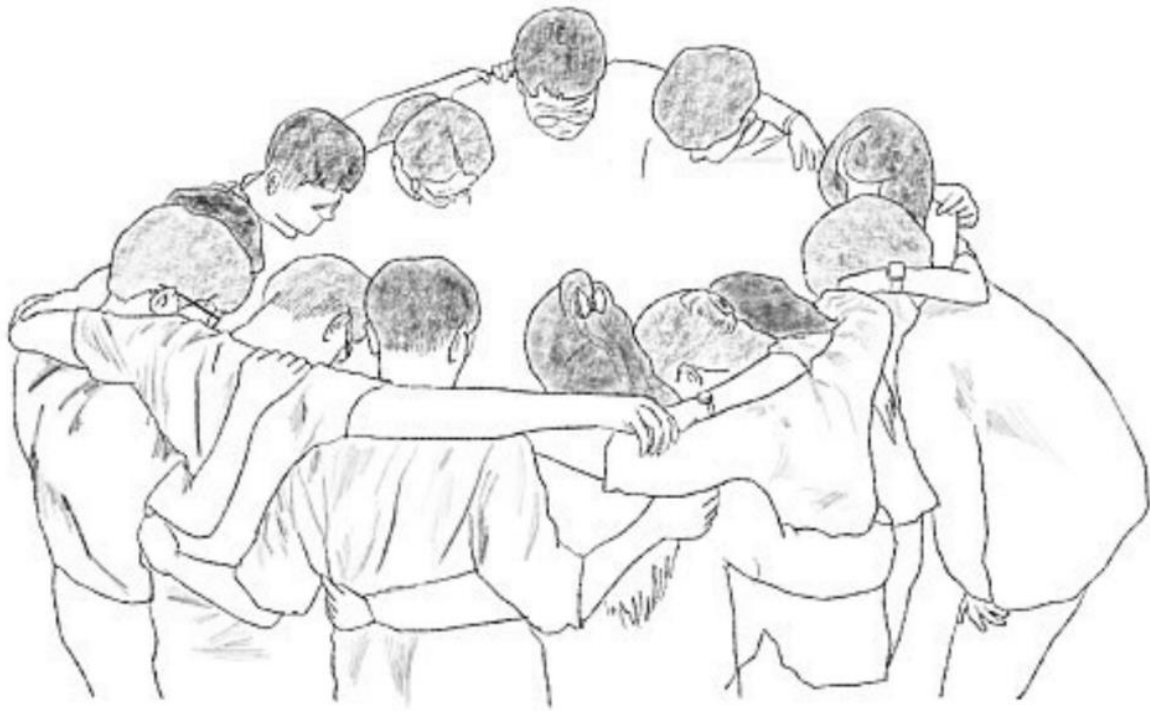




POCO 2025 Essay and Poster Collection

Community and I



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Digital Artwork by Donna Lee



Redefining Community: A Journey of Connection in a Mexican Nursery by Alex Baek

It is commonly said that communities require a lot of people and are built upon past existing connections. Communities that have such qualities can not only end up overwhelming new members but also give them the feeling that they don't belong. I believed this to be true my whole life. I believed that I never fit in any communities I joined. However, during my trip to Mexico, I found myself sitting next to a few kids I met just an hour ago, teaching me simple Spanish words through hand gestures and quick responses. Without even realizing it, I was being invited to a community.

When I first entered the nursery room, I was instantly filled with adoration. The room consisted of two cribs each containing a baby alongside several children who were scattered all over the dusted foam floor tiles that weren't connected properly. Right away, I felt the need to distance myself from them. The difference in language, lifestyle, location, social status – all of these made me feel an internal barrier between me and the children which led me to sit in the corner and just watch them play together. They already seemed to have fun playing with each other so why would I try joining them? After all, I could have made it awkward or end up doing something even worse.

Then, a kid came up to me. This kid, no older than 4 or 5, approaches me and happily greets me with “¡Hola!” Even while knowing that this kid and I knew nothing about each other, I instantly felt like I made a friendship. Despite this feeling, I continued to speak to him formally. The kid, however, ignoring this formality, began playing with me, such as going on my back and nonverbally asking for a piggyback, and as time went on, I became more playful with him. While playing, he saw another kid being lifted up high in the air, and became slightly jealous. Seeing this, I asked him if he wanted to do that too, and with a clear smile, a quick nod was gestured. I gently lowered my hands under his shoulders, and smoothly picked him up off the ground, and as I stretched my arms as far as I could, the most pure and innocent laugh was released from the kid. In that moment, his unfiltered laughter made me feel something deeper than joy – a feeling of warmth and the nostalgia of my own childhood.

As I let him down, the bonding didn't end. He came back later with his friend and began teaching me Spanish words. At first, they would point at a random object and ask if I knew what it was in Spanish – to which I simply hand gestured with the intent of saying ‘I don't know.’ Even though it seemed like I was a doofus, the kids didn't tease me about my lack of knowledge, but instead understood that I didn't know much about Spanish, and so they switched from asking if I knew what the name of the object was, to telling me what the word was called, aiming to teach me more Spanish. I tried my best to memorize what each word was called, and

surprisingly, they were good at teaching too – for example, they would buzz their lips and wave their hands up in the air, and then would say avión, implying an airplane.

Eventually, it was time to leave. As I went on to leave the room, I looked back at the two kids who I was able to connect with, and said my final goodbyes. As I slowly got further away from the nursery, I began feeling nostalgia for something that happened no more than an hour ago. However, I was also thankful that, for just a moment, they taught me that a community isn't made from just people you know, but by the willingness to understand and connect with one another in spite of each other's history and background.

