

SOCIAL CONNECTION GUIDE FOR ACTIVITY PLANNING



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, who are the Traditional Owners of the land on which Swinburne's Australian campuses are located in Melbourne's east and outer east. We pay our respects to leaders and Elders past, present, and emerging, for they hold all their Peoples' memories, traditions, culture, and hopes.

We express our gratitude for sharing this land, our sorrow for the personal, spiritual, and cultural costs of that sharing, and our hope that we may walk forward together in harmony and the spirit of healing.

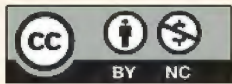
We also acknowledge and respect the Traditional Owners of lands across Australia and recognise the continuing sovereignties of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee approved this project per the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, reference number 20225828-9100.

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WEBSITE

access more information on the project and other resources and practice toolkits at our website www.social-connection.au.

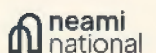
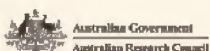


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Connection Project

INTRODUCTION



This guide is a practical resource for practitioners looking to foster social connection in their communities through activities, programs or interventions. It explains the key concepts related to social connection and offers a model to help understand how they fit together. The guide takes a hands-on approach and offers practical advice for designing social connection activities in everyday settings. It is a practical companion to the Social Connection 101.

For those yet to explore the foundational document, it is highly recommended and accessible at <https://social-connection.au/resources-database/social-connection-101>

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

This workbook guides practitioners through the process of designing activities with the explicit goal of either making new social connection or bolstering existing social connection. Key aspects covered include:

Design and Validation: Outlining a systematic approach for conceptualising and testing ideas about potential social connection activities to ensure their relevance.

Program Logic Development: Offering prompts and insights to assist practitioners in constructing a coherent and impactful program logic, ensuring that the intended outcomes align with the activities proposed.

Ways to start thinking about Measurement: Establishing clear target outcomes and methodologies for gauging the effectiveness of social connection initiatives.

WHO IS IT FOR?

This guide is designed for a broad audience of professionals and volunteers passionate about nurturing community bonds and enhancing social connection. This includes;

- Community Development Officers
- Local Councils
- Community Health Organisations
- Not-for-profit organisations
- Neighbourhood Houses

This guide is intended to equip a diverse range of practitioners with the knowledge and tools necessary to design and implement effective programs that strengthen social connection within communities, contributing to healthier more resilient communities.

