

Your Growing Edge

*A connection practice companion
for rural nonprofit leaders*

Three levels, one week, a date beside each one

Practices for connecting with yourself, with a peer, and across your community — sorted from where you're comfortable to a little along your edge. Nothing here costs money — only intention and a little bravery.

Your Growing Edge

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During the session, “What Actually Sustains You,” you took a step towards building your connection. You paused three times and named what you could do — for yourself, with a peer, and in your community. This is where those notes live now.

Come back to these pages whenever you’re stuck and feeling like you need some help connecting again. Nothing in here costs money and nothing in here takes more than a few minutes.

Building meaningful connection definitely takes time, practice, overcoming challenges, and emotional labor. But humans aren’t meant to move through the world alone and when you find your people and grow real authentic relationships, the resulting support and care is worth everything and then some. You’ve got this! And you, your purpose, and your organization’s mission will thrive.

FIRST, A QUESTION

What actually sustains you? Write your answer somewhere on this page before you go any further — then come back to it in a month and see whether it has changed.

START HERE

Remember: Meaningful connection isn’t the goal — it’s a practice. The goal is to build a culture of compassionate belonging for yourself and with others: feeling seen, heard, valued, supported, and cared for, and offering that to the people around you in reciprocal and cup-filling ways. Meaningful connection is how you get there - you can’t jump from acquaintance to trusted colleague without time, effort, and care - it takes all of this to grow real trust. Just like learning to walk, practicing meaningful connection gets easier the more you do it and more awkward and scary the longer you leave it.

All of this to say - you don’t have to be good at this from the day you start intentionally practicing it. You just have to do it a little at a time, on purpose and mindfully, and then keep going. When you hit a bump, slow down, check in with yourself and evaluate, find the lesson, and then get up and try again. When you practice meaningful connection you and the people around you will ultimately thrive and that support will feed your sustainability. Even more, it will feel regenerative.

Find your growing edge

Every practice in this companion is sorted into two groups: “where you’re comfortable” and “a little along your edge” — because where you start matters more than how far you go. You design your practice but that requires honesty and a willingness to challenge yourself. Keep in mind the different relational zones for yourself will help you stay grounded and practicing:

COMFORT ZONE	GROWTH ZONE	PANIC ZONE
Relaxed. Easy. You could do this today without thinking about it. No big deal!"	A little nervous, a little excited. Just past comfortable. This is the edge you're looking for. "A little challenge is good!"	Fear takes over. Too far. Back up — nothing good grows here. "Ah! What is happening? Run away!"

Your growing edge is different from other people's, being shaped by your unique life experiences and it moves depending on the challenges and successes you experience. Pick something that feels safe but slightly challenging, try it out and practice, and the comfort zone gets a little bigger. That's the whole mechanism. If the comfort zone doesn't get bigger - try a different approach instead. This is you designing for you.

HOW we are in relationship matters — with ourselves, with each other, and with our communities. All three of the pages that follow are the same practice, just pointed in different directions.

Inner Connection - Connecting your own head and heart

Meaningfully connecting with yourself — so that you are seen, heard, valued, supported, and cared for by you. Every other relationship is built upon this foundational layer and cannot be strengthened without prioritization and attention here.

What I wrote during the session:

Start where you're comfortable

- Name one thing you did well as you connected with yourself this week. Write it down and hang it up where you'll see it again.
- Take your full lunch break, away from your desk and work, once.
- Put a fifteen-minute walk on your weekly calendar and treat it like a meeting with a major donor.
- Catch one harsh sentence you said to yourself and rewrite it the way a good friend would say it instead.
- Write down one thing you're carrying that nobody else can see. Just for you. Tell yourself what a good friend might say to you about this.

Push a little along your edge

- Pause before answering when you're unsure. Say "let me think on that and come back to you."
 - Celebrate a win on purpose — buy the coffee, take the afternoon off, tell someone.
 - Say no to one thing that was never actually yours to fix or carry.
 - Notice a moment your body knew something before your brain did, and listen to it. Write down what it's saying.
 - Speak your truth in one moment where you'd normally stay quiet — respectfully, and on purpose.
 - Leave early on a hard day so tomorrow's version of you is fresher for the big problem.
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Peer Connection - Practicing to thrive together

Meaningfully connecting with someone who understands what you're carrying — another leader doing similar work, who can swap stories and trade suggestions and who probably needs someone to talk to as much as you do.

What I wrote during the session

Start where you're comfortable

- Make a list. Everyone doing work similar to yours — your town, your region, anywhere – people you are interested in talking with but haven't made the call or sent the email to. Just the list, no outreach yet.
- Reply to someone's post or newsletter with a real sentence instead of a reaction.
- Send one email or LinkedIn message introducing yourself to someone whose work you admire. Three sentences is plenty.
- Ask a peer one question you actually want the answer to.

Push a little along your edge

- Invite someone to coffee, a walk, or a video call — offer two specific times so they only have to say yes.
- Tell a peer one true thing about how the work is actually going.
- Ask for something specific: a template, an introduction, thirty minutes of their thinking, something to start a conversation that you could actually use their help with.
- Offer something specific before you're asked.
- Set up a standing monthly call with one person and protect it.
- Say out loud to another leader: "I don't know how to do this part."