Before my trip to Mexico, I believed that a community was defined with ideas like having a lot of people or everyone already knowing each other beforehand, but afterwards, it made me think differently. From a quick '¡Hola!', to lifting the kids high up in the air, to being taught Spanish, I was able to, in such a short time, be a part of a different community regardless of each of our differences. When I left the nursery room, it wasn't just me that left, but a new understanding of what a community truly was and new bonds that I will cherish for the rest of my life.

“A brief interaction with children in a Mexican nursery taught me that community is built on the willingness to connect, not on prior connections or size, transforming my understanding through shared laughter and language lessons.”

Walk Together

The Vital Role of Community in Nurturing Mental Health by Yena Bahang

In recent years, mental health has become an increasingly important topic of discussion. With growing awareness, more attention has been brought to the factors that influence mental well-being; one of them being community. Being surrounded by a supportive community can deeply impact a person's mental state by fostering a sense of belonging, bringing purpose into their life, and providing them opportunities to make meaningful connections. As individuals have had to face new challenges as the world evolves, community has become an even more important part in guiding people through uncertainty and stress.

One of the most significant ways community supports mental health is by offering a sense of belonging. Belonging is a feeling everyone wants; it strengthens a person's identity and self-worth. Studies have shown that we desire to belong from the same region of our brains that drives hunger and that we experience social exclusion in the same area of our brains that we feel physical pain. This research suggests that our desire to belong is not just emotional, it is also physical. When people feel accepted into a community, they experience validation, which in turn strengthens resilience, promotes optimism, and equips them with better coping mechanisms to everyday challenges. These benefits all contribute to a stabler, healthier state of mind. Furthermore, a strong sense of belonging reduces the chances of mental conditions such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts which are associated with lack of belonging, isolation, and rejection. This is especially true during a person's youth, where acceptance from peers and reputation can heavily impact the person's long term self perception and mentality. Therefore, a community that cultivates belonging within its people can impact mental health positively.

Being in a community improves mental health by giving individuals a sense of purpose and meaning to their lives. Believing that you are a part of something bigger than yourself boosts mental health by broadening your perspective. It shifts focus from personal concerns and negative thoughts towards something more meaningful, which can dramatically improve someone's mental state. Whether it is volunteering, participating in a group, or simply being present in someone else's life, being active in a community can provide direction and purpose into the life of someone who is struggling with their mental health. Purpose can help during difficult times by acting as an anchor and motivating people to keep pushing forward. Community offers support, knowledge, and recognition of contributions which all reinforce the idea that one does have purpose in life. By connecting individuals to important roles in relationships, community becomes a powerful tool in keeping a healthy state of mind.

Although having a community is important, finding the right community is just as important, if not more important. It is not enough to merely be surrounded by people, it is the quality of the relationships and the

environment they exist in. True, meaningful connections are formed in communities where everyone feels seen, heard, and supported. These are the kind of environments where individuals celebrate each other, can be vulnerable with fear of being judged, and where growth is encouraged. According to the National Library of Medicine, people who were said to have a negative sense of community had higher reports of depression, anxiety and stress compared to people with a positive sense of community. A negative sense of community causes feelings of alienation, distance, and disconnect. In an environment where individuals feel excluded, or worse, that they are explicitly being judged, it creates a stressful state of being which makes it extremely difficult to grow as an individual. These emotions are connected to poor mental health, especially when they become chronic and are not managed properly. Having a negative sense of community also increases one's risk of mental conditions, further proving how community directly influences mental health and why finding the right community is so crucial.

In closing, community plays an essential role in mental health because it supports key factors of our mental health – self-esteem, purpose, and connection. These elements are all deeply correlated with our sense of identity and stability. From small acts of appreciation to feeling completely understood and heard, the right community can be a highly influential source of solace and strength. As the conversations of mental health continue to grow, it is critical that we also expand efforts in building open communities that include, encourage, and empower every individual in order to promote healthy psychological states.



“A supportive community enhances mental health by fostering belonging, providing purpose, and building meaningful connections, with the quality of these relationships being crucial to reducing depression, anxiety, and stress, as supported by research from the National Library of Medicine.”

Forging Resilience: Building a Youth Drug Prevention Community Inspired by Penguins by Grace Hong

When I think of the term community, I see penguins standing united in the middle of a blizzard. One penguin alone will not survive, but if they stand united, they form a wall of strength and resilience. Teenagers are the same. If isolated, we are vulnerable to outside stress. But if we stand together, we build resilience. That photo has also changed the way I perceive my own community and inspired me to begin one that specializes in youth drug prevention.

In 2023, I began a nonprofit group dedicated to protecting young people from drug use. What began as a handful of friends has mushroomed into more than fifty members in a system of ten schools. We set up chapters that served as mini-safety nets, where students could discuss freely the risks of drugs and urge each other to withstand. As opposed to top-down programs presented by adults, our model was peer-to-peer. Prevention had its greatest impact when presented by a peer who could accurately describe what it was like to be an adolescent making those choices.

Our efforts quickly went beyond our schools. We were supported by the city of Los Angeles during 2024 and 2025 and worked with the Department of Public Health to have a survey taken in Skid Row. Passing through that area, I came face to face with the harsh realities of addiction. I talked to people whose lives had been ruined by drugs, and I felt the urgency of prevention like never before. That first year confirmed that our efforts were significant—not for statistical theory, but for real people and real lives.

Developing this nonprofit has changed me as much as it has changed the community I serve. I've learned leadership isn't about standing over folks, but standing with folks. I've had to walk into rooms with city officials, in front of students I'd never met, and in front of strangers on the street, hearing their stories. Each step was courageous, but each step also reminded me why I began: so that no young person would ever have to feel alone in the face of the pressures that can so easily end in addiction.

Underneath it all, my community remains my closest circle of friends—the people who were the first to share the dream with me. We are each other's reminder that we are our best self together. The symbolism of the penguin is more than a photograph to me; it is how I live my life. Community is not born or guaranteed—it is forged through trust, empathy, and shared responsibility.

