



Circles of Care for Older Adults

Breaking Social Isolation
Building Community
Celebrating Care

engAGE Living Lab How-to Kit



engagelivinglab.org

Contributors to this kit:

Concept: Janis Timm-Bottos

Contents: Carly McAskill, Najmeh Khalili-Mahani, Sara Kariminejad

Editing: Janis Timm-Bottos, Mohammad Abdalreza Zadeh, Rachel Chainey

Photos and images: Rachel Chainey, Carly McAskill, Momo Escobedo



THE SCALE OF THE CHALLENGE

An Aging World Faces a Loneliness Crisis



2 Billion

People aged 60+
by 2050



426 M

People aged 80+
by 2050



80%

Older adults in
low to middle income
countries

Common Triggers of Isolation in Older Adults:

**Low self-esteem · Decreased mobility · Loss of friends or family · Retirement · Chronic illness ·
Language barriers · Financial hardship · Lack of physical activity and mobility ·
Grief · Discrimination ·**

(World Health Organization, 2024)

Why it matters:

- Supports mental health & reduces anxiety
- Promotes physical activity and mobility
- Provides free art materials for creative expression
- Builds strong, sustainable relationships
- Welcomes people of all backgrounds & abilities
- Connects community-defined evidence with university research

"All are welcome."

A community engaged research project at Concordia University that gathered people of all age groups, especially older adults, to encourage collaboration and joyful connection through free, accessible art making and community building activities.

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Circle of Friends, by Judith Snow



Circles of Care have been influenced by two **strength-based models** that align with the values inherent in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion initiatives:

Circle of Friends and **Circle of Courage** (next page):

Judith Snow developed her own inclusion model, based on her direct experience as a person who had minimal to no ability to move her body. She was able to continue to accomplish her dreams through a model she developed and called a **Circle of Friends**: a powerful set of ideas that require a shift from service mentality to a strength-based “what’s working well” mentality. Driving in to the classroom with a breath-operated electric wheel chair, she carried a clear message: able-bodied people are missing out by not befriending people with disabilities. Snow’s vision was to move away from ideas of disability and see the giftedness, interdependence and reciprocity of the relationship. Her Circle of Friends allowed her to live her life independently and not be placed in an institution. She then started a nonprofit connecting friends with artists with disabilities, exhibited her art at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) and was hired as an actress.

Judith Snow presented her work at Concordia University in 2015:

<https://www.engagelivinglab.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CirclesofSupportFeature.pdf>

Circle of Courage

(Brendtro, Brokenleg, Bockern, 1990)

An indigenous model of youth empowerment represented by four core values that include: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. These same values have relevance for an older adult population and the Circle of Courage has influenced the development of the eLL Circle of Care model. Applied to older adults, it can be considered in the following ways:

Belonging: Fostering a sense of belonging is necessary for the maintenance of health and wellbeing throughout the life cycle but can be particularly necessary at times of transition as well as in the end of life.

Mastery: Sharing skills happens spontaneously in Circles of Care as well as at the Art Hives. Having skills to share fosters a sense of purpose providing feelings of worth and being valued as member of a community.

