



Fostering Student Connections

Be here. Be you. Belong.

By Sarah

One of the most important life experiences is feeling like **you belong where you are, how you are**. Human connection is essential for healthy development. In May 2023, United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new Surgeon General Advisory, stressing the reality of “loneliness, isolation, and lack of

connection” being public health crises. Dr. Murthy explained “loneliness is like hunger...a signal we’re lacking something for survival” (New Leaders, 2024).

School connectedness is a strong protective factor for children’s mental health and directly impacts student engagement and learning (Leever, 2023). For this reason, medical experts and researchers have recommended increasing connectedness as an effective preventative strategy that can deter young people from engaging in risky behaviors and decrease loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Nat Lib of Medicine, 2018).

Dr. Maithreyi Gopalan, a Professor of Education and Public Affairs at Penn State University, compiled research that showed the positive correlation between a ‘belonging intervention’ and student performance, perseverance, and mental health. The components of the intervention were as follows:

- ✓ The acknowledgment that challenges are expected, especially during times of transition, and that most students experience similar feelings in these situations.
- ✓ Communication that belonging is a process that tends to increase over time.
- ✓ Use of student examples of challenges and resolutions, often written in letters to future students (Gopalan, 2023).

Another important concept is that social connection is based less on how many friends a child has and more on the quality of their relationships. Taking time to discuss and practice what the qualities of a good friend look like will help students build positive social skills. Parents and educators can help children think differently about perceived negative interactions with others and the power of a growth mindset (Leever, 2023).

As parents and educators, we see fragile yet powerful interactions amongst kids that have the potential of unveiling vulnerabilities and strengthening resiliency. Brené Brown explains that a sense of belonging isn’t just about fitting in. When students genuinely belong, they feel seen, heard, and valued in a place, without ridicule, as their ever-changing, unique selves. It starts with self-discovery and acceptance and grows into confidence and celebration of self-worth. As mentors, we can create opportunities for every student to feel safe, respected, and important. We can model how we treat others that appear different or unfamiliar to us, celebrating the weirdness and goodness in all of us. We all bring something to the table and it’s to our benefit that our offerings aren’t the same.

As the school year kicks off, educators have shared the intentionality behind connection-building moments in their classrooms. Below are some examples of routines and activities that emulate the value of relationships while learning.

Daily Dedication

Henry Seton incorporates brief but powerful daily dedications; 30-60 second presentations delivered by a student or teacher, about anyone real or fictional that's provided inspiration. Seton explains these moments plant seeds for deeper relationship building while fostering an environment of humility that allows students to honor their own diverse identities and important people in their lives. Students could also print visuals of their dedication and post them around the classroom.

Student Sunlight

At times, students struggle with social skills and making friends. Make an intentional effort to laugh with and provide praise to students AROUND their classmates. This helps students see others through your eyes and encourages them to look for the goodness in everyone.

Empty Desk

Leave an empty desk in your classroom so when a new student joins your room, it sends the message that the class was waiting for them. It also signals to your current students that their class could grow and change. Making a 'welcome sign' or having students sign a card to leave on the desk is a special touch. Students can sense when adults feel inconvenienced rather than genuinely excited that they are a part of their classroom family.

Belonging Design

Provide opportunities for students to celebrate their roots as you strengthen your class family tree. Dedicate a large portion of your walls to student artifacts, such as self-portraits, 'I AM' poems, class projects, photographs, etc., showcasing your students' strengths and identity. Students' cultures, interests, and backgrounds should be mirrored when they walk into a learning space. Don't forget about the visuals that serve as constant reminders of resiliency, a growth mindset, and restorative practices.

Dialogue Journals

Have students write to an adult in your building every week and then write back. Topics can vary and be chosen by your students. Although this can be time consuming, students feel heard and important, looking forward to this meaningful exchange.

Family Norms

Create the non-negotiables in your classroom. What's important to your students and how do these values look, sound, and feel in a classroom? Create powerful visuals and refer to these agreed-upon norms regularly that increase ownership and student agency. Making a plan for how students circle back when norms are challenged is also important.

Boring Together

Take off the pressure of sharing a "fun" fact about themselves, ask students to come up with a boring fact instead. For example, "I ate cereal for breakfast" or "My alarm goes off at 6:50 every

morning.” Students begin to notice commonalities amongst themselves and this activity often leads into other conversations.

Fake Summer/Winter Break

Not every student has an epic family vacation to tell about after returning from a break so tap less into the comparison trap and more into students’ imagination and ask them to come up with the most outlandish, made-up adventures. Students can read and vote on the wildest one.