SOCIAL CONNECTION CIRCLES

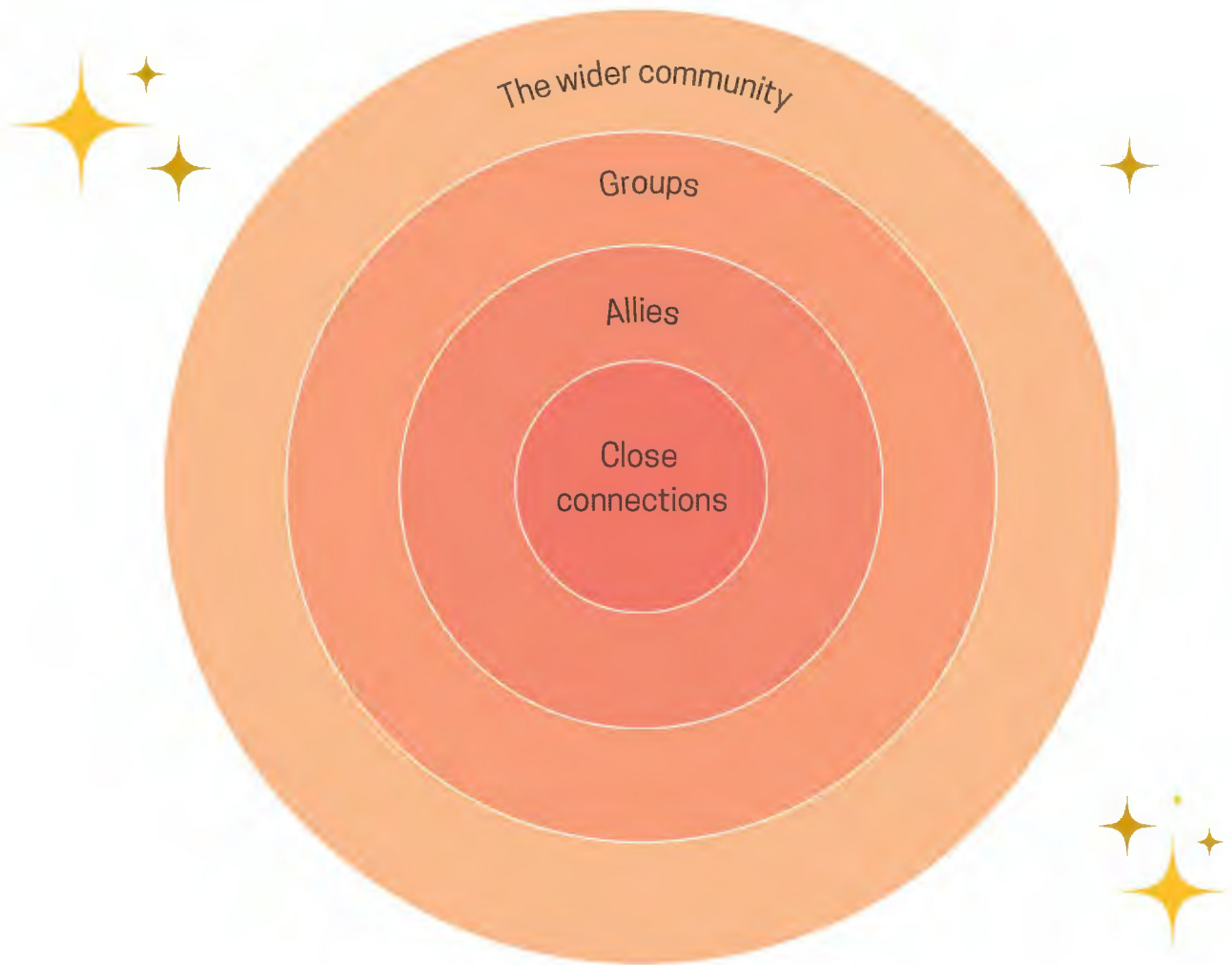


Figure 1: Social Connection Circles

Social connection is often thought of as having one-to-one connections. But social connection is about more than that. It's about balance and quality across a range of types of connections. We call these different types or layers of connection, 'circles of connection'.

Close connections are your inner circle, those that you have a strong bond of care for.

Allies are those you rely on for help of all kinds, and you help your allies, too, in return.

Groups are the communities that make you who you are - they might form around different parts of your life that you identify with - like work, hobbies, online communities, or sports. These are people you share some interests with.

The wider community are people around in your day-to-day life. You might recognise them to say hello. They make you feel like you belong in society - could be a local cafe or shop owner, friends of friends or the person at your yoga class.

