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Institute for Mental Health Education
at The Chicago School

Alone Together
Confronting Loneliness Across the Lifespan

24th annual Community Mental Health Conference
Breakout Session 1
1:00pm – 2:00pm

Presenter Name(s)	Session Title	Session Description
Alexis Eyler, MSW, LSW	Unseen and Unsupported: Understanding Grief and Loss in Adoption	In this session, participants will explore adoption through a whole-triad lens, examining how birthparents, adoptees, and adoptive parents may experience forms of loss, identity disruption, and relational ambiguity across the lifespan. The presentation will discuss how adoption-related grief can persist over time and how the experiences of birthparents have often been overlooked in research and support systems. Participants will also examine gaps in post-placement support and the ways adoption-related grief may affect mental health and relationships. Attendees will leave with a deeper understanding of how loneliness and loss can unfold across the adoption constellation and how more responsive, inclusive support systems can be developed.
Urvi Sharma, MA	Alone at Work: Why Organizational Systems Must Confront Workplace Loneliness	This session explores workplace loneliness as both an individual experience and an organizational challenge. Participants will examine how factors such as remote work, leadership changes, burnout, and workplace culture can influence employees' sense of connection and belonging. The presentation highlights how loneliness can affect engagement, resilience, and overall organizational health. Rather than focusing only on individual coping, the session emphasizes organizational strategies that promote psychological safety, collaboration, and meaningful connection. Participants will leave with practical insights for creating workplace environments that support well-being and belonging.

Presenter Name(s)	Session Title	Session Description
Meg Bowman, MS	Loneliness Lives in the Body: How Nutrition Supports Safety, Belonging, and Connection	In this session, participants will explore how loneliness and social disconnection affect both physical and emotional health. The presentation will examine the relationship between stress, nervous system regulation, and the gut–brain connection, highlighting how daily nutrition patterns can influence mood, resilience, and overall well-being. Using accessible concepts from nervous system science, attendees will learn practical ways food and daily routines can support emotional steadiness and a sense of safety in the body. Participants will leave with simple, sustainable strategies for using nutrition to support both physical health and meaningful connection.
Sharon Dornberg-Lee, LCSW	Social Isolation and Loneliness in Late Life	This session examines the growing concern of loneliness and social isolation among older adults and how these experiences affect emotional well-being, health, and quality of life. Participants will explore common contributors to loneliness in later life and review strength-based approaches that help older adults maintain meaningful relationships and community engagement. Drawing from clinical practice, the presentation highlights supportive interventions such as connection groups, psychotherapy, and wraparound services. Participants will leave with practical strategies to support older adults in building relationships, maintaining purpose, and remaining socially connected as they age.
Mahalia Jackson, MPH Natalie Larson	Solitude and Substance Use: Understanding Loneliness in Addiction and Opportunities for Intervention	This session examines the complex relationship between loneliness and substance use disorders, including how social isolation can contribute to addiction and persist throughout recovery. Participants will explore how loneliness may appear differently among individuals struggling with substance use and why connection is often a critical yet overlooked element in recovery programs. The presentation highlights prevention and intervention strategies that emphasize belonging, community support, and relational healing. Participants will leave with practical approaches for supporting individuals in recovery through connection-focused strategies.
Dr. Mojgan Makki	The Hidden Cycle: Loneliness and Mental Health in Children and Young Adults.	In this session, participants will explore loneliness as an important but often overlooked factor in childhood mental health. The presentation will examine how peer rejection, bullying, family stress, and social challenges can affect a child's sense of belonging at home and in school. Participants will learn how loneliness interacts with conditions such as ADHD, anxiety, and depression, and how early experiences of isolation may influence long-term emotional well-being. Attendees will leave with practical strategies for recognizing loneliness early and strengthening protective factors through collaboration with families, educators, and youth.

Breakout Session 2
2:15pm – 3:15pm

Presenter Name(s)	Session Title	Session Description
Dr. Sandra Clavelli	Balancing Independence AND Connection by Tapping the B.R.A.K.E.S.℠: A Practical Strategy to Combat Loneliness at Any Age	This session explores how loneliness can emerge in a digital world where people are constantly connected through technology yet often feel socially disconnected. Participants will examine how heavy digital engagement, changing social expectations, and pressures toward both over-independence and over-accommodation can affect identity and relationships. The presentation introduces a practical resilience framework to help individuals balance independence with meaningful connection while maintaining a strong sense of self. Participants will leave with tools for understanding emotions, navigating relationships, and building authentic connection in both digital and in-person environments.
Cristina Castillo, MS	Belonging as Prevention: Addressing Loneliness in Hispanic/Latino Communities	This session explores how loneliness, migration experiences, economic stress, and barriers to culturally responsive care can affect emotional and behavioral health in Hispanic and Latino communities. Participants will examine how early adversity and social conditions influence stress, mental health, and long-term well-being across the lifespan. The presentation emphasizes a strengths-based perspective that highlights family cohesion, cultural identity, and community connection as powerful protective factors. Participants will leave with culturally responsive strategies for fostering belonging and resilience in schools, healthcare settings, and community spaces.
Dr. Ana Belmonte	Recognizing Concerning Patterns: Isolation Within the Pathway to Violence	This session examines how loneliness and social isolation can appear in some pathways toward targeted violence while emphasizing that most individuals who experience loneliness are not violent. Participants will review research on warning behaviors, grievance formation, and patterns of escalating despair identified in certain cases of targeted violence. The presentation focuses on early recognition, supportive intervention, and evidence-informed prevention strategies used in threat assessment practice. Participants will leave with a clearer understanding of warning signs and practical approaches communities and professionals can use to support safety and connection.

Dr. Julie Fanning, LCSW	The Hidden Grief of Professional Helpers: Isolation, Identity, and Connection	This session explores the often-unspoken grief experienced by professionals who work in helping roles and are repeatedly exposed to trauma, systemic barriers, and human suffering. Participants will examine how experiences such as burnout, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and moral injury can affect professional identity, purpose, and long-term sustainability. Grounded in a grief-informed approach, the session highlights realistic self-care, boundaries, peer consultation, and community connection as protective factors. Participants will leave with practical strategies and a personalized sustainability statement to help remain grounded, connected, and values-aligned in their work.
Samantha Willi, LPCC-S Halle Schelb, LPCC-S	The Loneliness of Masking: How Late-Identified ADHD & Autism Shape Connection Across the Lifespan	In this session, participants will explore how loneliness often manifests for autistic and ADHD adults through years of masking, blending in, or performing socially while feeling unseen or misunderstood. The presentation will examine how chronic masking, misdiagnosis, sensory overwhelm, and unmet support needs can shape identity development, mental health, and belonging across the lifespan. Participants will gain a deeper understanding of how loneliness intersects with neurodivergence and learn practical, neurodiversity-affirming strategies to reduce masking pressures, support authentic identity, and foster relationships that feel safe, reciprocal, and sustainable.

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