It doesn't have to be local. A colleague you feel meaningfully connected to doesn't require in-person time — it requires an honest, respectful conversation where you feel seen and valued. The person could be as far away as India, Spain, or Australia and as near as your own community. If your local nonprofit field feels more competitive than collaborative, widen the map. Find the room you feel you belong in.

Community & Partner Connection - Fostering community-wide compassionate belonging

Meaningfully connecting with the people and groups around your work — partners, sponsors, businesses who appreciate what you do, the Rotary club, the library, the org two towns over doing something adjacent.

What I wrote during the session

Start where you're comfortable

- List five groups or businesses that you haven't reached out to yet whose work touches yours, even loosely.
- Show up at one thing you've been invited to but haven't gone to yet and wander the room.
- Send a thank-you to a partner with no ask attached to it.
- Follow up on an offer somebody made months ago that you never took them up on.

Push a little along your edge

- Email a civic group and ask whether they're looking for a local nonprofit speaker.
- Ask a partner or sponsor what they need before you tell them what you need.
- Propose one small shared thing — a co-hosted event, a shared table, a mention in each other's newsletter.
- Meet with someone whose work seems unrelated to yours and go looking for the overlap.
- Reopen the relationship that has gotten quiet, and be honest about the quiet.
- Introduce two people who you feel should know each other and then step out of the way.

THE CHALLENGE

Your week

One action at each level, a date beside each one - written down now so you don't lose it.

Complete all three actions inside the next seven days.

LEVEL	WHAT I'LL DO	BY WHEN	DONE
Inner			☐
Peer			☐
Community			☐

Then do them. Follow through is the part that changes something. A step can be as small as sending one email, booking one walk, or looking up when the next Rotary meeting is.

AFTERWARD

One sentence per action is enough — write it the same day if you can. If you want to go further, these questions help. (Aim for one set each for Inner, Peer, and Community.)

- How did you feel?
- What worked, and what didn't?
- What would you do differently next time?
- What did you learn about your comfort, growth, and panic zones?
- What do you want to learn more about to help you continue to practice?
- What's one next step you can take?

READ THIS PART BEFORE YOU NEED IT

When it goes badly

Things won't always work how you would like them to - that's why it's called practice. You are going to make mistakes because you're an imperfect human being. And, we are ALL out of practice connecting with each other - hence the loneliness epidemic, so you are not alone. Even the folks who teach about connection for a living mess up all the time. Remembering you are not perfect and practice is what helps us to learn and grow will help you to get more comfortable with the idea that you'll make mistakes and then you'll learn something each time. Sometimes a mistake will feel like a small stumble. Sometimes it will feel like a hard fall that knocks the wind out of you. Mistakes are hard to go through, but they teach us things if we're willing to pay attention and slow down to catch the message.

Perfection was never the goal. Compassion is — the action we take on our caring. Disconnections are going to happen no matter how much you practice - that's just life. What matters is what we do with them when they happen. Do we ignore the elephant in the room and act like everything is fine? Or do we reflect, find the lesson, and apply the new knowledge?

What if...

Nobody answered

Wait two weeks and try once more. If it's still quiet, let it go without building a story about yourself out of it. People are buried and you know barely anything about what they are living through. It is almost never about you and if it is, well, maybe they're just not your people. That's okay. Practicing connection doesn't require forcing a relationship where it just isn't happening.

It was awkward

It was almost certainly less awkward than it felt from the inside - we often make things worse in our own imagination, especially when we've been through hard relational stuff in the past. You don't have to fix it, explain it, or apologize for it. Heck, you can name it and the other person will probably agree they felt awkward too and laugh about it with you. Let it be a first attempt, because that's what it was. Also - everyone is awkward. Some people are just way better at acting like they aren't.

Someone let you down

Name it then release it. Come back to your inner connection practice - acknowledge to yourself how you are feeling, look for what is underneath how you're feeling. What is your role here? Is there more to the story you don't know? Sometimes we don't have the full picture and curiosity is helpful to learn more instead of giving up the practice. Also, not every connection is a connection worth pursuing - it has to be a good fit with reciprocity and cup-filling behaviors. Sometimes things just don't work out. Take the lesson and practice in another direction. Take a break and focus on the inner stuff for a bit if you need to.

You lost the thread for a few weeks

Start again at the comfort zone. Not the edge — the comfort zone. Getting back into practice is its own step and deserves to be an easy one.

Humans were never meant to be lone creatures. The need to belong — to feel seen, valued, heard, supported, and cared for — is as persistent and urgent as needing food to eat and air to breathe. We just don't talk about it that way.

KEEP GOING

Round two...and onward!

The practice only works if it repeats. Same three levels, new week, and this time try moving one of them a little further along your edge. Remember, growing compassionate belonging takes time, consistency, and intention. You've got this!

LEVEL	WHAT I'LL DO	BY WHEN	DONE
Inner			☐
Peer			☐
Community			☐

AFTERWARD

Same questions as before — one sentence per action is enough.

- How did you feel?
- What worked, and what didn't?
- What would you do differently next time?
- What did you learn about your comfort, growth, and panic zones?
- What do you want to learn more about to help you continue to practice?
- What's one next step you can take?

IF YOU'D LIKE COMPANY IN THIS

I work with people and organizations growing cultures of compassionate belonging through the practice of meaningful connection — education and training, nontraditional consulting, and community engagement. If you or a colleague want support in your practice, I'd love to hear from you.

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Creatively cultivating meaningful social connection to thrive together

Gather ~ Connect ~ Belong