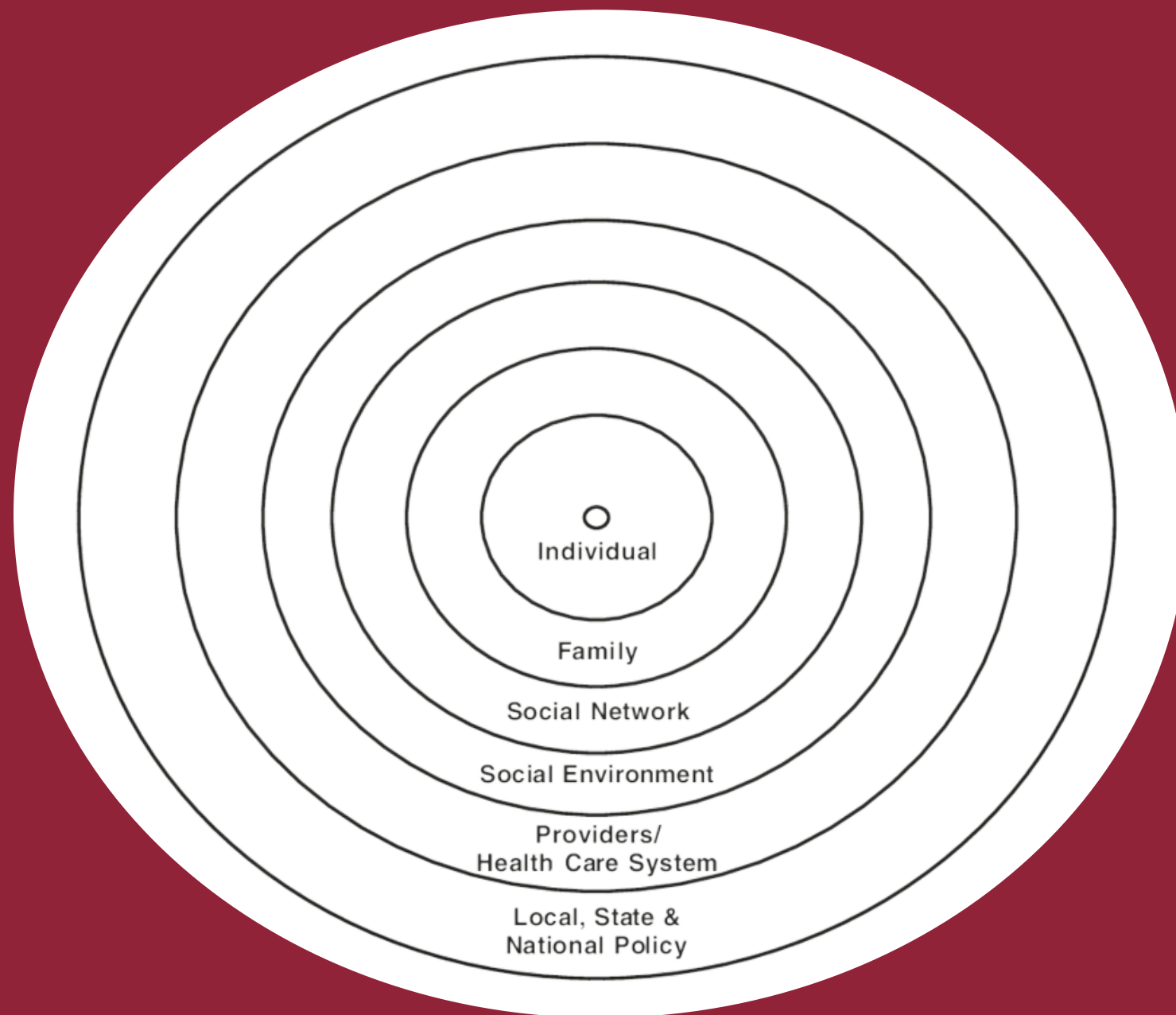
Independence: At the other end of life older adults who can maintain their autonomy live a better quality of life. Agency in older ages is as important as in younger ages.

Generosity: Provides multiple opportunities for older adults to share their life skills and materials. Having a space to give back to society is an underrated value in modern culture where retirement is seen as giving up one's life work.



Illustration: Starr Commonwealth

What Is a Circle of Care?



**A circle has no beginning, no end –
it moves in both directions.**

–Carly McAskill, eLL facilitator



A framework for building social relationships where everyone feels heard, listened to and valued.



Founded on engagement, support, kindness, trust, respect and compassion.



Develops skills in self and mutual care, self-expression, learning, leadership, communication, and teamwork.



Can happen anywhere: parks, coffee shops, libraries, malls, living rooms, and online.



Challenges stereotypes about aging and creates a community where all are welcome exactly as they are.

Highlights & Impact

- The engAGE Living Lab brought scientific and creative practices together in the same space through research residencies, research questionnaires, community art exhibitions, symposiums, conferences, and time spent together.
- Older adults took on leadership roles — teaching knitting, calligraphy, jewelry, music, and other informal skillshares through “each one, teach one” (Casanova, 1996).
- During the pandemic, eLL facilitators adapted activities online on Zoom, over the phone, and through artful flyers, such as colouring pages delivered to residential homes and apartments in the area. The objective was to keep the community connected when we could not be together in-person.
- Older adults with mobility challenges were offered accessible transportation to participate.
- Older adults who felt lonely were encouraged to attend. Many older adults commented on how special the space was, welcoming them as they are and offered for free and without registration.
- Older adults who became regular participants met friends and family at the engAGE Living Lab. It was common that family members would share with the team how important the eLL was, adding meaning and purpose to their loved ones’ day.