Daily Check-in

It takes one adult champion that checks in and gives support to make all the difference to a student. Show interest in your students as people, not just learners. Try and engage with each student, every class. Use those popcicle sticks to help you keep track of who you’ve checked in on. Take 1-2 minutes to ask how the soccer game went this weekend or when they get to visit their Grandparent next. Again, students feel connected when their grades and behavior aren’t the only topics of conversation. Come up with a method in your building that ensures every student has a connected adult.

If you have other suggestions that have worked well in your classroom or home, please share them with me and I’ll share them with our SCIP community. Happy connecting!

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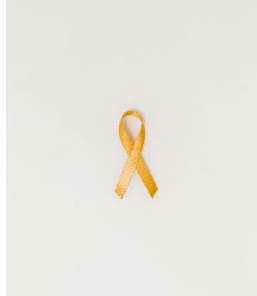
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National Suicide Awareness Month

By Tessah

National Suicide Awareness Month is in September. Throughout this month in Nebraska, various communities will hold awareness events and prevention trainings, such as the Out of Darkness Community Walks, Gatekeeper Trainings, and Mental Health First Aid Trainings. Check your local health organizations and regional behavioral health offices for more information on these events. Some events and trainings are mentioned below as well.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that suicide is the second leading cause of death for people ages 10 to 14. It is also the third leading cause of death for those between 15 and 19 years of age. The CDC's provisional data suggest that more than 49,000 people in the United States died by suicide in 2023. Of those, 306 individuals were Nebraskans. While suicide affects everyone, rates of suicide are highest among Non-Hispanic American Indian/ Alaska Native individuals at 23.8%. Non-Hispanic White and Non-Hispanic Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander follow at 17.6% and 17.3%, respectively. Suicide rates continue to be much higher in males than in females. Despite these frightening statistics, suicide is preventable.

Suicide can be prevented when the warning signs are known. The American Psychiatric Association reports the most common warning signs include the individual speaking about death and suicide, expressing feelings of hopelessness, having no sense of purpose in life, and questioning if it would be better if they were not here. Other warning signs include increased substance use and other risky behaviors, withdrawing from relationships, and experiencing dramatic mood changes.

Several risk factors may increase the likelihood of an individual attempting and/or completing suicide. These include previous suicide attempts, a family history of suicide, mood disorders, and substance use. Access to lethal means, such as unsecured prescription medications and firearms, is also a factor. Experiencing a loss, a history of trauma or abuse, or being bullied by peers can contribute as well.

As opposed to these risk factors, protective factors that may counteract the likelihood of an individual committing suicide include feeling strong connections to other individuals, family, community members, and social institutions, having a sense of cultural identity, having problem-solving skills, and having access to effective mental health care.

Having a mental illness can be a contributing factor to suicide. However, over half of the population that died of suicide did not have a known mental health condition. This could result from the individual being undiagnosed and/or not sharing their mental health challenges with the people around them.

Is self-harming a warning sign? Not necessarily. The Mayo Clinic describes that nonsuicidal self-injury may bring a sense of release of physical and emotional tension, but life-threatening

injuries are usually not intentional. Within the same article, the Mayo Clinic recommends speaking to the individual about the self-harming behaviors and seeking professional help from a pediatrician, school counselor, and/or any mental health professional.

Within Nebraska, there are several certified evidence-based programs and training options for suicide prevention that exist for people of all ages. These trainings equip participants with the skills to recognize the warning signs, engage with suicidal individuals, and refer the suicidal individual to professional help.

The QPR Institute has developed the Question, Persuade, Refer model and a series of Gatekeeper Trainings. These trainings are offered online and in-person to a variety of individuals, including professionals, coaches, school personnel, first responders, and many more. Learn more at [QPRInstitute.com](https://www.QPRInstitute.com).

Mental Health First Aid offers a series of training courses to reach teenagers, adults, and workplace professionals about mental health and substance abuse challenges. These curricula can be presented in both English and Spanish, and courses are conducted in-person and in a hybrid format. Learn more at [mentalhealthfirstaid.org](https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org).

Help is always available at the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988. Center Pointe also offers a 24/7 crisis line at 402-475-6695 (call only). Check out centerpointe.org to see all services offered.

References: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; American Psychiatric Association; The Mayo Clinic; QPR Institute; Mental Health First Aid.