This community has hardened me, bettered me as a compassionate human being, and more committed to sharing these lessons. Whether through college public health initiatives or joining new communities down the

line, I will take with me the understanding that strength is not in standing alone, but in huddling together when the storm comes.

“Inspired by the unity of penguins, I founded a peer-driven nonprofit in 2023 to prevent youth drug use, growing it into a 50-member network across ten schools, supported by Los Angeles and shaped by personal encounters with addiction, reinforcing my belief that community strength lies in standing together.”



Beyond Boundaries: The Unifying Power of Shared Experiences in Community by Colin Hong

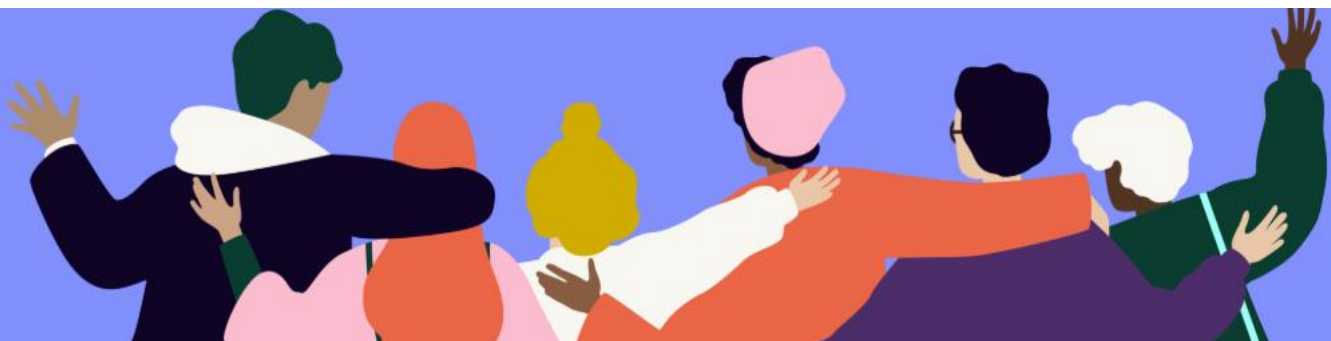
Community is often defined as a feeling of fellowship that emerges when individuals share common attitudes, interests, goals, and experiences, creating a bond that transcends mere proximity or association. Traditionally, the concept of community is most commonly understood as a group of people united within a specific boundary, such as an organization, an ethnic group, a geographic location, or a cultural identity. In many instances, this holds true, with communities forming around these structured frameworks that provide a sense of identity and purpose. However, a community can evolve into something far greater than these set principles, stretching beyond the confines of established norms to embrace a deeper, more organic connection. Reflecting on my own life, I can pinpoint moments that reshaped my understanding of this idea. One such moment takes us back to 2023, when I spent time with my friends playing football on the quiet, empty streets of our neighborhood. The games were filled with laughter and excitement, but what stood out most was the shared experience we encountered at the end of each session. Tripping or falling on the rough concrete or uneven surfaces was almost inevitable, leaving us with “skinned” palms, elbows, or any part of our bodies that hit the ground first as we tried to catch ourselves. Every single one of us bore these rashes by the time we were done, the burning sensation a testament to our active play. Interestingly, our skills in football—whether it was speed, agility, or jumping height—varied widely, and we couldn’t relate to each other’s abilities in those areas. Yet, those rashes became a unifying mark, a shared occurrence that, despite the discomfort of our vulnerable, stinging skin, fostered a profound sense of fellowship and belonging among us. It taught me that even the smallest, seemingly insignificant things, like rashes, have the power to bring people together and form a community, embracing imperfections and the minor pains that come with them. This realization resonates with a powerful insight from Brené Brown, who once said, “Those who have a strong sense of love and belonging have the courage to be imperfect.” To me, this encapsulates the essence of a true community—a group unified not by perfection, but by a common shared occurrence that binds them together.

Moving forward from that experience, another pivotal moment occurred in the summer of 2023 when my church organized a mission trip to Thailand. This journey opened up a new chapter in my understanding of community, as we set out to educate a local school about English and Christianity. For many of us, this was an entirely new venture; we had never before had the opportunity or experience of teaching children, let alone foreign students from a different culture and background. The initial uncertainty was palpable, but we were driven by a shared mission to teach, support, and make a positive difference in the lives of those kids. As a group, our community came together in a beautiful way, collaborating to help each other navigate the challenges of teaching and interacting with the students. We exchanged ideas, offered encouragement, and learned from one another’s approaches, which not only helped us succeed in our educational efforts but also

left a lasting impact on the children and their school. The experience was transformative for them, as they gained new knowledge and perspectives, but it was equally life-changing for us. It helped shape our own viewpoints, broadened our understanding of the world, and allowed us to grow together as a community—as a family bound by a common purpose. This idea is beautifully echoed in the words of Brian Solis, who noted, “Community is much more than belonging to something; it’s about doing something together that makes belonging matter.” This mission trip exemplified that principle, as our collective actions turned our sense of belonging into something meaningful and enduring.

Looking back, these experiences highlight how community can transcend traditional boundaries. The football rashes were a spontaneous, unplanned marker of unity, while the Thailand mission was a deliberate act of togetherness with a clear goal. Both, however, relied on the willingness to connect, to embrace imperfections, and to engage in shared endeavors. The rashes reminded me that community can form in the midst of everyday life, through the most unexpected and minor incidents, while the mission trip showed me that purposeful collaboration can deepen those bonds and leave a legacy. This dual perspective has stayed with me, reinforcing the idea that community is not just about who we are or where we come from, but about what we choose to do together. Whether it’s a playful game on the streets or a structured outreach in a foreign land, these moments teach us that community is a dynamic force, shaped by shared experiences and the courage to be imperfectly human. Brené Brown’s wisdom continues to ring true, encouraging us to find strength in our vulnerabilities, while Brian Solis’s insight pushes us to act together, making every connection count. As I move forward, I carry these lessons, seeing community not as a static group but as a living, breathing entity that grows through every small act of fellowship and every shared goal we pursue.

