connections, providing new opportunities for people to explore their interests and to re-define those vehicles and becoming creative in the way people are connecting with their current relationships and making necessary adaptations if needed to ensure they are maintained.

As David Pitonyak put it, “the work is to help people find meaningful and enduring relationships, there is nothing else we could do that would be more important than that.”

And with that, our e-learning video on Building Connections and Nurturing Relationships has concluded- thank you for joining and will see you next time!