NATIONAL (SUBSTANCE ABUSE) RECOVERY MONTH

By Chris

National (Substance Abuse) Recovery Month first launched in September of 1989. This arose as SAMSHA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) saw a real need to raise awareness surrounding substance abuse disorders and addiction to help reduce stigma and promote recovery. Please click the link below to find SAMSHA's

2025 Recovery Month tool kit.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/about/digital-toolkits/recovery-month/toolkit>

Today, National Recovery Month continues to be celebrated every September to offer hope, support, and awareness about substance use disorders/addiction and the idea that recovery is possible for anyone.

Each year, a new national theme/tagline is chosen. The theme for National Recovery Month, this year, 2025 is "Join the Voices for Recovery: Together We Are Stronger".

The theme highlights the importance and power of group and community support for those in recovery as well as those on the road to recovery. It also lends support to those who have been impacted by another person's substance use addiction and recovery.

In addition to those in and on the road to recovery, it also recognizes the dedication and commitment of the many first responders, service providers and community members that help make recovery possible.

The observance includes various events and activities aimed at raising awareness, reducing stigma, and celebrating the successes of individuals in recovery.

In Nebraska, Individuals, families, and communities are encouraged to celebrate and partake in Recovery Month. This can include attending events, sharing stories, wearing purple (the official color of Recovery Month), and joining in discussions about recovery.

The month-long event emphasizes that recovery is possible for anyone and everyone and that that can involve different ways, for different people, including treatment, medication, support services, and family support in a person's journey in recovery.

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (NDHHS) observes, promotes and celebrates recovery from substance use through awareness, prevention efforts, and training. They also provide information about treatment and recovery programs and services within Nebraska. Please click the link below to learn more about NDHHS.

<https://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/default.aspx>

Furthermore, NDHHS takes on a leading role in organizing, supporting and/or promoting September Recovery events through collaboration with a multitude of organizations and communities throughout the state.

For instance, NDHHS shares and highlights the different ways their Regional Behavioral Health offices promote and celebrate Recovery Month throughout the state.

- Region 1 Office: Distributing purple pinwheels in the Panhandle, a Celebrate Recovery on September 22nd, 2025. To learn more about this event or about the Region 1 Behavioral Health office please visit <https://www.region1bhs.net/>
- Region 2: "Language Matters" webinar. To learn more about this webinar or about the Region 2 Behavioral Health office please visit <https://www.r2hs.com/>
- Region 3: The Lights of Hope event in Kearney on September 12th, 2025. To learn more about this event or about the Region 3 Behavioral Health office please visit <https://region3.net/>
- Region 4: Run/Walk in Norfolk on September 25th, 2025. To learn more about this event or about the Region 4 Behavioral Health office please visit <https://region4bhs.org/>
- Region 5: Art Submission Contest (submissions due by September 21st, 2025). To learn more about this contest/event or about the Region 5 Behavioral Health office please visit <https://region5systems.net/>
- Region 6: A virtual "Recovery Rocks" event series every Wednesday night in September 2025 via Zoom. To learn more about this series event or about the Region 6 Behavioral Health office please visit <https://www.regionsix.com/>

Here are a few additional Recovery Month activities/events **currently scheduled** in Nebraska.

- **Life of Laughter – Combating Addiction Through Comedy (Omaha area event):** This event on September 6th invites alumni and the community to experience the power of comedy as a tool for recovery.
- **Hands Across the Bridge 2025 (Council Bluffs, Iowa/Omaha area event):** Join Prevention Means Progress, Valley Hope Addiction Treatment & Recovery, and other organizations on September 13th to celebrate recovery in all its forms. This is a nicotine-free event.
- **2025 Northeast Nebraska Rally for Recovery (Norfolk area event):** Hosted by The Connection Project on September 20th, this rally celebrates recovery and community strength and will present the 2nd Annual Spirit of Recovery Award.
- **CR Training Conference (Omaha):** This event, with early check-in on Friday, September 26th, offers training for individuals involved in Celebrate Recovery ministries, [according to Eventbrite](#).

- **The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services:** This state-wide event brings awareness to recovery from substance abuse and mental health challenges. It will be held from 12pm to 4:00 p.m. Sunday September 28, 2025, the north plaza (outside) at the State Capitol in Lincoln, NE.

Check the NDHHS website <https://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/default.aspx> for new and updated Recovery Month events/celebrations in Nebraska this month).



<https://www.samhsa.gov/>

<https://nationaltoday.com/national-recovery-month/>

<https://www.naadac.org/national-recovery-month>

<https://www.cdc.gov/overdose-prevention/php/toolkits/national-recovery-month.html>

<https://www.samhsa.gov/about/digital-toolkits/recovery-month>