“Brian Solis once said, “Community is much more than belonging to something; it’s about doing something together that makes belonging matter.”



The Transformative Power of Community on Mental Health

by Andrew Jeon

The idea of community is often taken for granted by us, but it's one of the most powerful influences on human mental health. A community can take numerous forms: it can be a neighborhood, a school, a sports team, a church group, or even an online space where people gather and share their experiences. What all communities share in common is connection. People who feel connected and supported by others most oftentimes have stronger mental health than those who feel alone. On the other hand, isolation can make stress and emotional struggles worse. Evidence from research and real-world programs shows that strong communities give people a sense of belonging, provide support that reduces stress, and create opportunities to recover and thrive.

One of the most critical ways community affects mental health is through the sense of belonging. Belonging is the feeling that a person matters to others and has a place in the world. Research shows that adults with a stronger sense of community report lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Young et al.). Without this connection, people may feel invisible or unwanted, which often leads to loneliness. For teenagers, this can be especially harmful, as loneliness has been linked to higher risks of depression and even suicidal thoughts. On the positive side, when students feel supported by their classmates and teachers, they are better able to handle academic pressures and personal struggles. A simple example is how being part of a team or club can make school less overwhelming, since students know they have a group that cares about them. Belonging does not erase life's problems, but it provides the emotional foundation to face them.

Another way to have a community can support mental health is by providing social support. Social support can take many forms, from advice and encouragement to practical help with daily challenges. According to a study of Filipino adults, people who had strong support systems experienced less stress and fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression (Salvacion and Aruta). The reason is that talking to others about problems changes how people see their struggles. A heavy burden can feel lighter when it is shared. Without support, stress can build up until it feels impossible to manage, leading to serious mental health issues. Support from family, friends, and even casual connections like neighbors helps people cope better. Communities that encourage kindness and connection give individuals tools to manage life's ups and downs, while communities that lack support leave people vulnerable.

In addition to personal relationships, entire communities can take active steps to improve mental health. One well-known example is the "Friendship Bench" program in Zimbabwe, where older women are trained to provide counseling on public benches. This program has reduced depression in neighborhoods that

have little access to doctors or clinics (Chibanda et al.). Other examples include the “Clubhouse” model, where people with serious mental illnesses gather in community spaces to build skills and friendships, and public amenities like pools or parks that give people places to come together. A study in the Netherlands even showed that towns with more green space had lower rates of antidepressant use, proving that the environment itself can protect mental health (Helbich et al. 1073). These examples show that communities are not just background settings for people’s lives—they can be designed and organized in ways that actively support well-being.

In conclusion, community has a direct and powerful impact on mental health. Belonging helps people feel secure and valued, social support reduces stress, and community programs create opportunities for healing and connection. While medical care and therapy are important, they cannot fully replace the benefits of strong social networks and supportive environments. Everyone has a role to play: individuals can strengthen communities by being there for others, while leaders can design schools, neighborhoods, and cities that encourage connection. In a world where loneliness is increasing, remembering the importance of community is more critical than ever. Stronger communities mean healthier people, and healthier people create even stronger communities. I would like to end this essay with a quote which I heard while watching the UFC. These so-called fighters who seem tough physically and mentally sharing such touching and vulnerable messages genuinely touched me. It highlights the importance of community and how people rather you reach out during hard times than end your life. Here is the quote I would like to end with. “People would rather have you cry on their shoulders than have to go to your funeral - UFC Fighter Paddy Pimblet.”

“ “People would rather have you cry on their shoulders than have to go to your funeral - UF Fighter Paddy Pimblet.”



MLA Format Citations:

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Building Community Through Small Acts: A Journey with POCO by Elliot Kim

When I think about community, I don't picture large crowds or great speeches. I think about the small, ordinary moments when one person chooses to care for another. For me, community has always been built through simple acts: acts of noticing, listening, and being present.

I was six years old when I first learned this. My pregnant teacher dropped her pen during class, and while the other children sat still, I ran forward and picked it up for her. Such a small gesture, but my teacher later told my mother how meaningful it was that a young child noticed her difficulty and acted. That moment showed me that even the smallest choices can strengthen the bonds of a community and leave a mark larger than we expect. In Scouts, once, after a strict scoutmaster had a heated conflict with a parent, I simply asked her, "Are you okay?" She later told me how much comfort she felt in that simple question. I learned that what people often need most is not a clever solution, but the reminder that they are not alone in facing a difficult moment.

These small acts do more than meet immediate needs. They create happiness and satisfaction, which together form the foundation of mental health. In this sense, mental wellbeing is not just an individual matter; it is sustained through connection with others. When care is not one-sided but mutual, when people feel truly connected, our minds naturally grow healthier and stronger, making us more resilient in the face of stress.

I read an article from the National Institutes of Health that explained how people with strong support systems bounce back from challenges more quickly. The American Psychological Association also points out that loneliness often increases the risks of anxiety and even health problems later in life. It made sense to me, because I know from my own experiences that just having someone stand beside you can make a hard moment feel lighter, even when nothing else changes externally.

Science also shows why this happens. When people laugh or grieve together, our brains release chemicals like oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin. These chemicals calm stress and make us feel safe, almost like nature's way of rewarding us for connecting. Oxytocin, often called the "bonding hormone," doesn't just help us trust one another. It also lowers aggression and strengthens empathy. That means communities that encourage kindness and care can actually prevent conflict before it starts, long before words of anger or division ever take root.

For teenagers especially, being part of groups like sports teams, volunteer programs, or clubs builds self-control and resilience. One guide I looked at from the National Institute on Drug Abuse said that when young

people see their peers making healthy choices, they are more likely to do the same. That's exactly what we try to do in POCO.

