



# Waltham Connections

for Healthy Aging

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## The Mind, Body, Spirit Program

### Description and Evaluation

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## 1. Program Description

Being socially isolated can be difficult at any time but has been especially challenging during COVID. One in three adults say they lack regular companionship, and one in five older adults say their mental health has gotten worse since the pandemic began.<sup>1</sup>

With funding from McLean Hospital through CHNA 18, in April and May of 2021, Waltham Connections for Healthy Aging (Connections), designed and conducted a virtual, six-week program entitled Mind, Body, Spirit (MBS) for Waltham seniors. The program was designed to be interactive and give participants a chance to connect not only with the material but also with one another. Connections is a coalition of older adult activists and public and private agencies working to make Waltham an age-friendly community, as well as a model for community involvement for older adults. With limited opportunities for social engagement, Connections felt the MBS program could provide an opportunity to decrease isolation and continue community building in Waltham.

## 2. Program Development

### **a. Background**

During the pandemic, Connections continued to meet virtually and plan for ways for older adults to come together. We know that social interaction is important. Studies have documented the beneficial

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<sup>1</sup> National Poll on Healthy Aging, March, 2021

<https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/167308/NPHA-Mental-Health-report.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>

effect of social support on health outcomes. Individuals who are more socially connected have a 50 percent reduced risk of early death relative to those who are less socially connected.<sup>2</sup>

We also know that group activities can provide meaningful ways for people to connect. Hubie Jones, former Dean at Boston University School of Social Work writes, “Groups can serve as an effective antidote to social isolation and loneliness. Groups provide a place to be cared about and to care about other people. Groups provide a valuable sense of belonging and being a part of community. Groups offer the opportunity to acquire social skills and access valuable social resources. Groups can provide activities and programs that integrate mental and physical health.”<sup>3</sup>

Finally, we wanted to make sure that the program had a significant connection to the Waltham Senior Center. Senior Centers are an important place to bring older adults together and are often the front door to older adult community activities. Outreach and sign up for MBS were through the Waltham Senior Center.

#### ***b. Team composition and operations***

The planning team met with several of our agency members who were committed to programming to decrease social isolation. This included the Waltham COA, Jewish Family and Childrens Services (JF&CS), and Healthy Waltham. The team included several volunteers experienced in designing programs for older adults. The lead volunteer was a social worker with a specialty in aging. It was also decided that we would hire a program facilitator who could help with the administration of the program and also provide the program with continuity, week to week.

#### ***c. Curriculum and presenters***

In designing the curriculum, team members determined that the primary goal would be to try to counter social isolation among older adults in Waltham via a short program focused on mental and physical health. We felt that sessions focusing on mind, body, and spirit would provide a range of experiences for participants which promote social connection and support the primary goal.

Two sessions would focus on physical activity. A 2020 study found that exercise classes decrease loneliness and isolation in older people with improvement in social connectedness.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, according to the Suicide Resource Prevention Center (SRPC),<sup>5</sup> “regular physical activity is one of the most important things older adults can do for maintaining heart and brain health, reducing stress, and improving mood. Even just 20 minutes of exercise or movement (including stretching) can make a difference.”

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<sup>2</sup>Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Baker M, Harris T, Stephenson D. Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Perspect Psychol Sci.* 2015 Mar;10(2):227-37.

<sup>3</sup> Group Practice with Older Adults online course Boston University School of Social Work Donna McLaughlin, Fall 2018, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Los Angeles Daily News; Study: Exercise classes decrease loneliness, social isolation in older people <https://www.dailynews.com/2020/11/13/study-exercise-classes-decrease-loneliness-social-isolation-in-older-people/>.

<sup>5</sup> Suicide Resource Prevention Center, “Promoting Psychological Health and Suicide Prevention among Older Adults during COVID-19,” <https://www.edc.org/suicide-prevention-resource-center-sprc>.

Two sessions would focus on spirit. The SPRC suggests that programs incorporate ways to experience relaxation and calm. “Learning to manage stress through effective strategies, such as mindfulness, deep breathing, imagery, yoga, or stretching, can increase older adults’ sense of control, confidence, and focus.”

Finally, two sessions on mind would be helpful in keeping participants engaged in learning new things. SPRC suggests that, “keeping the mind active is associated with a number of positive cognitive, emotional, and physical health outcomes.”

### **3. Program Details**

#### **a. Learn It, Like It?, Try It Format**

The six, weekly, 90-minute sessions were offered via Zoom. Each session included a presentation on the selected topic which we called **Learn It**. After the session we gathered feedback from the participants on their thoughts about the session, which we called **Like It?** At the end of the **session** resources related to the topic were offered, with the suggestion of **Try It** at home.

