



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Finding connection beyond family, friends and community

Connection and belonging

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who've been through tough times to spark hope and new ideas for finding and sustaining threads of connection and belonging.

It may not always feel possible to find relationships with other people or communities. There are many reasons why it might not currently be safe or possible for you and your family to reach out to others or find a sense of belonging. So what other types of connection might be available?

The families we talked to generously shared their stories and ideas for finding and sustaining threads of connection in tough times.

Ideas for when connection is hard to find

Let's hear from the families that we worked with to create this resource about what helped them tap into connection when some of the more obvious options weren't available.

Definition of 'parent'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

Connecting with animals

'I've always had a strong connection to animals. I find that just kind of sitting with an animal, watching it, observing it, doing something cheesy, like looking into its eyes – it does give that sense of connection and belonging.'

'When things were really at their worst, I had this dog called Sugar. She was really beautiful, a Greyhound-cross. We had this close bond – at the time when things were actually very, very challenging.'

‘Your pets tend to understand when you’re not travelling well, so if I was going through a difficult moment, she would come up and she’d lay her head on me. And then in that moment we just have this connection. We did have to leave her behind because we were in the refuge. But we’ve all got really beautiful memories of her.’

‘Not everyone can have pets. I also remember when we lived in Tasmania, things were quite bad. I used to go for a lot of runs in the morning and we lived in a farm area. If I came across a farm animal, I’d communicate with it non-verbally; watching it, looking at it, maybe it came up to the fence, patting it, that kind of thing. It’s a really simple thing, but a lot of stuff happens in that moment.’

Spirituality, faith and connecting with something bigger

‘Spirituality, believing in God, praying was very, like, surviving for me when I first came to Australia. I feel like God looks after me. So I’ll be OK. That makes me feel better. That gives me a hope that things are gonna get better because God looks after me. So even when I was alone, isolated, vulnerable ... spirituality helped me a lot.’

Take a moment to think about



There are many cultural, religious and spiritual practices that people find sustaining.

- What kind of practices are you drawn to?
- Are there any practices you’ve used in the past you could come back to?
- Do you have any ideas for new practices that might support you?

Connecting with workers

‘When we were in the refuges and homeless shelters, we were all really desperate for human connection. Myself and also the kids were able to connect with different workers in those places. Finding that person that feels safe. An initial moment, gut reaction, sitting back and watching. If something happened with that worker that didn’t feel right, avoid them. Sometimes it took a bit of time. For a long time, my only human connections were with workers. I accepted that was how it was. I was quite vulnerable and in trauma. And they were trained so they were safe to be around in my vulnerability.’



Finding ways to connect your family with ancestors

‘Maybe because our life was so disjointed for so long when the kids were young, it was always a big thing to talk about family history, and to find ways to connect our life, the children, events or ways of being back to family history. The kids have really loved it as well. When you do that, you don’t become buffeted around by the moment, you become something connected back through time – an anchor point. The kids loved stories about family. I’ve always had this feeling, the sense that there’s people before me that I’m connected to. Bringing that into the kids’ lives, then they become a part of something, you know, they’re a part of a school of fish, not just one single fish in this big wide ocean.’

Nature

‘When the children were younger, we were moving around a lot, and the relationship I was in was pretty hectic and not the healthiest. It was actually very hard to make connections in any new community that we were in, and they were kind of actively worked against by my ex. After a time I just stopped trying to make those person-to-person connections or community connections. But what we did was find a lot of connection through nature, that kind of intangible connection. We would do a lot of walking in the evenings, on weekends, walk in the bush or visiting a new coastal area.’

Special places

‘Our granddaughter will go into her room to be in her special place where her books are and her things on the wall. She will go into her space where her things are that make her feel good about herself.’



JORDAN, 9 YEARS OLD

Take a moment to think about...



- What's your special place: your bed, bedroom, somewhere in nature, a space you share with family?
- What difference does it make to you and your family when you are able to visit your special place?

Loving and caring

'You wouldn't believe what you could survive. If that's your only choice to survive, you'll do it. The moment I became a mother, I got extraordinary superpowers. It's just, if it was only me, I'll say, "That's it. I don't wanna live, I wanna die." You know? "That's too much." But, it was not just me, I was responsible for a human being. When you're responsible for a beautiful human being, it's like: "I'll do it for my son." I was doing incredible things.'

“

The beach is my special place. I love going down to the water to swim and look for sea creatures. I also love building sandcastles, looking for shells and playing with my dogs, who also love the beach.

CHILD, WESTERN AUSTRALIA, IN MY PLACE IN WA¹

Books and reading

'I've always read. Reading has been a big part of my life. When I would read, it's like getting lost in that moment, I'd be able to connect into something intangible. You get into almost like a bubble. I think it probably allowed me to connect better to my children. A way of finding peace and serenity when things aren't like that on the outside.'