POCO is more than just a club. It is a community where we support and rely on one another, while also reaching out to other teens who might struggle with drugs. We started small, painting murals in rehab centers with messages of healing and second chances. Over time, those murals turned into lectures in middle school auditoriums. The hands that once painted murals have expanded into voices that fill school auditoriums with encouragement, honesty, and hope. For now, we focus on prevention by reaching students who "have not yet started" down a dangerous path. But in the future, I hope we can also be a source of guidance and renewal for those who "already have."

"Community and I" is not about standing above others, but standing with them. It is about noticing the moments others might overlook, turning care into action, and believing that even the smallest decisions can spark the greatest change. That is the kind of leadership I hope to carry forward, in college, in my career, and in every community I will one day call home.

"Those who have a strong sense of love and belonging have the courage to be imperfect," said Brené Brown, capturing the essence of a community unified by shared imperfections."

Courage to Love

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The Dual Role of Community in Shaping Substance Use: From Stigma to Support by Euna Kim

When people approach someone under the influence of drugs, their first instinct is to look down upon them. Our society labels people who struggle with drug abuse as ill in the mind and reckless; people who have destroyed their futures. But, this niche vision is much oversimplified. Unfortunately, our world is flawed in multiple ways, and we cannot reach a world where everyone is clean of drug use. We neglect to see our own role in this issue – social pressures, judgements, isolation. We are part of the cause that leads people to use drugs in the first place. There are many instances in which the main cause of drug use is not just the choice of the individual, but the influence that the community has that makes people believe that using drugs is their only escape. But instead of acknowledging our influence, we continue to judge people for choosing a path involving drugs. As a community, we hold a responsibility for not just our lives, but the lives of those around us as well. We must take accountability for our actions and take initiative to save those struggling with substance abuse.

The peers that one surrounds themselves with play an important role in the choices of substance use. According to Beth S. Russel and Jeremiah Trudeau, youth who begin their substance use as young as age 8 are often pressured by peer culture to do so. “Their escalation in substance use to a pattern including opioids was also most often attributed to peer influence over several years.” (Russel & Trudeau, 2015) As demonstrated, we can see that our community can be a deciding factor in whether a young person experiments with drugs. Peer influence reflects a larger culture of judgement and expectations that can shape behavior. When we normalize or even encourage substance use, individuals may believe that drugs are their only option of belonging or coping. Stigmatization produced from society has proved to be another driving factor of substance abuse. Jennifer Ahern and Jennifer Stuber state that stigmatization may also adversely affect the health of those who use illicit drugs, through exposure to chronic stress such as discrimination. The rejection that people face from society reinforces the feelings of isolation and worthlessness. This feeling of never being able to fit in with the rest of society makes them turn into the dark path of substance abuse. Our community and society actively shape the situations in which people believe drugs are their only escape.

So, how can we fulfill our responsibility to become part of the solution? People are doubtful that one person can change the world, but in situations such as these, individuals can greatly impact our society. Even as a peer, they hold the power to change one’s life. According to Keith James Topping, peer education could impact attitudes, knowledge, behavioral intention and reduced risky behavior. Peer education was actually preferred to professional aid and was as effective as professional education. This proves that our society can initiate a ripple effect in which a community strengthens each other in terms of knowledge, empathy, and resilience. Young adolescents also have the capability of having as much influence to saving lives, even in schools. According to

Raquel Alarcó-Rosales et al., analyses have indicated that school based intervention programs can be effective in reducing the escalation of substance use among students. By giving students the knowledge and skills necessary to combat substance abuse, programs can lead to the promotion of healthier behaviors and choices.

As proven throughout this paper, the influence of community on substance use cannot be ignored. We can view the influence of community as a double-sided sword. On one end, community can be the reason that the problem with substance use gets worse. Peer pressure, social isolation, and societal stigma can force people to default to using drugs. But, community can also be the reason why we are able to escape this issue. Through support and proper education to raise awareness, our community can help guide people to the right paths without needing to use substances. Each and every person has the potential to make a difference in their community. By taking responsibility for our actions, we can promote understanding and support rather than shame and exclusion. As we help our community grow in awareness, we grow as individuals as well.

“Community significantly influences substance abuse through peer pressure, social stigma, and isolation, but also holds the potential to combat it through peer education and school-based interventions, urging individuals to take responsibility and foster support rather than judgment, as supported by research from Russel & Trudeau, Ahern & Stuber, Topping, and Alarcó-Rosales et al..”



To what extent is community a crucial aspect of mental health? By Hailey Kim

What is a major part of your life? For most people, including myself, a community is the number one aspect in our lives. A community plays an important role in people's lives and mental health due to several factors. First, everyone needs a community to rely on. Second, the community is there to allow people to thrive in their own ways. Lastly, it strongly affects people's mental health both positively and negatively. Community is a crucial aspect of mental health to a very large extent because of connections, responsibility, and influence.

Communities are full of building different connections. These different connections that people build plays a main part in their mental health. What a person needs to support them are connections. The connections that support each other. The connections that uplift each other. The connections that make people feel like they belong. All of these traits of connections contribute to a person's mental health. For instance, a positive effect to mental health is when someone feels lost within themselves, the connections they build in a community are there to make them feel like they belong. On Statistics Canada, reports have shown that 53.5% of people have felt like they belong in a community. Feeling like you belong within a community has a huge positive impact on your mental health. It not only gives you a sense of support, but also a reason to keep going. Whereas if you don't feel like you belong, that equally has a huge negative impact. Based on the National Library of Medicine PubMed, it can often lead to depression, a feeling of loneliness, and even risky behavior. Whether it is positively or negatively, we know for a fact that connections that we build in our community plays a main part of our mental health.