THE SOCIAL CONNECTION MODEL

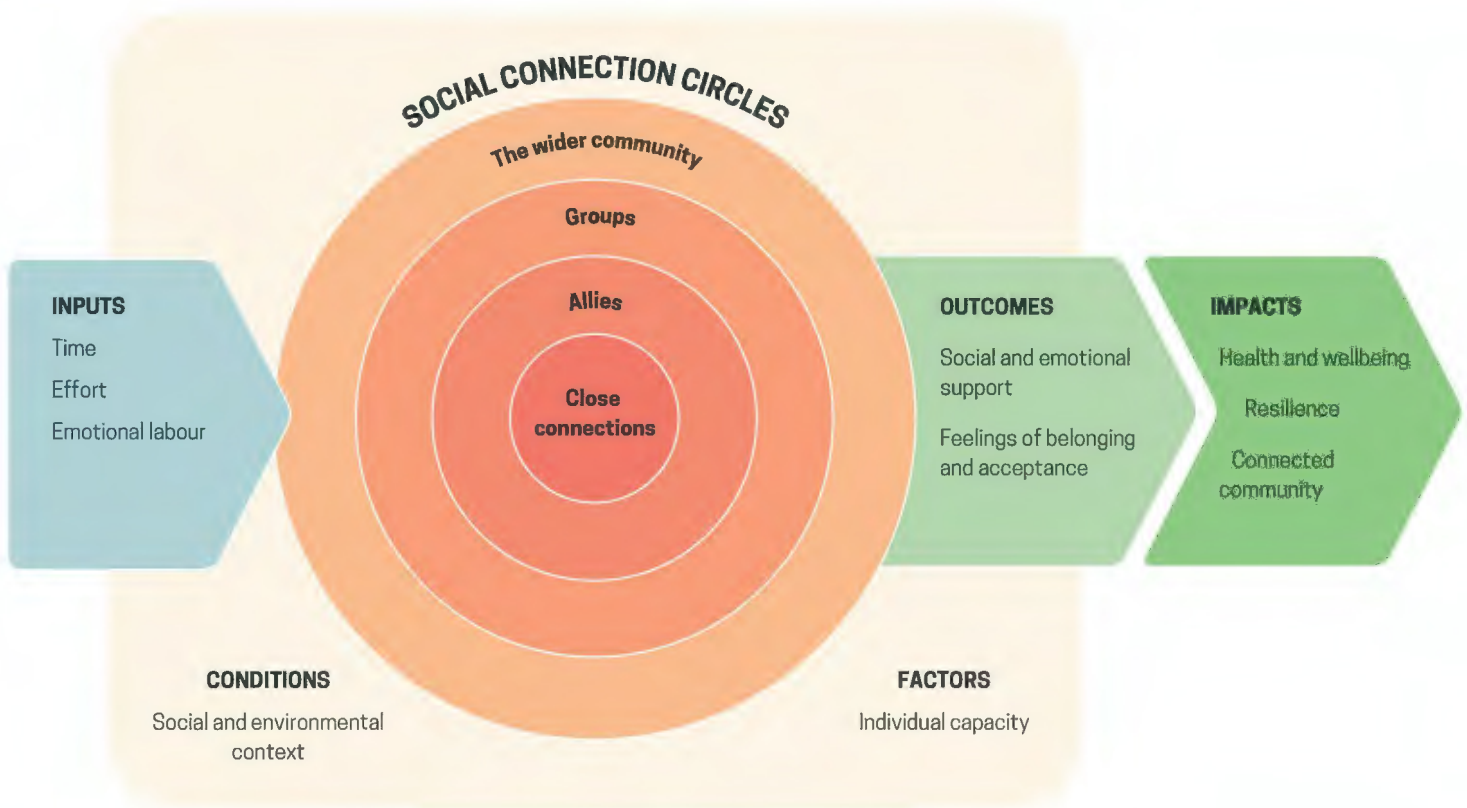


Figure 2: Social Connection Model

The Social Connection Model is an evidence-based model that brings together concepts from different disciplines across the academic literature as well as ways that people think and talk about social connection. It expands on the Social Connection circles, showing the relationship between what we put into our relationships and what we get out of them.

If you think about your connections, there are people you are closer or less close to. Some of your connections are around a hobby, a shared place or helping each other, others are people you regularly see in your community and others are close friends or family members. It's important to feel that you have balanced connections across these circles of connection.

Building and maintaining social connections involves significant time, effort, and emotional labour. Close relationships receive more of your attention. As relationships extend beyond close connections, each person gets less time and the dynamics shift towards a more reciprocal interaction. Factors such as work demands or challenging environments can hinder the ability to foster these connections.

Social connections bring benefits like emotional support and a sense of belonging, and they positively impact health, resilience, and community cohesion over time.

