



"They See You as Human": Experiences in a Safer Opioid Supply Program in Canada

Abigale Sprakes, PhD, RSW
School of Social Work
Lakehead University
Canada



CRISM | ONTARIO
Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Matters



Lakehead
UNIVERSITY





~ WP, Artist ~

Acknowledgments

Individuals engaged with SSP:

Research & Program Participants

Research Team:

Mike B, RWLE
Sophie Kuhn, RA

Funder:

Canadian Institute for Substance Matters
(CRISM)

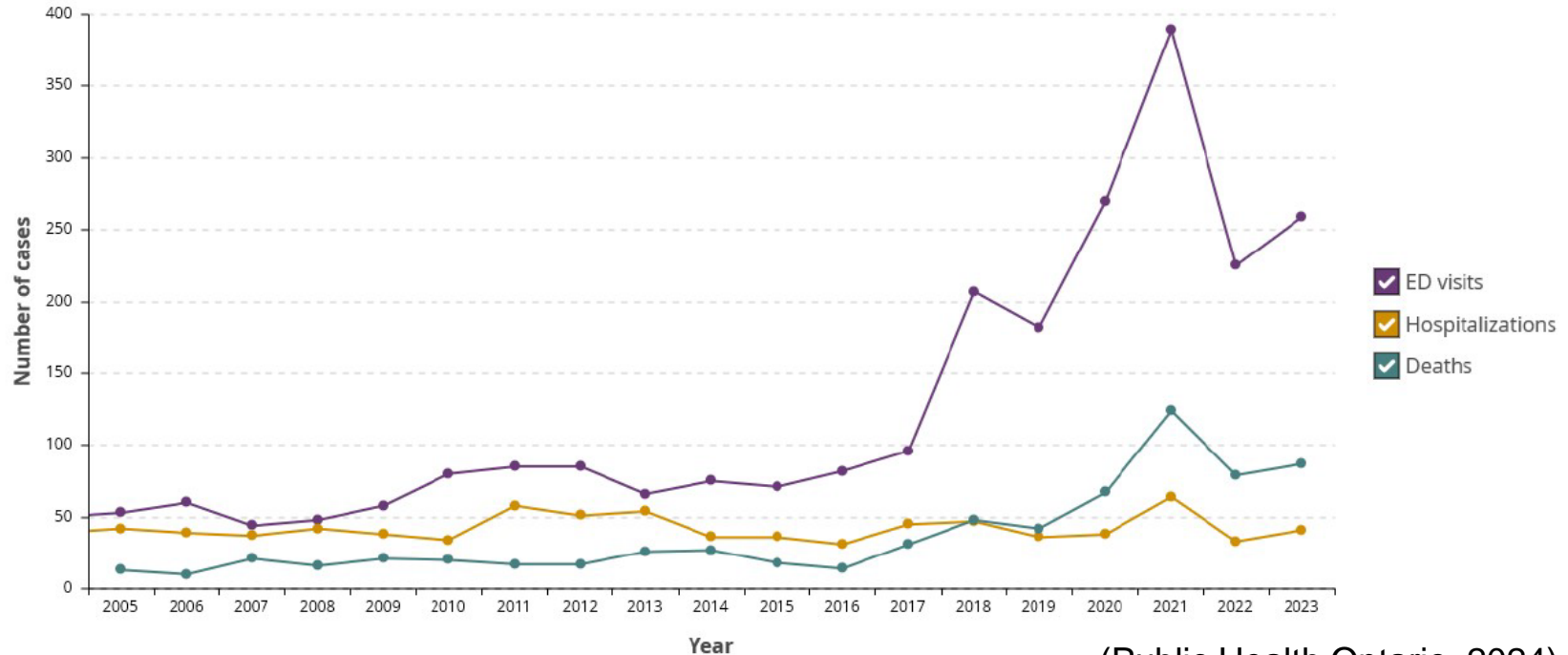
**“The turtle represents a safe place where you are treated with dignity and respect.
This program save my life, and it stopped me from reverting back to my old ways.**