Within a community, there are countless opportunities to get involved and support others. These opportunities help build responsibility, which is a crucial aspect of mental health. From cleaning up a local park to donating to charity, even a small action can make a significant difference. As you help your community strengthen, you are constantly building responsibility. The actions we take to support our community shapes our mind in a positive direction. On the National Library of Medicine PubMed, it is stated, "Employees who felt responsible for completing an important team project (Study 1) and MTurk users who felt and actively took social responsibility (Study 2) were more inclined to use mental contrasting." This study supports how taking responsibility within a community strengthens mental health by increasing motivation and encouragement. Ultimately, the responsibility you build within a community encourages both personal growth and strategic thinking.

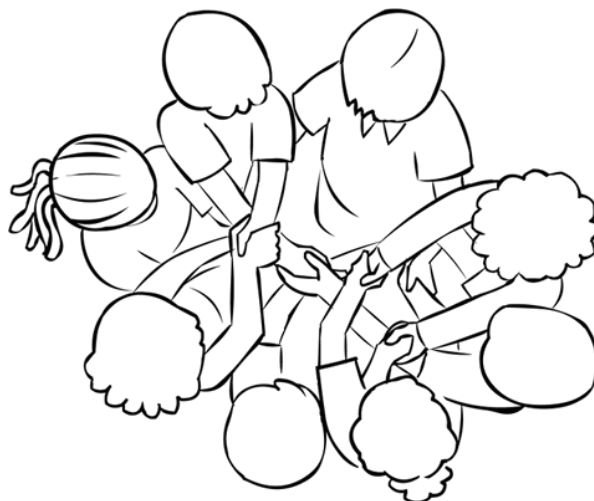
Furthermore, communities are influential. People within a community influence each other everyday, especially in school environments. According to the National Library of Medicine PubMed, it is stated, "In the school environment, some children seem to influence the attitudes and behavior of their peers more than

others.” This demonstrates how people, particularly children, are heavily influenced by others around them. Constantly being influenced can lead to negative effects on our mental health such as anxiety and stress. For instance, oftentimes, when people are in a toxic environment or surrounded by people representing negative behavior, they are influenced to do the same. Besides anxiety and stress, common negative factors are low-esteem and feelings of loneliness. On the other hand, some people can be influenced in a positive way. If everyone in a community contributes to activities hosted for a good purpose, it inspires other people to do the same. In turn, creating a stronger and well-connected community that leaves people with a positive mindset.

Moreover, both outcomes can strongly shape a person’s mental health.

In conclusion, community is a major part of mental health because of the relationships we build, the responsibility we take, and the influence we get within a community. A strong sense of community can reduce negative feelings like depression and loneliness. This is due to the relationships and actions we build to support our community. While there are ups and downs in the interactions within a community, it is clear that they all contribute greatly to mental health. Therefore, the choices we make and the actions we take are important. Everyone should feel belonged and have the opportunity to shape their mind positively through their community.

“Community is a crucial aspect of mental health to a very large extent because of connections, responsibility, and influence,” highlighting the foundational role these elements play in shaping well-being.



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Empowering Adolescents: The Case for Drug Education and Nationwide Prevention by Tae Lee

Adolescence is the developmental stage of life when people start figuring out who they are, becoming more independent, and making choices that affect their future. One of the biggest challenges teens face is being exposed to drugs and other harmful substances. With peer pressure and the influence of social media, it can be easy to feel pushed into trying them. This is why drug education matters. It gives young people the knowledge and skills they need to handle these situations and make better decisions. Looking at why adolescents should care about drug education, and the pros and cons of having substance abuse programs across the country, shows how prevention can help create healthier communities.

Drug education is important for prevention, health, and awareness. Studies show that using drugs as a teenager can interfere with brain development, hurt academic performance, and make it more likely for someone to struggle with addiction later in life (National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA] 2020). Since the brain is still developing during adolescence—especially in areas that control judgment and self-control—teenagers are more vulnerable to risky choices and lasting consequences. Learning about these risks early helps students think carefully and avoid mistakes.

Drug education also helps young adults resist peer pressure. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), peer influence is one of the most common reasons why teenagers experiment with harmful substances such as alcohol, nicotine, and other illicit substances (CDC 2022). Programs that include refusal skills, role-playing, and discussions give students methods to say no while maintaining social confidence, allowing adolescents to gain practical skills that extend into their daily lives. Another reason why adolescents should care about drug education is social impact. Substance abuse often affects families, communities, and opportunities for future success. For example, drug use is linked with dropout rates, delinquency, and dangerous behavior (Johnston et al. 2021). Adolescents who are educated about these outcomes are better prepared to understand that drug use is not only a personal risk but also a community issue.

Carrying out nationwide drug prevention programs, especially within education systems, offers several advantages. First, consistency ensures that all students, regardless of region or background, have access to information. Without the nation's supervision, some communities may have strong prevention programs while others have none, leading to unequal opportunities for awareness and support. Second, nationwide programs have the potential to lower healthcare costs and crime rates in the long term. Research suggests that every dollar invested in drug prevention saves about \$18 in treatments and social costs (NIDA 2016). By standardizing substance abuse education, governments could mitigate the economic and social burdens related to addiction, including services such as healthcare. Third, nationwide programs can address rising drug trends more

efficiently. For example, the rise of vaping and fentanyl-related overdoses has shown that these trends spread quickly. A national program allows professionals to update curricula and campaigns across the country simultaneously, ensuring adolescents are aware about the most relevant risks.

On the other hand, there are drawbacks to enforcing programs nationally. One problem is that a “one-size-fits-all” model may not work everywhere. Teens in rural areas, big cities, or different cultural groups face unique challenges, and a uniform program might not address those differences well. Another issue is the risk of using outdated or ineffective methods. In the past, programs like D.A.R.E. relied on scare tactics, but research found that this approach didn’t really work (Ennett et al. 1994). If programs don’t keep up with evidence-based strategies, they can end up wasting time and money. Funding and politics also play a role. Starting a large program requires steady support and money, which isn’t always guaranteed. If budgets are cut or policies shift, the programs may not last long enough to make a real difference. It’s also important that national programs balance general education with respect for different communities’ values, which can be difficult to manage on such a big scale.