MEASURING SOCIAL CONNECTION

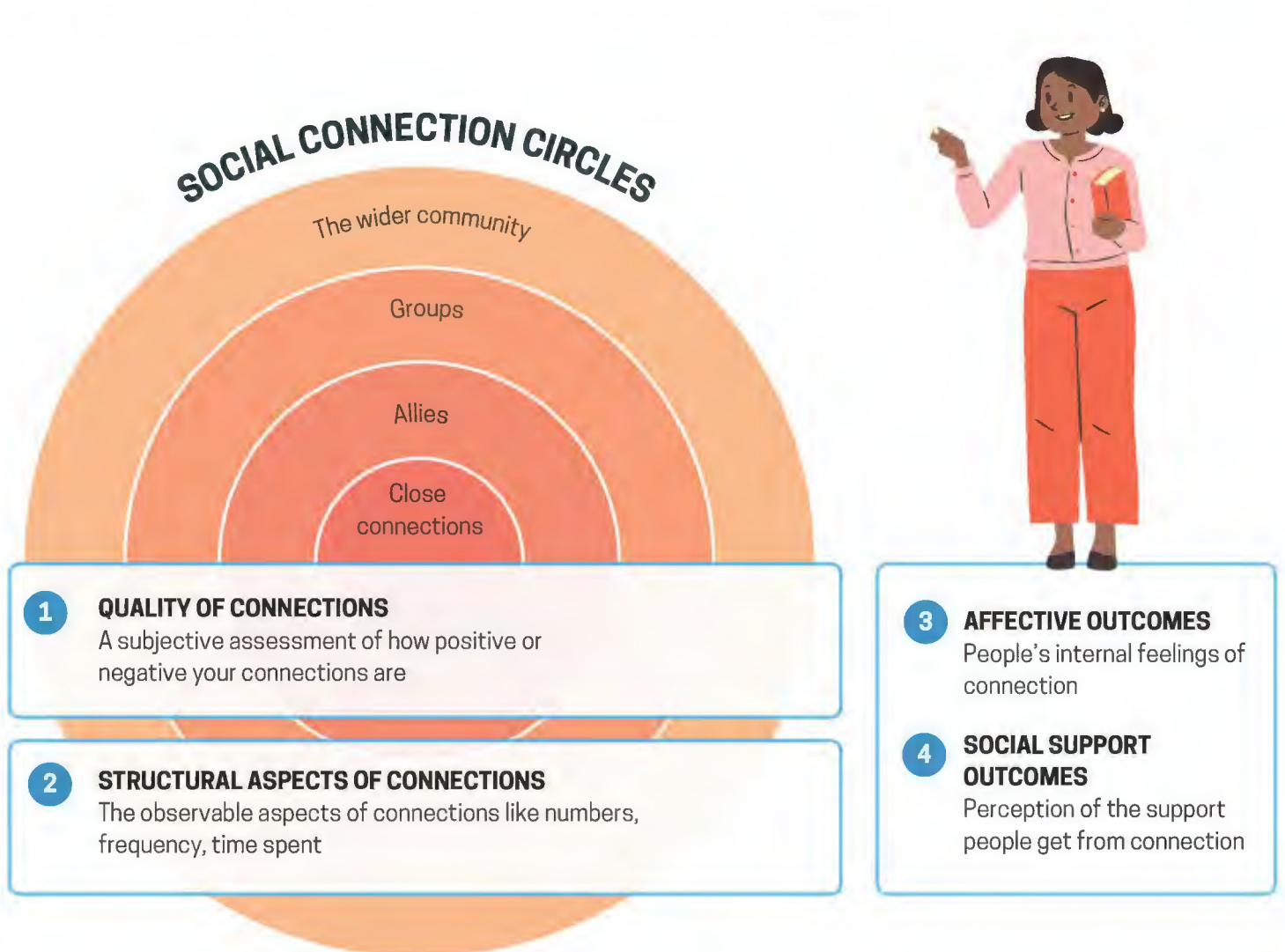


Figure 3: Social Connection Measurement

The 4 dimensions of measurement are based on analysis of research evidence and observed ways that people describe social connection when they talk about it. When implementing a program, activity or initiative aiming to improve or increase social connection, the diagram shows the measurable dimensions you might aim to improve – that is, having more contacts or connection time, assessing relationships as more positive, feeling more connected, perceiving oneself better supported.

When measuring, it is generally difficult (and tedious) to ask people to differentiate between each circle of connection – so it's most practical to look for, and measure, a change overall – or across a person's circles of connection.

SOCIAL CONNECTION ACTIVITY DESIGN PROCESS

In this section we outline an approach to help you effectively apply the Social Connection Model to your context and design an activity to deepen existing or build new connections in your community. As with any process, feel free to adapt it and make it your own.



1

Identify target audience

Start by identifying who you are creating your activity for and why. This will help inform the types of solutions that might be appropriate. You may need to do some additional research, engagement or co-design activities with the group - to uncover their needs. Don't make assumptions.

KEY QUESTIONS

- Is there a priority group you are targeting?
- Why are they a priority?
- What is unique about their context?
- What are their needs?
- Might they participate in defining their needs?

2

Identify the target outcomes

Identify the types of connections you want to influence. You might want people to feel more connected to the wider community. Or you might want them to be part of more different kinds of activities or hobby groups. You might want people to develop social supporters through growing their circle of allies. Remember building social support from allies takes time to build trust.

KEY QUESTIONS

- What social connection circle(s) are being targeted, why?
- Might you aim for connection with the wider community and groups, first; and then support building allies? Getting allies takes time for trust to build.
- Do you have any other target outcomes you'd like to aim for?

3

Design your Social Connection activity

Based on your participants and the desired change(s) to social connection, come up with ideas for activities that might help.

