

Making Connections Strategies for Community Resilience

Six core strategies emerged across the Making Connections sites during the planning phase of the initiative, providing the foundation for each site's theory of change and planned activities. Every Making Connections site combines the strategies and modifies them according to their population of focus, geography, and community culture for a comprehensive approach to create the community conditions necessary for mental wellbeing.

Creating space for being, doing, and connecting

Social connection is essential for mental wellbeing, but social isolation is a growing problem throughout the U.S. Spaces for being, doing, and connecting can look like drop-in locations with staffing and hours that meet the needs of the community, or improving public spaces like school yards to make them safe for gathering. Across Making Connections this has included a "hub" where young men are invited to be their authentic selves, learn valuable skills, and shift norms around mental health; a bike shop where community members learn to repair bikes; a college veteran's center where students study alongside peers with shared experiences; or a monthly park gathering where public spaces are activated to create a cohesive community.

Creating networks for gendered or cultural approaches

Wellbeing doesn't follow a "one size fits all" model. Making Connections has focused on addressing the needs of men and boys, and specifically men and boys of color and veterans and military families. These groups have specific cultural strengths that can be tapped into to build their resilience against mental health challenges. These gender- or culture-specific networks have included peer-support networks made up of young men of East African descent; provider referral networks made up of veterans service providers; healing circles that bring in Hawaiian cultural traditions; and intergenerational mentorship and coaching programs that connect African-American men with youth through basketball and other sports.

Facilitating advocacy for changes in policy, practice, and systems

When community leaders and residents come together to advocate for policy and system change, it can improve their mental health and wellbeing two ways: through the empowering experience of taking action for change and through the policy change itself. Facilitating advocacy for changes in policy, practice, and systems can include championing policies that increase men's access to resources and basic needs; introducing and institutionalizing new

practices in organizations to better support men and boys' mental wellbeing; and engaging with policymakers, practitioners, and governmental agencies to embed gendered and culturally competent approaches within systems, such as countering biases against young men of color. [AB1] [RC2] Across Making Connections this has included advocating for community improvements related to housing, employment, education, transportation, and more.

Supporting civic and community action to enhance wellbeing

Coming together as a community to organize projects and events builds community members' sense of belonging and connectedness with each other. Supporting civic engagement and community action to enhance wellbeing includes strategies like organizing farmers markets and community gardens, offering recreation and expressive arts activities, and providing peer leaders resources to organize small-scale, focused projects. Across Making Connections, this has included Veteran's Day celebrations, young men's sports programs, a program to train veterans' support dogs, and an annual fatherhood "grill off."

Building capacity to help self & others

Offering training and mentorship programs on topics related to men's mental health and wellbeing can build people's capacity to help themselves and other community members. These programs can include activities such as structured education activities and workshops; curricula such as Mental Health First Aid tailored for a specific population of focus; and pathways to certifications and course credits. Across Making Connections this has included suicide prevention trainings for American Indian youth, facilitation trainings for young men to lead culture circles, sessions on financial literacy and leadership development, and a "Passport to Manhood" program.

Amplifying narratives of healing and hopefulness

To counteract the negative stories about our communities, we need to uplift the hopeful stories that illustrate community strengths, progress, and resilience. Across Making Connections, community coalitions have created videos, podcasts, op-eds, spoken word events, and social media posts that tell different stories about men and boys' mental wellbeing than those that usually get highlighted. These stories about cultural strengths and the healing power of traditions, and community successes and resident-driven solutions have always been there but don't get the attention they deserve.