Adolescents should care about drug education because it directly ties to their health, decision-making, and future opportunities. Education teaches them to resist peer pressure, avoid risky behavior, and contribute to healthier lifestyles. On a national level, substance abuse programs bring consistency, affordable tactics, and adaptability to new drug trends. However, they still have to avoid uniformity, fear-based tactics, and unreliable funding. Ultimately, drug education is not just a school subject, it is a foundation to build resilient, informed, and capable young adults who can shape a better place for themselves and society.

“Drug education is important for prevention, health, and awareness,” as noted by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA 2020), highlighting its role in protecting adolescents from the brain development risks and long-term addiction consequences of substance use.

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Youth Prevention

Leadership

The Enduring Influence of Family as a Community on Personal Growth by Chris Min

Growing up, my family has been the most influential community in my life. They have shaped my values, mindset, and perspective on the world. More than just the people I live with, my family has been my foundation, a source of support, discipline, love, and guidance through every stage of my development. Whether it was learning responsibility through everyday chores, facing challenges together, or being encouraged to pursue my goals, my family has created an environment that allowed me to grow with confidence. Their influence has taught me the importance of keeping my responsibilities, facing my challenges, and having moral values, which have shaped me into the person I am today.

One of the most significant ways my family has influenced me is by teaching me responsibility and accountability. From a young age, I was expected to help with household chores, manage my schoolwork, and actively contribute to our daily life. Whether it was doing the laundry, taking out the trash, or helping with meal preparation, these tasks were small but helped me get consistent lessons I needed to develop better discipline and time management. I learned that completing responsibilities can help build a strong foundation for achieving larger goals. Beyond household duties, I also did my schoolwork, met deadlines, and took ownership of my education. These experiences showed me that effort and consistency lead to meaningful results, and neglecting these small responsibilities can have consequences. Beyond practical lessons, my family demonstrated the importance of supporting one another through both triumphs and difficulties. Whether we were celebrating successes like a high test score or comforting each other during setbacks, I learned to approach these challenges with patience, resilience, and confidence. These experiences taught me not only to work hard but also to value empathy and care for others. All of this shaped how I interact with people and pursue my goals.

The combination of responsibility, support, and guidance from my family has been a cornerstone for the values I carry with me today.

Another significant way my family has influenced me is through their encouragement and belief in my potential. From the earliest stages of my life, they celebrated my accomplishments and offered me guidance whenever I approached obstacles. Their support created a sense of security, giving me the confidence to explore my interests and take risks without the fear of failure. For instance, when I first tried a new sport, my parents cheered me on even when I struggled. This has shown me that effort and courage can take you a long way. Even when I took on leadership roles in school or performed in piano recitals, their faith in me encouraged me to keep pushing even when I felt unsure about myself. Their consistent encouragement taught me that challenges are opportunities for growth instead of traps. It also helped me learn important lessons like self-belief, patience, and perseverance, which can shape the way I approach life as a whole. By having a mindset of confidence and

perseverance, my family has motivated me to face my challenges, pursue my passions, and trust in my own abilities.

In addition to teaching responsibility and providing support, my family has shaped my moral values and sense of empathy. Through both words and actions, I have learned the importance of treating others with kindness, understanding, and respect. I have watched my family help people in need, have patience during conflicts, and approach difficult situations with calm and thoughtful solutions. These examples showed me that a good person is not only defined by individual accomplishments but also by the positive impact they have on people around them. By participating in these acts of kindness and compassion, I developed a strong sense of integrity and responsibility. I learned that in order to contribute to the community, you need both empathy and action. This shows that our treatment of others defines our character as much as our achievements. These lessons continue to guide my decisions, interactions, and try to make a difference in my community, showing the impact my family had in shaping who I am today.

My family has been the most influential community in my life, shaping not only my character but also my values, morals, and approach to the world. Through lessons about responsibility, encouragement, and empathy, they have provided me with a foundation that allows me to grow with integrity. Their guidance has taught me the importance of hard work, resilience, and caring for others. These principles continue to shape who I am and how I interact with the world around me. As I continue to face new challenges and opportunities, the lessons and support from my family remain a guide for me, helping me to become a better person in this world.

“My family has been the most influential community in my life, shaping my values, mindset, and perspective on the world through support, discipline, love, and guidance,” reflecting the foundational role they play in personal development.



Importance of Community Within Women by Chloe Quan

For years, men have been the primary focus on the effects of drugs and alcohol. This left for many unattended cases of women relating to drugs. Addiction research was shaped by a narrow and exclusionary lens; because of this, women's unique experiences with addiction became a distant memory, and never was delved into. This bias is also reflected within our society, and how women have been treated for the duration they've been around. Women have been thrown to the sideline countless of times, whether it pertained to healthcare, rights, or just freedom. The patriarchal system may have been minimized in the modern times, but it still persists. The absence of a supportive community can also make it detrimental for a woman struggling with addiction to seek help or recover since isolation, stigma, and lack of resources restrict taking their first steps of going sober.

It was not until the 1990s that U.S. organizations started to require the inclusion of women in research studies. That was when scientists discovered the significant differences between how men and women experience addiction. This turning point revealed what has been overlooked for a while: women's struggles with substance abuse follow different patterns and carry different risks; they're shaped by both biology and society in ways that had never been sufficiently studied. The statistics show these clearly; it's like day and night. Men are more likely to use and abuse illicit drugs and alcohol, with 11.5% of boys and men over age 12 meeting criteria for a substance use disorder compared to 6.4% of women and girls. Yet, women face more severe health consequences. The overdose rate is higher in women, and in turn they are more likely to end up in emergency rooms. If the research on women's health were studied more attentively, many devastating cases could have been prevented.