Safer Supply makes my daily life easier to deal with.” WP

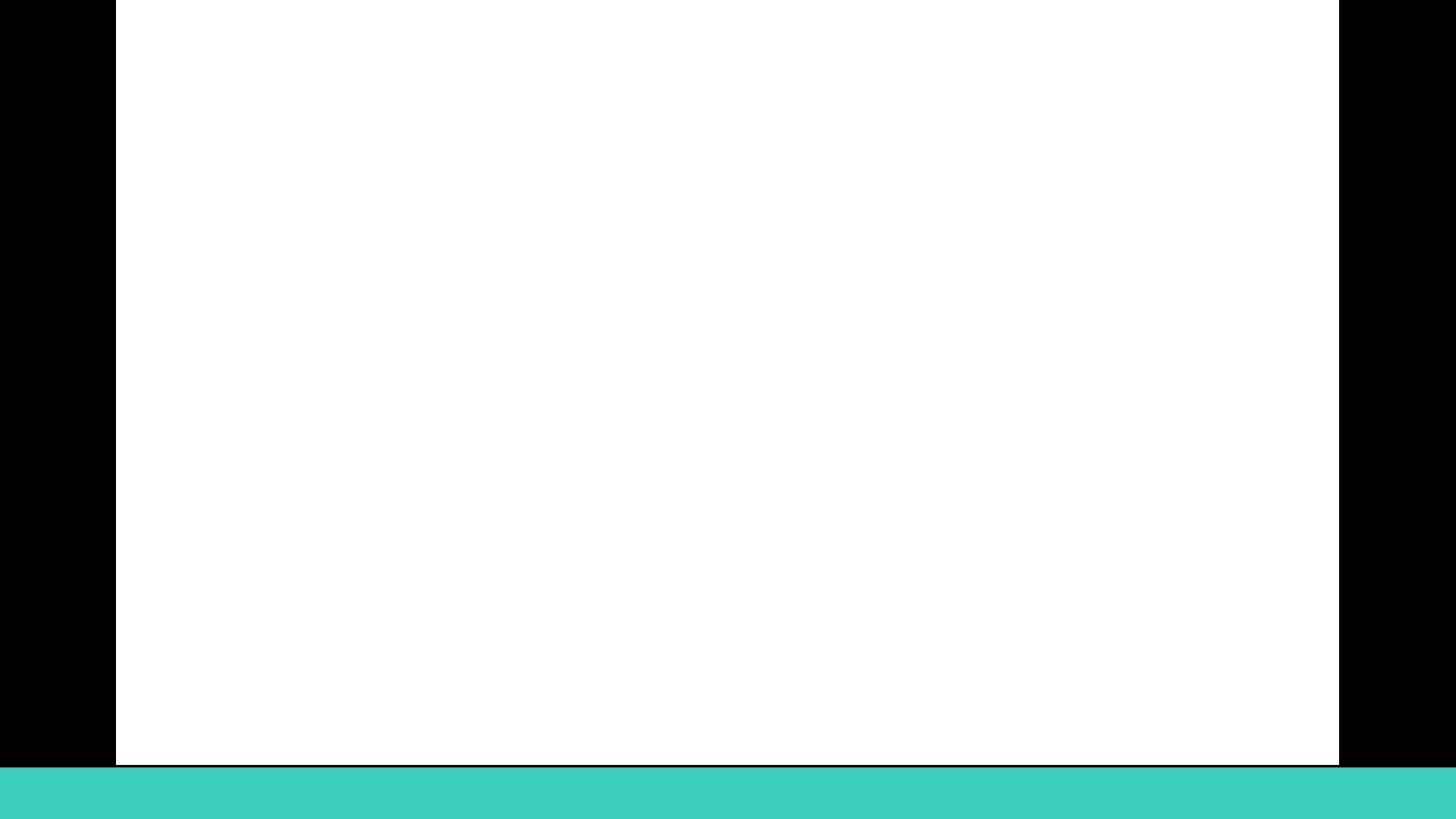


Why Thunder Bay, Ontario of all places?