Social justice

‘Being able to align myself with other people who share the same views, ideologically connecting with those movements and ways of thinking. The whole gamut: anti-poverty, animal rights, First Nations rights. Not specifically going on marches or to groups, because I didn’t have the time or the ability. But just kind of ideologically connecting with those movements gave me foundation, something outside of myself ... able to transport me from this moment to something wider and bigger. It creates something beyond your own world that does have hope. And also something in the future – because these movements are very much future-orientated – it allows us to connect into something like a valuable future. I was able to that share with my family. When things came up in the news or school projects, using it as an opportunity to talk about it with my kids. My kids, I have to say, they’re all very socially minded.’

Music

‘So many people connect through music. When there’s nothing else in the world, music is the thing that stays. It’s just such a powerful thing. My family has connected through music. When you need to have that bringing together in that moment, that can happen through music. In the refuge we used to have dancing sessions every night – we’d just play the music and just dance. So yeah, that was a big thing for us for quite some time.’

‘Music can transfer you back to a place where you felt safe. It is a great transporter, a great time leveller. You can play a song and it can take you back to a safe place where that song had meaning for you.’

Songs for connection and belonging

[Here’s a playlist of songs that help us feel connected to our families and beyond](#)

Connection to culture

‘Museums and galleries, I’ve got a love for those places. It’s part of my culture. Walking in the door, it’s like: “Ahhhhhh!” (sighing); it immediately ties to past times we visited. Galleries are like second homes to me. People who don’t have that experience, they can see them as revered,

high culture places where only certain people are allowed to belong. And they can feel like places of judgement. But that’s not about the places, it’s about the people that might be in those places. When I would walk through those spaces with the kids, connecting through history, through movements, through space. It becomes about connection with myself and my kids, you know, just in that moment through talking and the sharing of ideas. There’s a lot of things that can happen that you wouldn’t expect to happen in a place like that.’

Take a moment to think about



Connecting with cultural identity can be healing, as can forming relationships with space and place.

- What are things within culture that you can connect with (e.g. places, music, art, food, nature)?
- What are the ways of existing within your cultural identity that matter to you?

Connecting to self

‘When things have gone wrong or I’ve felt embarrassed; or the shadow of the past has felt too much, it has helped me to get in touch with myself. To just be in the present and sit with myself, take notice and connect with myself. And to be grateful for what I have, but also grateful for my own agency and power and self-compassion. After a while I learnt to talk to myself, and be my own compassionate friend. If you can connect with yourself it makes you more confident and able to follow your own path. It makes me more able to reach out, keep relationships and reconnect. It has a spin off for the other types of connection. And it’s freeing. And free!’

‘I’ve got a short fuse and that’s probably my military career that sort of enabled that I “act first” and “ask questions later”. I’ve got a real tendency to fly off the handle very quickly. So I take myself into a place where I feel a bit calmer and connected to the world around me. I’ve used [tapping](#); I read a lot. Teaching myself about how to be peaceful so I can make better decisions.’

Learning

‘Me and my wife got married quite late and had five kids by the time we were 41-years-old. We were older parents, add on having kids with disability and my wife being sick, we didn’t tick a lot of boxes. Our connection was really limited, we didn’t have a lot of family support. So we just kept on trying and trying to get the kids involved. We tried church, school sport, but didn’t really fit in. We kept trying to get involved in as many things as possible until we could find what the right thing was. Not quitting – don’t give up. Even when our life’s gotten really bad ... I don’t give up. My commitment has always been to my family.’

“

I found that I have this one teacher that I always go to talk to about my problems. They helped me through a lot and see my side of the story.

14-YEAR-OLD, WESTERN AUSTRALIA,
IN *SPEAKING OUT SURVEY*²

Take a moment to think about



- Which of these stories stand out to you and why?
- Do any of these stories give you ideas for your family?
- Which ideas do you think are the most important?
- Do you have a special place that helps you feel safe and connected?
- What steps might you want to take next? Is there anyone or anything that could help you?

Thanks for taking the time to read these stories. What might be missing from them? What ways have you and your family found to feel connected in times when belonging and community aren’t easy?

Resources on alternative ways to build connection

For some other ideas, check out the short film [Surviving the ocean of depression](#) (8 minutes, 56 seconds) made by refugees who recently arrived in Australia as they share their skills of connection and getting through in dark times.

More connection and belonging resources

Have a look at the following options and choose what feels right for you and your family.

- [Supporting children’s social connections in tough times](#)
- [Skills for connecting through social media](#)
- [When we’re really struggling to parent](#)
- [Why are connection and belonging important?](#)
- [Songs for connection and belonging](#)
- [See all resources on connection and belonging](#)

Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?
[First check out our practitioner guide.](#)

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References

1. Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia. (2021). [My place in WA: Children and young people speak out about their living environment](#). Perth: CCYP WA.
2. Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia. (2021). [Speaking out survey 2021: The views of WA children and young people on their wellbeing – A summary report](#). Perth: CCYPWA.