Use the Design Considerations in this guide and Social Connection 101, for ideas. Consider including your participants in this design process.

KEY QUESTIONS

- How might we support our target participants to build social connection?
- What does research evidence suggest might work?
- What are our constraints around resourcing, funding and compliance?
- How might you address any known barriers?
- Have we engaged participants? How will we validate if this is a good idea?

4

Ensure the activity you designed is likely to deliver the outcomes you want

Once you have some ideas shortlisted, it's good to check-in and look at whether they are likely to contribute to the outcomes you want your activity to lead to.

KEY QUESTIONS

- How does the activity contribute to achieving the outcomes set?
- Are there any gaps between what the activity offers and what is needed to achieve desired outcomes?
- How can we adjust the activity to better align with the outcomes sought, if necessary?

5

Measure and evaluate

We have created a Social Connection Program Evaluation Toolkit to help you evaluate the activity's impact on Social Connection. If you have additional target outcomes you may want to collect additional data to evaluate those.

Look back at dimensions to measure (Figure 3) and check our latest documentation on the Social Connection Program Evaluation Tool to help.

KEY QUESTIONS

- What will we use this data for?
- What do we need to measure to see if the activity makes any change?
- Is there a standard, ready, set of questions we can use?
- When will we need to measure (e.g. before, during, after the activity)?
- How will we collect data?
- How will we keep the data safe and private?
- How will we analyse the data?
- How will we present the data?

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Through our research we have uncovered a range of Design Considerations to take into account when designing Social Connection activities. Below are some cheat sheets to help you design programs and activities that help optimise the social connection you can get out of your activities. For more information, see Social Connection 101, and the reports of the Activating Social Connection project at social-connection.au.

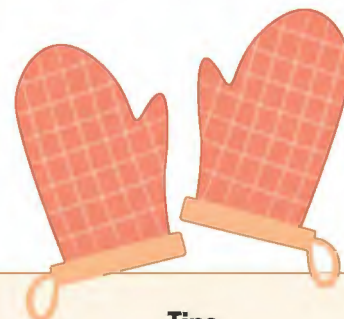
Actions

Social connection is often a by-product of other activities: Mostly, people attain social connection as a result of other activities. Activities do not need to be labeled as about building social connection; in fact, this may turn some people off. You can build in a set of social connection actions, to any activity or program, to ratchet up the opportunities to connect people.



Actions	Explanation	Tips
Action diversity	Different people want to connect in different ways so building a range of actions into your activities gives different opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer different ways for people to engage. • Create space for a coffee and a chat within existing activities. • Allow people to identify the actions they'd like to participate in.
Keep it simple	Activities don't need to be complicated. The basics work well .	Build in interaction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chat/ conversation • Walking • Interactive actions (see below)
Interactive activities	People get to know each other through interacting and working on stuff together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure actions create space for people to interact. • Invite people to solve problems together. • You could try joint cooking, gardening or other creative activities.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