Cases of opioid-related morbidity and mortality, Thunder Bay District Health Unit, 2003 – 2023



(Public Health Ontario, 2024)



22

69.5

181

0



Phase I: PE

4 Key Findings (n=35)

1. Decreased Risk
2. Increased Basic Needs
3. Increased Health
4. Increased Connection

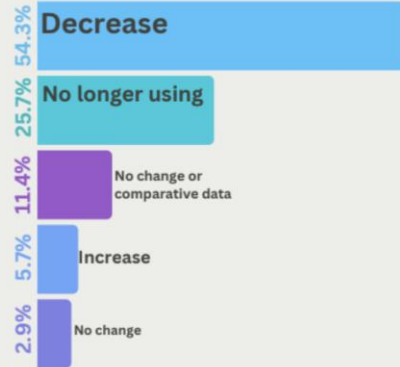
(Sprakes et al., 2024)



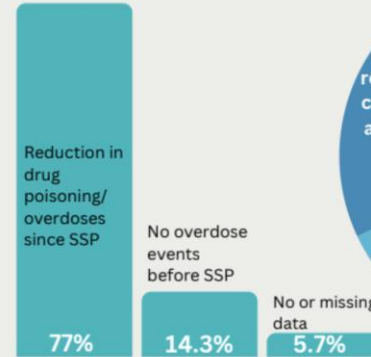
1

Decreased Risk

Decreased Fentanyl Use



130 Overdoses 3 months prior to SSP
10 Overdoses since SSP



92% reduction in drug poisoning events

2

Increased Basic Needs

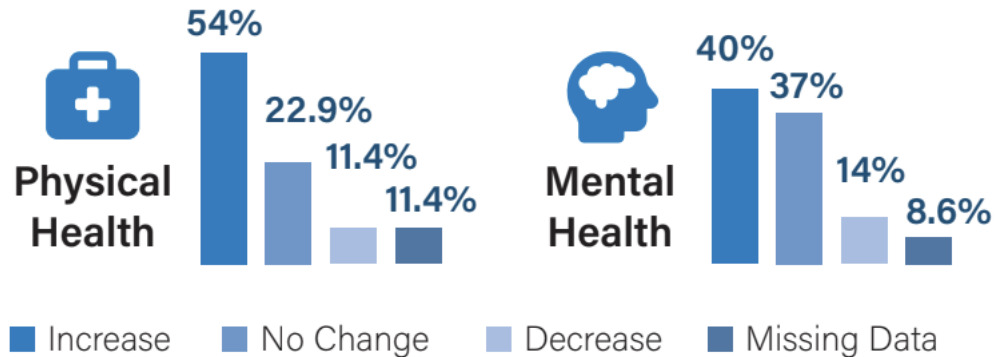


86%
increase in
housing for
SSP clients



3

Increased Health

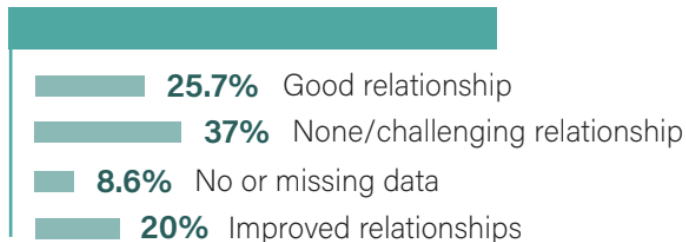


4

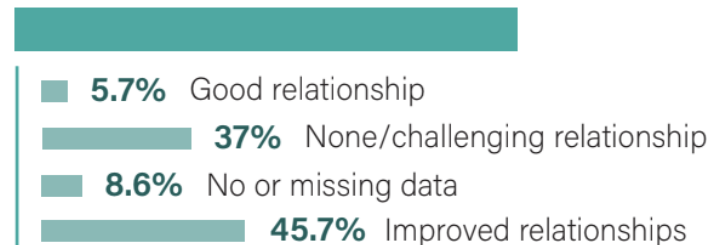
Increased Connection



Friends:



Family:



II

Phase II: Beyond Program Outcomes



CRISM | ONTARIO

Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Matters

PURPOSE

This study sought to:

- go beyond the program evaluation outcomes (Health Canada requirement) to sit and listen to what the program *really meant* to the individuals accessing services
- understand the experiences of individuals receiving services from a safer supply program in Thunder Bay, ON, the highest per capita death rate in Ontario
- To provide more evidence* to inform policy decisions to maintain and scale up the program based on



Community Based Research (CBR) Methods

- **Research Team Design***
- **REB approval**
- **Participant Recruitment**
 - n=20
- **Data Collection**
 - Semi-Structured Interviews
 - February 15 - March 31, 2024
- **Inductive thematic analysis**
 - Dedoose, Blind coding
- **Checked themes with members of the PWUD Advisory Group**



