

The Importance of Belonging

By David Pitonyak

Most of what I do in my practice is not very complicated. I spend time with people in ordinary places and situations and try to get to know them. I always ask the person for permission to meddle in their business, and most people, even those without a formal means of communication, let me know that it's OK. What I am most interested in is the person's story, the people and events that have shaped their lives, the highlights and disappointments, the ordeals and accomplishments. What often emerges, if I listen carefully, is a very human story, one that is easy to identify with, one that is all at once extraordinary and ordinary.

More often than not, what I learn from these stories is that the root of the person's difficult behaviors is loneliness. Many of the people I meet in my practice have one thing in common - they have lost connections to the most important people in their lives. Some people have no contact with their families, or if they do, the contacts are infrequent or tentative at best. Sometimes family members are there, but the person has no friends, depending instead people who are paid to be with them.

Paid care givers can be wonderful company, but they frequently change jobs or assume new positions; the resulting instability can be devastating to someone who is fundamentally alone. Bob Perske (1988) describes how a person whose life is devoid of meaningful relationships might feel: "We have only begun to sense the tragic wounds that so many [persons with developmental disabilities] may feel when it dawns on them that the only people relating with them -- outside of relatives -- are paid to do so. If you or I came to such a sad realization about ourselves, it would rip at our souls to even talk about it."

I believe that loneliness is the number one cause of difficult behaviors. It is not the only cause, of course, it is just the most common one. We are relational beings and the absence of meaningful relationships makes us sick. It wears us down to the point where we can't see straight. If you have difficulty believing it, if it seems too "touchy-feely," imagine yourself without the people you love for thirty days. You have no idea where they have gone. Now imagine being without them for sixty days...or ninety...or more. How are you feeling? Are you sleeping well? What is your mood? My bet is that you are falling apart. My bet is that you are spiraling out of control. You want to be logical about all of this, but reason has taken a back seat to longing.

I met a man once who was very much alone in the world. When he was a young boy, his family sent him to an institution. He had troubling behaviors, including self-injury, that would not go away, regardless of the behavioral strategies people employed or the medications he was given. He refused to do things with other people and preferred to isolate himself in his bedroom, wrapped tightly in blankets; they said he was "resistant to our treatment efforts." After getting to know him better, I came to believe that his

troubling behaviors and his resistance to relationships were the direct result of the trauma he endured when he was separated from his family as a young boy, and from the systematic abuse he suffered at the hands of his "care givers," often in the name of treatment (e.g., time out, seclusion, over-correction). This is to say nothing of the constant turnover in his staff; losing them was common; losing the people he cared about was less common though far more devastating.

When I suggested that trauma and loneliness might be at the root of his difficulties, one member of his team said, "He's not lonely. He has one-to-one coverage." You can, of course, have ten-to-one coverage and be terribly alone. One way I like to explain the difference between coverage and relationships is to ask people to imagine that I have just returned home from a road trip. I pull up in my driveway, and discover that my wife, Cyndi, is not home. Another woman is standing at the door and I ask, "Where is Cyndi?" She replies, "Cyndi is not home, but don't worry. We have you covered."

People generally laugh at this scenario; it's silly; preposterous, really. But it is exactly what happens to people who experience our services time and time again. The very fact that people laugh at the joke of another woman "covering" for my wife is indication that they know there is a huge difference between "coverage" and "relationships." Our field keeps giving people coverage (and interventions) when what they desperately need is to belong.

There are many things we can do to help people find meaningful and enduring relationships (Pitonyak, 2004). As a starting point, I like the questions posed by Mary Romer (Romer, 2002). They strike me as fundamental to anyone's success: "Are enough people engaged in the person's life?" "Are there people who are imbued with the belief and hope for a brighter, better future for the person?" and, "If not, how might such people be found or how might that sense of hope be instilled in those committed to walking with the person?"

References

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