#### **b. Curriculum**

##### **➤ Mind**

#### **Week 1- Waltham Going Places**

**Learn It-** Presentation on the history of Waltham using architecture/buildings as an entry point.

**Try It-** Walking tour of the sites that were discussed, to be done at a later time.

#### **Week 2 -Journaling/ Reminiscing**

**Learn It-** Presentation on writing with an in-class exercise.

**Try It-** Suggestions for journaling exercises and resources.

##### **➤ Body**

#### **Week 3- Use It**

**Learn It-** Body strengthening exercise class with a COA instructor.

**Try It-**Exercise at home via zoom, classes on cable access, walk around the neighborhood.

#### **Week 4- Gentle Yoga**

**Learn it-**Gentle yoga class with a COA instructor.

**Try It-** Take a class on your own, practice poses.

##### **➤ Spirit**

#### **Week 5 -Emotional Well Being during COVID**

**Learn It-** Presentation on coping during COVID-19

**Try It-** Exercises to try at home.

## **Week 6- Mindfulness**

**Learn It-** Presentation on breathing and mindfulness.

**Try It-** Participate in an online mindfulness class, suggestions on meditation resources.

### ***c. Presenters***

With Connections being a coalition of community partners, we turned to our members for suggestions for presenters. We gathered names and found 6 presenters with ties to the Waltham Senior Center, the Brandeis Osher Center for Lifelong Learning, Brandeis University, and JF&CS.

### ***d. Putting content into online format***

Initially we had hoped to present the program on Waltham Cable TV because of its broad accessibility. Unfortunately, cable offered limited options for interactivity so the program was presented on Zoom. The program met weekly at the same time for 6 consecutive weeks. The Zoom link was sent out at the beginning of the program and then weekly. In addition, the program facilitator called participants weekly to remind them of the program.

## **4. Outcomes: Enrollment, Operations, and Feedback on Individual Sessions**

### ***a. Recruitment, enrollment and attendance***

A flyer (attached) describing the program was designed and distributed. An announcement of the program was included in the Waltham COA newsletter and Connection member newsletter. It also appeared in several local government officials' newsletters. The flyer was distributed at the Healthy Waltham food pantry and in senior housing. Sign up was through the CoA and interested older adults received a call back from the program facilitator.

Initially 14 people signed up for the program. They had heard about the program from the COA newsletter and flyers in their buildings. Eleven seniors attended the first session and continued to attend most sessions. Over the six weeks of classes, attendance was 84%.

Although we did not ask about ethnicity or languages spoken, this information came out during the sessions. Four of the participants shared that English was not their first language with two participants identifying as Spanish speaking and two participants identifying their first language as Chinese.

### ***b. Operations***

The facilitator of the program was a paid first-year social work student with an interest in aging. She took an active role in emailing and calling participants on a weekly basis. Participants felt a strong connection to her and our belief is that attendance would not have been as good, without a strong connection to a facilitator.

### ***c. Feedback on Individual Sessions***

Over the 6 weeks, feedback was gathered on each session, using the format of Learn It, Like It?, Try It.

➤ **Week 1 History of Waltham (mind)**

**Learn It**

The history of Waltham presentation used architecture/buildings as an entry point. The Try It element was a walking tour of the sites, to be done at a later time. Several people commented on how much they enjoyed learning about the city's history. This included hearing about the first woman architect to join the AIA, the history of the state hospitals in the community, information on the city's museums, and Waltham self-guided walking tours. Participants also spoke about their personal connection to the city. This included working at Metropolitan State Hospital, working at the Waltham Watch Factory, and shopping with their grandmother at the Grover Cronin Department store, which closed in 1989.

**Like It?**

All gave it a thumbs up.

**Try It At Home**

Several participants spoke about wanting to try the suggested walking tours and explore some of the museums, when the weather is better and there are fewer pandemic restrictions.

➤ **Week 2 Journaling (mind)**

**Learn It**

Participants liked this session, noting how they enjoyed the class exercise of just observing and writing about what was around them. Someone commented that they felt that journaling would be good for memory. On the personal side, one participant whose first language was not English initially felt a little uncomfortable writing during exercise in the session, but she tried it and was able to do it. This included sharing how lonely she has felt during the pandemic.

**Like It?**

All gave it a thumbs up.

**Try It At Home**

A participant talked about writing through hard times including the death of a child. She has done it in the past and was moved to continue. Another person used the suggestion of writing to work through a problematic situation. She did it and felt it was extremely helpful to her.