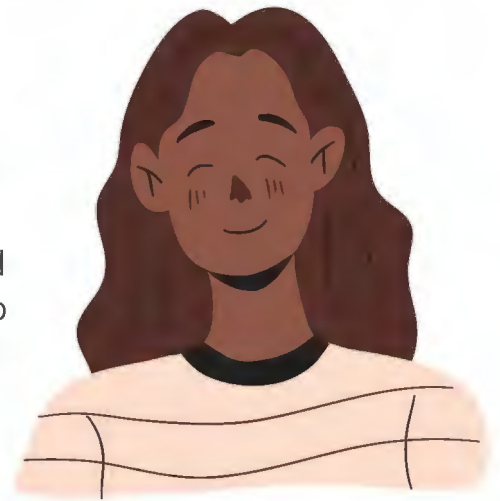


Actions	Explanation	Tips
Purpose-driven actions	Social connection is a by-product of a purpose-driven activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for ways for people to feel like they are aligning around a shared purpose. • Involve people in co-design activities around what the community cares about.
Synchronous activities	<p>Synchronous activities like singing, clapping and dancing give a sense of transcendence beyond the individual, evoking togetherness from the same group activity.</p> <p>This helps to foster group-ness and belonging together to a group.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for ways to bring synchronous action into activities. • Consider using singing, music-making, dancing, laughing, or chanting to boost feelings of connection.
Rituals or repeated practices	<p>Getting to know what to do and repeating an activity together gives people a sense of comfort and predictability. Rituals will become a group signifier or special thing that gives people a sense of belonging to a special group.</p> <p>Over time it builds a sense of group identity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating an agenda with repeated practices such as check-ins or warm-ups. • Look for inspiration in activities that have rituals like sporting events or religious/faith practices.
Volunteering	People go in a spirit of altruism and shared purpose to generate benefit which helps them to bond. Maybe try to make volunteering a shared experience and not done alone so people can build bonds through altruism together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find ways to make volunteering more accessible, visible and appealing. • Look for ways to make existing volunteering opportunities more collaborative and connected.
Consider group sizes	It can be much easier to get to know someone in a one-to-one rather than competing for attention in a group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all programs need to be for large groups, you only need two people to connect. • Consider mentoring or pairing programs. • Look for opportunities to break into smaller groups or pairs during larger group activities.

ACTIVITY DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Activity design insights

Through our ongoing research, the Activating Social Connection project has uncovered a range of insights into what building social connection looks like in communities, and some suggestions on how you might approach it. Before we get started on those, though, remember that it takes time for people to make connections and feel connected in a group, program or activity. There is a well-worn path to socialisation - see Figure 4 below and think about this as you seek to support people to connect through activities, events and groups.



How people connect to communities

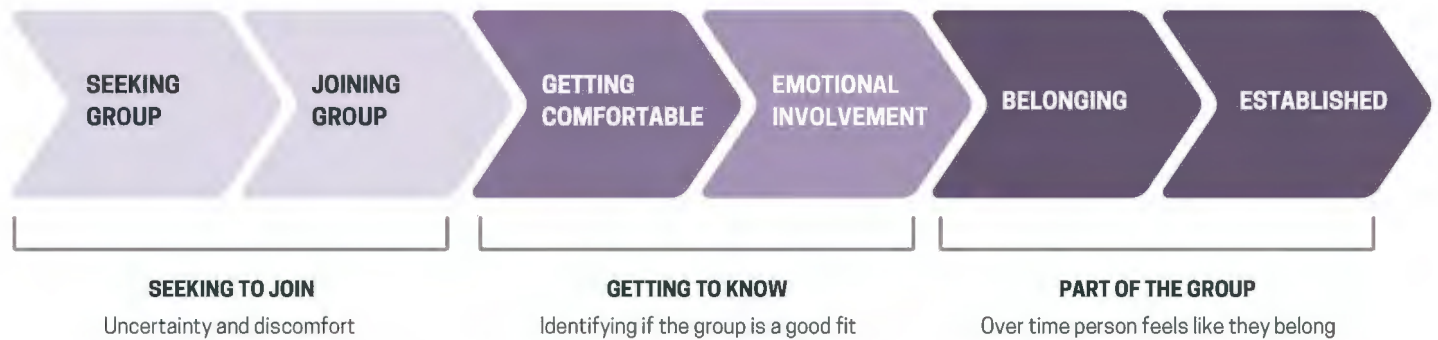


Figure 4: How people connect to communities

Insight	Explanation	Tips
Building social connection takes time	Establishing new relationships requires time, for building trust, working out if you belong and feeling safe. Consistently attending group activities demands persistence. It's common for some participants to leave if they don't feel the group suits them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs of activities will have more likelihood of building connections. • One off activities have their place, but be reasonable about social connection outcomes that can be produced.
People need freely accessible places to connect	Social connection happens in places – physical and digital places. If you want to connect people, you have to also consider how you can try to hold your activities in places conducive to connection.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure there are accessible, welcoming places available for people to meet, bump into each other, sit around waiting, or have a free coffee.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Insight	Explanation	Tips
Giving permission to connect	Approaching others directly can be daunting. Create spaces and activities where there is explicit 'permission to connect'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create times and places for people to talk and connect. • Don't put all the onus on individuals or the community to initiate, how might you facilitate space/places for them to meet? • Offer ongoing connection and group spaces where possible, or if the group is time limited offering ways to connect beyond the end of the group.
People value an invite or going along with someone	Receiving an invitation makes people feel appreciated, and many prefer not to attend events alone due to a lack of confidence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for opportunities to invite people, rather than have them sign up. • Look for ways to encourage bringing others along.
People use a mix of digital platforms and face-to-face to connect	Digital and face-to-face interactions are interlinked; digital tools are used to sustain in-person connections and share experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support a blend of digital and physical interactions, like using WhatsApp groups related to your activities. • Provide technology support to those who may need it.
Digital technologies can help those who struggle to connect in person	Digital platforms can be a crucial social tool for individuals with social anxiety, those who are time-poor, or live far from activity locations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider digital or hybrid events to help get people comfortable before meeting in person. • Look for ways for people to stay connected in between activities using messaging apps and digital platforms.
Time in community builds connection	Spending time in your local community through work, volunteering, community leadership programs and activities plays a significant role in developing social connections and a sense of belonging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for opportunities for programs to connect participants back into the community of place.

