

FOSTERING BELONGING IN THE RESIDENCE HALLS

THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING

Belonging is **essential for well-being**, impacting **physical** and mental health, personal development, social cohesion, and overall quality of life. Despite our commitment to an inclusive "Notre Dame Family," many students feel they don't belong. Most students report feeling lonely and lacking companionship at least some of the time. Reflecting upon your own experiences of belonging uncertainty can provide insight into which experiences triggered doubts and which helped you feel a sense of belonging.

UNDERSTANDING BELONGING UNCERTAINTY

Belonging uncertainty involves anxiety or doubt about one's place and acceptance within a group, especially in new environments like college or a graduate program. It can be triggered by:

- Observing others who seem more successful or integrated.
- Encountering unfamiliar norms and expectations.
- Experiencing criticism, exclusion, or rejection.
- Being aware of individual differences from the majority (racial/ethnic, socioeconomic. etc.).

Conformity perpetuates belonging uncertainty by encouraging individuals to suppress their true selves to fit-in, leading to isolation and self-doubt. This lack of genuine self-expression prevents meaningful connections, reinforcing the belief that their true selves are not acceptable.

ADDRESSING STEREOTYPE THREAT

Belonging uncertainty and stereotype threat are interrelated, significantly impacting students. **Stereotype threat** is the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about one's social group, leading to increased stress and impaired performance. These issues create a cycle of anxiety and underperformance, resulting in social withdrawal, increased conformity, and avoidance of risk. Fostering inclusive environments and psychological safety is crucial to mitigating these effects.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IS KEY

Psychological safety is a key characteristic of flourishing communities and successful organizations. It is the perception that one can speak up, share ideas, take risks, and make mistakes without fear of negative consequences such as embarrassment, rejection, or punishment. It allows individuals to be authentic, fostering a healthy and productive community in which everyone feels a sense of belonging and is empowered to contribute.

ANYONE CAN FOSTER BELONGING

By understanding the importance of belonging and recognizing the challenges of loneliness, belonging uncertainty, and stereotype threat, anyone can take proactive steps to foster a sense of belonging and create a more inclusive and supportive community for all. The next page has a few tips to get you started.



PROMOTING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND BELONGING

- **Set a welcoming tone wherever you are:** Promote psychological safety, normalize imperfection and transition challenges, invite and celebrate diversity, and encourage a growth mindset.
- **Introduce, invite, and connect:** Use ice-breakers and structured activities to foster connection. Facilitate connection by giving others an opportunity to introduce themselves in ways that feel comfortable to them.
- **See the whole person:** Challenge [biases](#) and stereotypes. Show humility and respect. [Learn names](#).
- **Use inclusive language:** Ensure activities and conversations are inclusive. Check in about preferences and accommodations.
- **Diversify social connections:** Be mindful of those who seem left out. Challenge yourself to find new ways to connect with others you might not naturally be drawn to.
- **Be real and humble:** Be transparent with your own humanity and imperfections. [Avoid toxic positivity](#).
- **Stand up for others:** Avoid and address bullying. [Challenge offensive jokes or comments](#). Set and emphasize community expectations early and often.
- **Consider all personalities:** Encourage [introvert-friendly](#) activities and consider ways to make all gatherings inclusive and accessible for all personality types.
- **Challenge norms:** Challenge perceptions and perceived norms, especially around drinking and partying. Don't assume everyone drinks or speak as if it's a foregone conclusion. Normalize alcohol-free activities.
- **Encourage outside connections:** Normalize building friendships across different communities. Allow and encourage social groups to be more [open and permeable](#).
- **Check in with yourself:** Find a mentor to support you as you work to foster belonging in your community. Ask for help.
- **Educate yourself:** Learn more about DEI. Participate in cultural events. Learn more about connection and belonging. As a starting point, see "[The Six "Ess"ential Conditions for Creating Connection](#)" and [101+ Ways to Create Connection and Community](#) from *Project Connect*

OVERCOMING UNCERTAINTY AND BUILDING CONNECTION

- **Follow your values:** Let your [values](#) guide your everyday actions and interactions.
- **You're not alone:** Many people experience [loneliness](#). Building friendships [takes time](#) and intentionality.
- **Seek connections everywhere:** Seek connections in [shared interests](#) and experiences. Look beyond [immediate community](#).
- **Foster a growth mindset:** Trust you can practice making connections and [develop more skill](#). [Ask for help](#).
- **Keep realistic expectations:** Trying to [match perceptions of an ideal social life](#) is nearly impossible. Ebbs and flows are normal.
- **Recognize the choice of friendship:** Rejection is often about perceived fit, not personal flaws. Let go of toxic relationships.
- **Embrace differences:** Celebrate them as a source of strength.
- **Increase discomfort tolerance:** [Discomfort](#) is normal in social situations. Accept [awkwardness](#) and rejection as a normal part of the process. Manage [social anxiety](#). Be open to going to places and events by yourself.
- **Take the initiative:** [Start](#) something new. [Invite](#) people. [Introduce yourself](#). [Strike up conversations](#).
- **Practice self-compassion:** Be kind to yourself. Everyone struggles and [comparing](#) your private struggles to others' facades is often misleading and can foster feelings of inadequacy.
- **Expand conversations:** Go beyond the Notre Dame introduction and typical [small-talk](#) with [meaningful questions](#).
- **Practice self-disclosure:** It can be hard to be [vulnerable](#), but it's a necessary part of developing deeper friendships. Share your [struggles](#) and interests--yes, even the nerdy ones.
- **Be warm and authentic:** As best you can, try to be [friendly](#). When it's safe to, be [authentic](#). Use open [body language](#).
- **Be a good listener:** [Listening well](#) to others is powerful. Be [present](#) and [attentive](#). [Validate](#) others. Show [empathy](#) and [curiosity](#).
- **Keep an open mind:** Explore [new ways](#) be social together - try new interests, people, places, and activities.
- **Spend time with yourself:** [Normalize](#) and find ways to [enjoy being alone](#). Learn to appreciate your [own company](#).
- **Enhance friendship skills:** Friendships and connection take intentional thought and effort. Build your friend-making skills by strengthening your: [social](#) skills, [assertiveness](#) skills, ability to [apologize](#) when needed, ability to offer [forgiveness](#), ability to [repair relationships](#) when something goes wrong, and overall [communication](#) skills.
- **Expect others to like you:** Assume people want you there if they invite you. Trust that you are "[liked until proven disliked](#)" and you're more likely to engage in a more likeable way.