➤ **Week 3- Use It (body)**

**Learn It**

One participant spoke of having participated regularly in exercise at the senior center. She was missing it but learned through our session how to do more on YouTube with the instructor. Participants felt the instructor was aware of the needs of older adults. They liked the philosophy "don't do it if it hurts." Another participant liked learning that you can gain muscle mass even as you age.

**Like It?**

All gave it a thumbs up.

### **Try It At Home**

Participants appreciated being provided a list of activities that can be done virtually at the senior center and through cable TV.

#### **➤ Week 4 Gentle Yoga (body)**

### **Learn It**

Several participants talked about enjoying the movements. They liked having music in the background and the stretches felt good.

### **Like It?**

All gave it a thumbs up.

### **Try It At Home**

One participant talked about stretching every morning in bed. This program gave her new ideas to add to her stretching routine. Another spoke about having a lower back injury so will try adding some stretching. Participants were pleased to now have the handouts listing how and when they could take classes virtually through the senior center.

#### **➤ Week 5- Coping with COVID- (spirit)**

### **Learn It**

Many of the participants spoke about the importance of being reminded to think about their emotional well-being every day. They enjoyed the suggestions of how to do it. A participant shared, "I don't remember the titles she put on them. But it hit home. Because that's how I find my peace."

### **Like It?**

All gave it a thumbs up.

### **Try It At Home**

One participant spoke about savoring the moment at home. "It's hard to keep in mind. But if you do, there are moments to be savored."

#### **➤ Week 6- Meditation (spirit)**

### **Learn It**

Participants found this session particularly helpful. "This session was very beautiful," said one. "I thought he was great. He helped me be calm in the midst of breathing in/breathing out," said another.

### **Like It?**

All gave it a thumbs up.

## **Try It At Home**

Participants felt that the instructor made the practice of meditation accessible. “It’s something available to all of us at any time.” “I’m not a person who does this, but I’m going to give it a go to see if it helps.”

## **5. Final Program Evaluation**

There were three elements to the final program evaluation: four open-ended questions asked at the last session, a 10-question Zoom poll, and a pre-post survey on loneliness. Each is discussed in turn below.

### **a. Open-ended questions and responses**

Here are the four open-ended questions and responses from the last session.

Now that we concluded the 6 weeks:

- What did you think of the program?
  - “It was a great program”
  - “Thank you for organizing this program. I think it was beautiful.”
  - “It was a terrific program as expected. A strong do it again; hopefully it can be live.”
  - “Thank you very much. It was very fun.”
  - “I thought the program was very well planned.”
  - “Karla (the facilitator) created a wonderful environment for us all to share and explore, or get reacquainted, or use these new ideas.”
  - “Kudos to you Karla – you did great.”
- What were the benefits to you, of each part of the program?
  - “This program covered a lot about Mind, Body, Spirit. I think I get a lot. I take notes, and I can practice later for the yoga, and the meditation. And also for the history part; I also liked that – that was interesting.”
  - “I liked it very much. I thought it was a great program. It has a little bit of everything. For me it was a very much desired break from other things I am doing.”
  - “Thank you for the many hours of hard work you and your team put into giving this course called “Mind, Body Spirit”. I think the topics were diverse and offered something to each participant. I appreciated the recordings, the web site addresses and the information covered by each presenter. It is so good to just listen and know the information will be sent later by email.”
  - “The Mind section was interesting to those who do not know the history of Waltham. If the weather had been warmer, I would have visited the historic sites mentioned in the class. The journaling is a good idea. I like the way you sent out website information for both classes in the Mind sessions.”
  - “The Body sessions were well designed for older seniors like myself. I learned that I need more regular exercise as I had become very stiff. I was aware that I lack flexibility as I tried the exercises in this session.”
  - “The Spirit part of the course had good suggestions for using music, enjoying the environment and staying connected with others. I was reminded of the care of self in terms of nutrition, understanding others, sleep, sense of purpose and

emotions. I have heard of Mindfulness but never tried it until the instructor in the last session taught this class. I think I will try it when I am feeling stressed.”

- Would you like to see this offered again, and if so, are there any changes you would make?
  - All participants wanted the program to be done again. Several suggested doing it face to face.
- Any overall suggestions?
  - “Ideally, it would be done in person. I loved the history of Waltham. I wish that that was two sessions, with perhaps some history of the COA in Waltham.”
  - “One thing that maybe can help is maybe a nutrition piece.”
  - “If this course was offered again then I would want more content added such as anti-racism in terms of Asians, people of Color and immigrants. We had a diverse group of participants and I would like to hear their experiences of facing discrimination or everyday issues. Another related topic is micro-aggressions and cultural boundaries which need to be respected. Again, the cultural diversity of the class was a valuable asset for understanding others in the group.”