Challenges & Lessons Learned

- **Mobility challenges:** Coming to the space was difficult for some older adults with physical disabilities. Accessible transport was needed, but not always readily available.
- **Communication barriers:** Discussions were sometimes challenged by hearing loss, language gaps, most often between French and English speakers. Cultural barriers occasionally required non-judgemental facilitation.
- **Winter weather:** snowy conditions constituted a serious obstacle to attendance, especially for those with limited mobility. The mall also provided space for an indoor walking club to emerge.
- **Comfort of space:** Some chairs were uncomfortable and would easily fall over if heavy coats or backpacks were added to the back of the chair causing risk of falling. Participants needed cushions for support. Ergonomic, sturdy, arm-supported seating is essential for comfort and safety.
- **Washroom access:** Public washrooms at the mall were considered far from the space by participants. Older adults frequently needed to use them during visits to the living lab.
- **Digital divide:** Some older adults lacked access to devices or how to use them decreasing access to online sessions, limiting online program reach. Media training was added in response to this need.



Circle of Care Calls

The **Circle of Care Calls** were solution that emerged from the engAGE Living Lab team listening to the participants about what mattered to them. The calls developed through trial and error to mitigate to mitigate access, mobility and technological challenges.

- **One hour-long group conversations** were held **weekly** during a **16-month period** (April 2021 to September 2022).
- The calls were joined by **2-6 community members** through **cell phones or landlines**, and facilitated by one **art therapist and one student** from the engAGE Living Lab team.
- Intended to be a **safer space** for **all ages and abilities**, the Circle of Care Calls were hosted bilingually in **English and French. Conversation themes** were provided by participants, and facilitators chimed to provide relevant information as needed.
- **Challenges** included: navigating group dynamics without non-verbal cues, managing speaking turns and disagreements between participants, balancing participants' need to vent with maintaining an uplifting group atmosphere,
- Some of the documented **benefits** were: enjoying coming together to listen to each other, having a moment to look forward to during the week, feeling connected to the community's concerns, understanding the value of giving to fellow community members, finding value in oneself and one another, being curious and reducing preconceived ideas about each other.



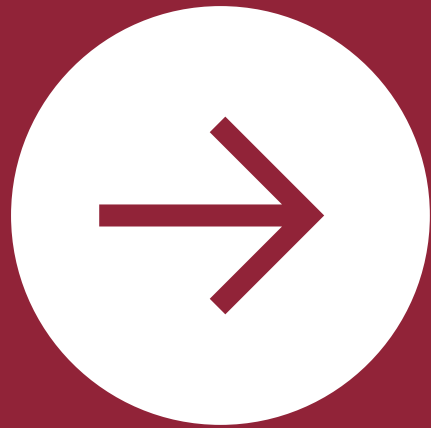
Illustration: Momo Escobedo

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion :

In Côte Saint-Luc (pop. ~34,000), approximately one-third of residents are seniors aged 65+. The eLL emerged in this community with a commitment to closing gaps of social isolation through an intergenerational, intercultural space shaped by the community itself.



- **Intercultural & Intergenerational:** People of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities interact in the space. Babies to adults in their 90s — all coexist and contribute to what matters to them.
- **Accessible to all incomes:** Zero cost removes socioeconomic barriers. Supplies are donated, upcycled or sourced secondhand through donations and Concordia University's Centre for Creative Reuse (CUCCR).
- **No administrative barriers:** No registration needed. No forms to fill. Walk in and be welcomed. This helps to reduce fear and discomfort many people face when entering a new space.
- **Challenging Ageism:** eLL actively challenges negative perceptions of aging. Older adults are not passive recipients — they are leaders, teachers, and co-creators contributing to Age Friendly Cities.
- **Bilingualism and tech support:** Bilingual facilitators help bridge French-English divides and ensure all participants can communicate and feel at home. Digital skillshares answer older adults questions about how to use computers and cellphones.
- **Mobility Awareness:** Adapted furniture and accessible transport options help participants with movement disabilities engage fully in activities.



How to start your own Circle of Care :

1

Choose your space

A park, a corner of a coffee shop, library, community center, hospital waiting room, or even online or on the phone!
Anywhere people feel safe and welcome, works.

2

Gather basic supplies

Start small: a few sturdy chairs, a table, art supplies, coffee or tea. Encourage everyone to contribute a small recyclable item or discarded craft kits to be repurposed. There is an abundance of materials being thrown away.

3

Spread the word

Post flyers in community centres, libraries, pharmacies, senior centres, using large print and simple design. Use multilingual materials if able, especially when reaching out to groups missing from activities.

4

Welcome everyone

No registration, no cost, no experience needed. Make it clear all are welcome exactly as they are. Add a simple sign-in book and ask permission for optional emails and phone numbers to be able to contact if needed. Always ask for consent if taking photos.

5

Start with connection

Open with a display of simple materials to encourage playfulness and experimentation — making art, sharing snacks, or start a listening circle*. Let the community guide the direction of the conversation.

6

Listen & Adapt

Invite older adults to shape the space. Ask what they need. Work with them, not for them. Relationships take time.

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