DEFINING THE FOCUS

When designing a program or activity aiming to build social connection, it's important to tailor it to the context, conditions, and factors relevant to your target audience. This means understanding their potentially unique needs, preferences, and circumstances. Consider aspects such as the cultural background, economic conditions, physical environment, language(s) spoken, and access to transport. What do you know already and what might need some more investigation to validate?

Brainstorm the challenge you want to address with your activity, program or intervention.

Who, what, when, where, why?



CREATING A PROGRAM LOGIC

When designing a Social Connection activity, it can be easy to rely on assumptions, 'common sense' or what's always been done. The following tool is designed to help you get specific about what you really aim to achieve through your activity, and how you think that the activity will address that aim. You can use this as a tool to help come up with ideas. Remember to test and validate your ideas with the community, or better yet, work with community members to develop ideas.

Goal

We want to help...

Identify the target audience

to

- Make new social connections
- Maintain social connections

Tick relevant

with

- Close connections
- Allies
- Groups
- The wider community

Tick relevant

Considerations for this target group or context

CREATING A PROGRAM LOGIC



Activity logic

We believe that by...

Describe your Social Connection activity

we will improve people's connection within

- Close connections
- Allies
- Groups
- The wider community

Tick relevant

We'll measure this by looking at improvements to Social Connection

- measured as quality of connection, structural aspects of connection, social support outcomes and affective outcomes

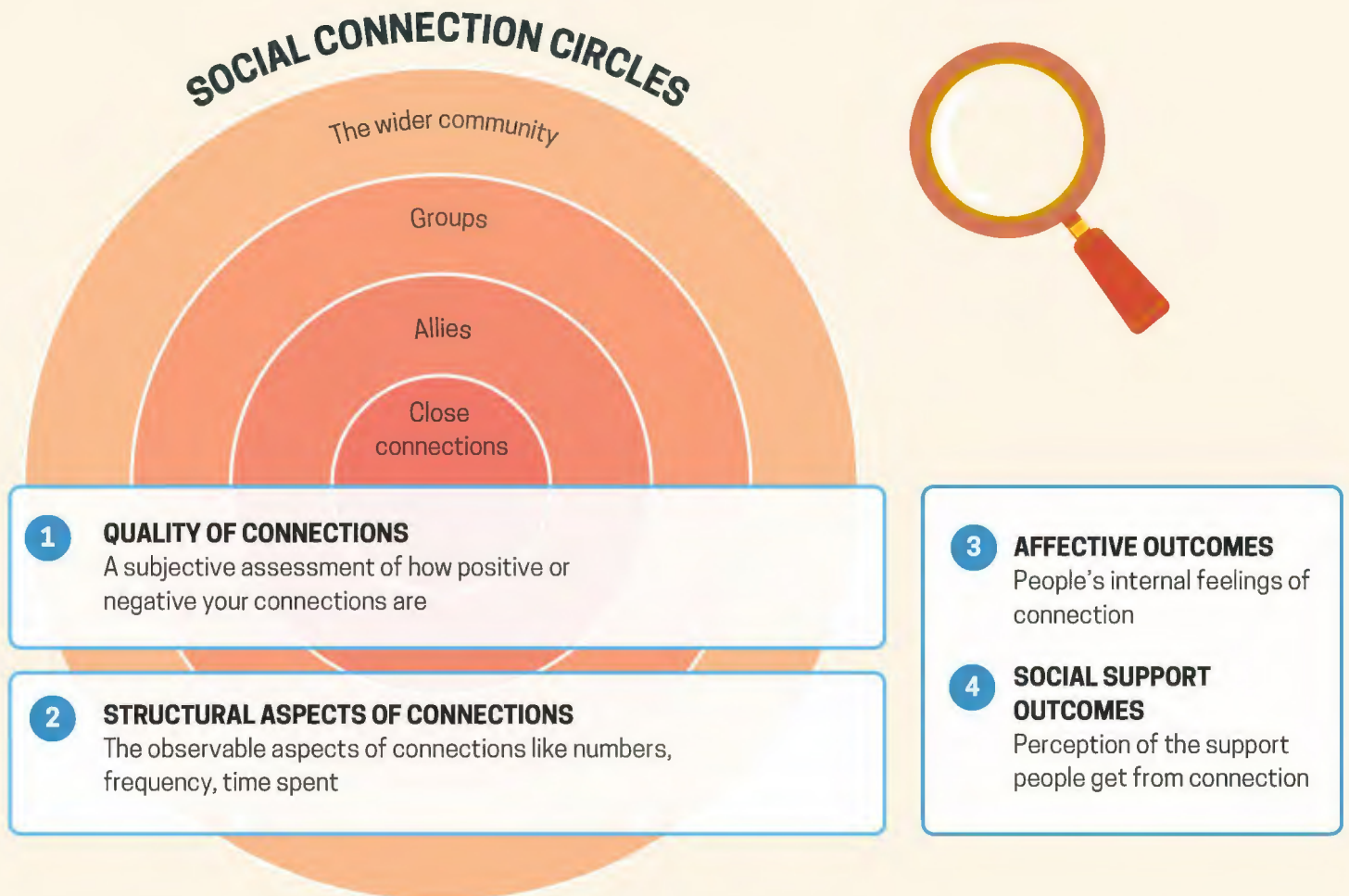
Over the longer term, we also expect changes to ...