Demographics (n=20)

Self-Identification:

- 55% Men & 45% Women
- 95% Indigenous
- Avg. 34 y (14 SU;17 OU)
- Fentanyl and Crack Cocaine
- 100+ overdose events 3 months prior to initiation of Safer Supply
- Prescribed: Receiving hydromorphone (Dilaudid) fast-acting and SROM (Kadian) long acting (backbone)
 - Two doses a day

II

Phase II: Beyond Program Outcomes – Key Findings



CRISM | ONTARIO

Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Matters



Relational Practice

“It feels good, like, I feel good about coming here and talking to staff a little bit, they care about us, it feels good knowing that someone out there watching out for you . . . They don't treat you as a client, they treat us as friends and stuff like that, they actually talk to you as a person.”

~ WP ~

“You can just see the compassion in their eyes, and the way they talk, and the judgment isn’t there. You could just feel that. Just yeah, feel it. You can feel people.”

~ Fats ~

“Well, I smiled more. I felt less ashamed. Which is a good feeling. Yeah. And my dad was like, 'don't be proud. You're an addict.' ... it feels- feels nice to not have to hate yourself every day. There's people out here that don't hate you; that are helping you. Without feeling like they have to. Right. Like you know- like your family they have to care about you, but they don't- they want to and that's a good feeling.”

~ Dawn ~

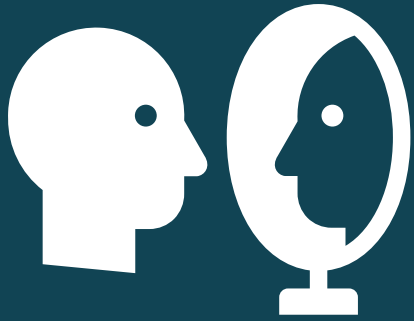


Social Inclusion

A large, dark teal, stylized graphic of an opening quotation mark is positioned behind the text.

*“I always felt judged by doctors and pharmacists.
They didn’t treat me like a person, just a junkie.”*

~ Miss Rose ~



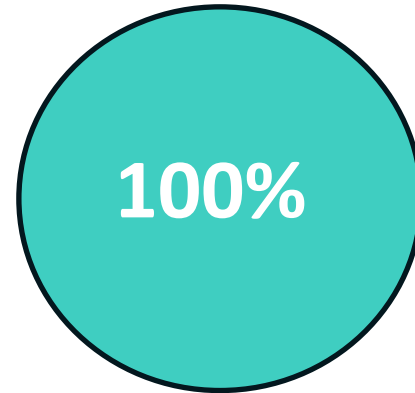
Self- Perception

“Um I feel like I matter now. Yeah, I feel like I matter (getting emotional). I’m not just another statistic.”

~ Nathan ~



Decreased Relational Stigma (connection+)





Research on stigma as social determinant of health (SDOH) exists

Social relationships as key to health outcomes has been identified

Where is the “Social” in Social Determinants of Health?

“This program is the best thing that’s happened in my life ... it saved my life, the people saved my life ... I would probably be dead already if it wasn’t for this.”

~ CRN ~

III

Phase III: Digital Stories



Email:

asprakes@lakeheadu.ca

Website:

<https://www.substance-use-research-hub.org/>



**In memory of
Kaile Archibald, 36.**

**Died of a fentanyl overdose
April 2, 2023.**



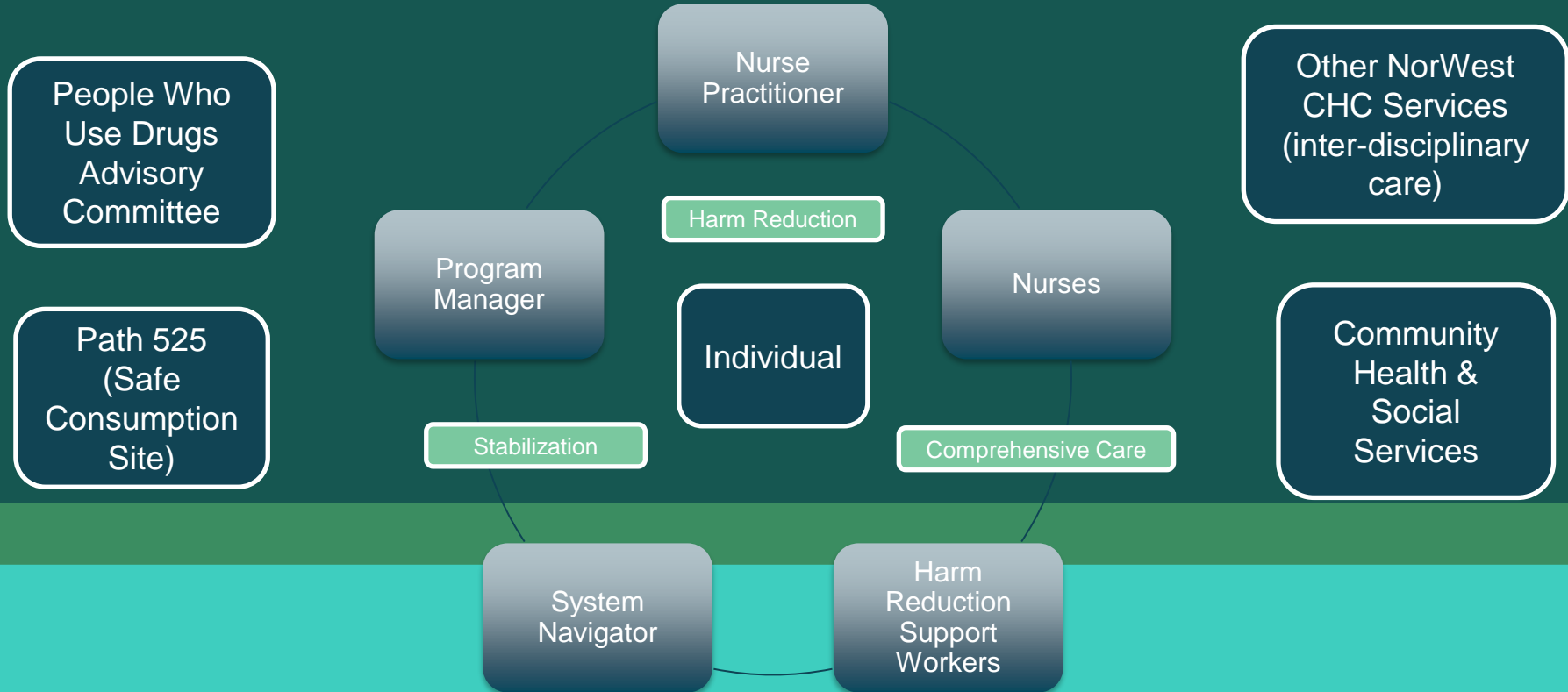
Bill 223, Schedule 4

Limit on power of boards or municipalities:

a municipality or local board does not have the power, without the approval of the Minister, to do any of the following:

1. Apply to Health Canada for an exemption or a renewal of an exemption to the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (Canada) for the purpose of operating a supervised consumption site.
2. Apply to Health Canada for funding under Health Canada's Substance Use and Addictions Program or any other Health Canada program in respect of safer supply services, or enter into an agreement with the Government of Canada with respect to funding under such a program in respect of safer supply services.
3. Support, including by passing a by-law or making a resolution, an application made to Health Canada by any other person in respect of any matter described in paragraph 1 or 2.

NorWest Community Health Centres Program Model



Beyond Program Outcomes

Pillar	Approach	Length of Stay (LOS)	Experiences	View of Self	Goals	Goal focus
Harm Reduction	Meet individual where they are at (one way); Person-centred	0-2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Barriers to accessing services Institutional Racism Stigma 	Worthless; not cared about	Core survival: To not die To not be dopesick	Acquiring basic necessities
Stabilization	Person-centred; Being-in-relation	2-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to Healthcare Addressing other chronic conditions 	Beginning to see self in different light	Social determinant of health: To improve health	Addressing physical health; feeling better
Comprehensive Care (Wraparound Services)	Relational Practice; mutuality	6+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health supports Social Inclusion 	Feel human and seen	Re-establish relationships, Connection: Constructing new possibilities/ hope	Addressing mental health and connection