**b. Ten-question poll**

After the open-ended questions, ten yes/no, multi-choice questions were asked via a Zoom poll.

- Did you like the MBS program?
  - All participants liked it very much
- What did you think about the Learn it, Like it, Try it format :
  - All participants liked it
- Did you like the Try it part of the program?
  - Answers were a mix of yes and somewhat?
- Were you able to implement any of the Try it suggestions?
  - Mixed response with some yes and some no
- Did you like the speakers?
  - All participants liked them or liked them very much
- Did you like the topics for each week?
  - All respondents liked them or liked them very much
- Which was your favorite?
  - History of Waltham
  - Emotional well-being
  - Mindfulness
- Did you feel that you connected with other participants in the class?
  - Yes and somewhat
- Did you develop new skills?
  - Yes and somewhat

- Would you recommend the MBS program to others?
  - All said yes

**c. Did we succeed in decreasing loneliness?**

We measured the impact of MBS on loneliness with a single question from the Center for Epidemiologic Studies (of Depression) 20-point scale<sup>6</sup>: “I feel lonely.” We asked the question via a zoom poll at the start and end of the course. The answers at the start were as follows:

- 60% Rarely or none of the time -Less than 1 day.
- 30% Some or a little of the time (1–2 days)
- 0 % Occasionally or a moderate amount of the time (3–4 days)
- 10% Most of the time (5-7 days) in the past week

In the poll at the end of the program, one person went from being lonely most of the time to being lonely occasionally. Other participants stayed the same.

As we tried to understand these results, we looked to a recent article by Caitlin Coyle and colleagues.<sup>7</sup> They suggest, “when it comes to reducing feelings of loneliness or experiences of social isolation, measuring change is hard. It’s hard because people don’t like to identify with the word lonely, so questions like ‘How often in the last two weeks did you feel lonely?’ fall flat.... For these reasons, we encourage communities to consider documenting the positive outcomes of their work as opposed to measuring change in social isolation and loneliness.” This is consistent with our documentation of positive outcomes above.

## **6. Lessons/discussion**

We believe that this type of program did create a community of participants that might not have happened in a typical six-week Zoom course that was more didactic (e.g., for Mind classes) or follow-the leader (for Body classes). People got to know one another and liked one another. There were also many opportunities for sharing feedback and impact. The “Try It” at home portion of the program, which we hoped would bring participants together to try something with other class participants outside of the class, did not happen. We believe that it could have been because activity was so limited because of COVID or that we were asking too much of participants to meet with classmates after knowing them for only a short period of time.

Another idea would be to use this format of introducing topics related to mind, body and spirit, as a sampler for new senior center participants. It would give people a chance to experience a range of topics and then decide if they would like more learning/courses on these topics.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.chcr.brown.edu/pcoc/cesdscale.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Coyle, Caitlin; Gleason, Shayna; and Bui, Cindy, "It's the Little Things: A Community Resource for Strengthening Social Connections" (2020). *Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging Publications*. P.6. <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/demographyofaging/47>



## **YOU'RE INVITED! NEW "MIND, BODY, SPIRIT" GROUP Starting in April**

"Mind, Body, Spirit" (MBS) is a no cost, 6-week journey, where older adults will gather- through computer meetings via Zoom- to learn new skills and connect with others. Participants will engage in six, 75-minute workshops presented by local practitioners, experts in the class subject. The workshops will be held from 10:00 am-11:15 am (through Zoom) on April 6, April 13, April 20, April 27, May 4, and May 11.

Planned workshops include:

- Waltham History—Places that Matter
- Journaling—The Rewards of Reminiscing
- Exercise Class—Move It and Use It
- Gentle Yoga
- Emotional Well Being and COVID
- Mindfulness—Joy of Breathing

We will also ask you to try practice suggestions made by your presenters, between sessions. This may include trying yoga at home, writing in a journal, or learning more about Waltham history.

Those attending all sessions, and trying activities at home, will receive a Waltham Mind, Body, Spirit sweatshirt. To sign up, call the Waltham Council on Aging at 781-314-3499 (x2). Leave your name, contact information, and ask to register for "Mind, Body, Spirit." You will receive a call back from the program coordinator, Karla Armenoff or email [w.connections.mbs@gmail.com](mailto:w.connections.mbs@gmail.com). There will be space for 15 participants.

MBS is sponsored by Waltham Connections for Healthy Aging in association with the Waltham Council on Aging.