because...

what are the long-term health, wellbeing, resilience and connectedness impacts you'd like to achieve

The reason you think your activity will lead to the desired change(s)

MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION

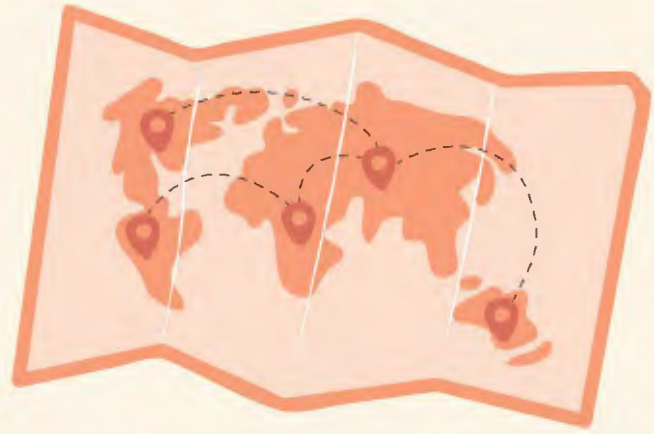


When considering how you will measure your program's social connection outcomes, come back to the measurable dimensions shown in the the model (Figure 3 above). We have developed an evaluation tool that will help you to assess changes in dimensions of social connection for your participants. You can use questions in the Tool to measure at the start of your activity/program or at some 'start' point where you want to start measuring from. Repeat administration of the questions, will tell you about changes to social connection over time. The Social Connection Program Evaluation Tool provides sets of questions that can be administered before, during and after your program.

In addition to measuring changes in dimensions of social connection, you may have other target outcomes set by your organisation or funders (e.g. improved feelings of safety, improved knowledge, increased confidence, employment). Consider what other tools and questions you might use to evaluate these.

For more information and access to the full sets of questions check out the Social Connection Program Evaluation Toolkit on the social-connection.au website <https://social-connection.au/resources-database/social-connection-program-evaluation-toolkit>

THANK YOU



With this guide you're on your way to creating a deliberate, evidence-based, plan for an activity, activities or program targeting stronger social connection in your community.

THE ACTIVATING SOCIAL CONNECTION PROJECT

The Activating Social Connection project aims to fill gaps in evidence, resources and guidance for local social connection activation. Based on research evidence, our project is committed to developing practical resources and guidance that are useable by community workers, planners and community members. The focus is to understand the complex mechanics of fostering positive social connections for people, and to translate this into resources that help to activate change.

As a collaborative endeavour, the project is part-funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Project Grant LP200301335. It is powered by a partnership between Swinburne University of Technology, RMIT University, the Australian Red Cross, Neami National, City of Casey, City of Whittlesea, City of Wyndham, and Today Design. The project partners with local people and organisations to support their work to enhance social connectedness within their communities.

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