These differences that men and women have with substance abuse can be traced to both biological and social factors. Biologically, hormones like estrogen and testosterone, as well as differences in body size and composition, mean that substances affect women's bodies differently compared to men's. Since women have a smaller body mass, are higher in fat content, and hormonal fluctuations can intensify the drugs or alcohol (especially because of the menstrual cycle, etc.), leading for the dependence to hit more rapidly and cause greater physical harm. On the societal side, women face unique pressures. From how society was formed and since continued to evolve, women have always been burdened with the most but it was always seen as an expectation rather than a chore. An example of this is childcare. Women, especially in this modern era are expected to have a good job, do the chores at the house, and also take care of the baby; while men may argue that they also do their fair share, statistics don't seem to favor their word. When women do drugs, they experience isolation and judgment, which makes reaching out for help way more difficult; but for men, it's okay. It's socially normalized.

Throughout all this, where is the community that forms such fragile yet strong bonds with one another? Female friendships are cultivated through understanding, open communication, and an unbreakable support system. That's why when faced with obstacles such as addiction, it makes it increasingly harder to open up to those so close to you. You want those that love and care for you to keep cherishing you; so in order to keep that image, you tend to keep these problems to yourself. Slowly but surely, you find yourself in a relapse of turning to yourself for answers when faced with problems. You force yourself into isolation unknowingly; your addiction becomes a poison that starts to consume you. You're too scared to ask for help, but in reality, the ones who truly love and cherish you rather see you reach out to them than see you at your own funeral, caused by all that poison intoxicating you because you couldn't ask for help.

While science has since revealed the biological and social differences that shape women's experiences with addiction, one of the most critical factors remains in community. Without a supportive system, women face greater isolation and heavier stigma; this limits the possibility for a recovery journey. Without community, connection, resources and validation would be lost, the isolation becoming overbearing, and that could lead to some nasty roads. To conclude, recognizing women's needs in research is only part of the solution; by ensuring that women have a reassuring community to turn to is essential for healing and long-term recovery.

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"Without a supportive system, women face greater isolation and heavier stigma; this limits the possibility for a recovery journey," emphasizing the vital role of community in addressing women's unique addiction challenges.



<https://fherehab.com/learning/addiction-affecting-women>

Breaking the Isolation Cycle: Community, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse Prevention by Emma Tran-Lee

I remember feeling very lonely during the pandemic. I started 7th grade at a new school on zoom, so I only met my classmates as boxes on a screen. I remember wanting nothing more than to go outside, create friendships with people, and find a community where I could belong. And I'm sure many of the people reading this felt the same way.

Sadly, for some people, this feeling of isolation is their daily life. They don't have a strong sense of community or connections to others. This is a problem because loneliness can lead to substance abuse.

The connection between a lack of social interaction and substance abuse can be seen from the COVID lockdowns. There was an increase in mental health problems. 1 out of 10 adults had anxiety or depression in 2019, and this went up to 4 out of 10 during the pandemic. The CDC found that 13% of Americans increased or began abusing substances to cope with stress from the pandemic. Also, ODMAP (an overdose reporting system) found an 18% increase in opiate overdoses.

Thankfully, the pandemic ended, and we went back to our normal lives. But despite not being stuck at home anymore, many people still feel lonely. Half of the adults in the country reported feeling lonely, and the rate of loneliness among young adults has increased every year between 1976 and 2019. The Surgeon General even created an advisory, as this is such an important issue for public health. Shockingly, they found that lacking social connection is as dangerous to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. This is even more surprising when considering that cigarettes literally have chemicals that cause cancer, but it makes sense because humans are meant to be social.

Also, loneliness in children and adolescents increases the risk of depression and anxiety. These conditions are associated with substance use disorders and other negative effects on one's life. For example, adolescents with depression were more likely to use illegal drugs, marijuana, and binge drink alcohol. They were also more likely to have a substance use disorder as an adult, not complete high school, and get arrested by the age of 19. This shows why it's important to prevent conditions like depression from developing. It can lead to higher rates of substance abuse that permanently impact people's lives.

Therefore, it's important that people get proper help for mental health conditions. However, there is a stigma that surrounds discussing and getting treatment for mental health. Some people have negative attitudes towards supporting those with mental health problems. This makes it less likely that those affected will get proper help. The CDC recommends being understanding and empathetic to those with mental health conditions

to reduce stigma. Listening to others who may have different experiences also creates a more supportive community, since people will be more willing to open up about challenges they're facing.

Another way to decrease the stigma about mental health and substance abuse is through education and awareness. Many people view drug addiction as a failure to resist using drugs, but in reality, it's a medical condition. This perspective leads to people with substance use disorders feeling more shame and guilt, so they don't want to reach out. Therefore, they become more isolated and turn to using even more drugs. Also, because people don't have an accurate idea of what addiction truly is, people who need help don't receive it. In 2021, 10.4% of people who thought they needed treatment didn't get any because they were afraid of being seen negatively by their communities. As a community, we need to be educated about the truth of substance use disorder, so that people won't feel ashamed for speaking up and asking for help.

In our modern world, it's very common to feel alone, and think that you have to face difficult problems like mental health and substance abuse by yourself. But that's not the truth. By reducing stigma about these issues, people will feel less ashamed to ask for help before possibly turning to the path of addiction. It's so important to have a strong community and bonds with others, so if someone is struggling, then they will have people that they can lean on. I've realized how important community is, so in college and in the future, I will definitely try to find various communities I can be a part of so I won't be alone.



“The Surgeon General even created an advisory, as this is such an important issue for public health, finding that lacking social connection is as dangerous to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day,” underscoring the critical link between isolation and well-being.

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