



2026 COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS SUMMIT
MCHENRY COUNTY COLLEGE | FRIDAY, 9.11.2026 | 9:00 AM - 3:00 PM

BREAKOUT DESCRIPTIONS & PRESENTER BIOS

KEYNOTE PRESENTATION 9:00 AM

One Conversation at a Time: Creating Connection in a Disconnected World | Shira Greenfield | Luecht Auditorium - Room B170

We are born into relationships. We are wounded in relationships. We heal in relationships. And those relationships are built—or broken—one conversation at a time. Shira will discuss ways people connect and disconnect in the digital age.

Objectives:

1. Examine current research on loneliness, social connection, and interpersonal communication to better understand why people often underestimate the value of everyday conversations.
2. Identify practical, evidence-based strategies for initiating meaningful conversations that foster connection, strengthen relationships, and promote psychological well-being.
3. Recognize how small, intentional acts of connection can have a meaningful impact on individual and community well-being.

Presenter Bio: Shira Greenfield, LCPC, earned her master's degree in Counselor Education from the University of Iowa in 1985. In the past 38 years, she has worked as a therapist, a crisis intervention worker, a group facilitator, and an educator. She has also held several leadership positions in behavioral health care providing oversight to both inpatient and outpatient programs and teams. She currently serves as the Clinical Director for Pivotal Counseling Center with offices in Lake in the Hills and Woodstock. Shira is an experienced and sought-after speaker who is known for her down to earth style and relatability.





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BREAKOUT SESSION I - 10:15 AM (4 CONCURRENT BREAKOUTS)

Listening to Leading - Youth Voices/Community Impact - Alex Campbell, Edith Sánchez, and Brenda Napholz | Room XXX

Young people are often asked for their opinions, but meaningful change happens when youth move beyond being heard and become partners in decision-making. We will explore how youth can influence programs, policies, and community initiatives while building stronger partnerships with adults. We will highlight the McHenry County Youth Empower Alliance model and explore how we can work together on the issues that matter most to them.

Objectives: Participants will be able to: Understand the difference between being listened to and being empowered to lead. Explore ways youth can influence positive community change. Develop actionable ideas for youth-led solutions. Identify issues impacting youth.

Presenters Bio: Alex Campbell and his wife, Leann, have lived in Crystal Lake since 1979 and raised three daughters. For 26 years, Alex has led several local non-profits, including NAMI McHenry County and Home of the Sparrow. A 2023 Distinguished Alumni of Leadership Greater McHenry County, he co-founded the Youth Empower Alliance, where he currently serves as Project Director. Alex remains dedicated to supporting local youth and provides consulting services to behavioral health organizations.

Edith Sánchez is a first-generation Latina from McHenry County and the Education and Engagement Manager for NAMI McHenry County. She holds a Bachelor's in Social Work and a Master's in Management. Active in several local leadership and suicide prevention initiatives, Edith is a passionate mental health advocate dedicated to breaking stigma, empowering individuals, and inspiring positive community change.

Brenda Napholz has lived in McHenry County since 1992, dedicating her work to youth empowerment. In 2013, she co-founded The BREAK with local high school students, and she later co-led the Youth Empower Alliance (YEA). A 2023 Distinguished Alumni of Leadership Greater McHenry County, Brenda holds a degree from Drake University and co-owns Fast Finish Coaching. Her passion is breaking down barriers so young people can thrive as leaders, innovators, and partners.





BREAKOUT DESCRIPTIONS & PRESENTER BIOS

BREAKOUT SESSION I (CONT'D) - 10:15 AM

Welcome to My Hype House: Helping Adolescents Build Safe and Connected Relationships – Kristy Hinz, MA, LPC | Room XXX

The “Hype House” is a creative, interactive framework designed to help professionals teach adolescents about emotional safety, healthy relationships, and meaningful connection through the metaphor of a house. Using engaging discussion and experiential activities, the model supports young people in exploring trust, communication, accountability, boundaries, and authentic connection in a way that is accessible and developmentally appropriate. Participants are encouraged to reflect on who they allow into their “house,” how relationships influence emotional well-being, and why healthy connection requires both openness and boundaries. In this breakout session, attendees will experience the Hype House framework from the learner perspective while also exploring strategies for implementation within schools, counseling groups, private practice, and other youth-centered settings. The session will provide practical tools, activities, and facilitation techniques that professionals can immediately adapt to strengthen social-emotional learning, foster community connection, and support adolescents in building safer and more emotionally attuned relationships. Participants will also examine how adolescents can use this framework to critically evaluate the qualities, patterns, and dynamics present in their interpersonal relationships. Emphasis will be placed on developing reflective decision-making skills that help adolescents identify healthy connection, recognize unsafe or imbalanced relationship patterns, and apply these insights to real-world social interactions.

Objectives:

1. Identify the core components of emotionally safe and healthy relationships, including trust, communication, accountability, and boundaries.
2. Describe how the Hype House framework can be used to facilitate social-emotional learning and relationship-centered conversations with adolescents in schools, counseling groups, private practice, and other youth-centered settings.
3. Apply interactive activities and discussion strategies from the Hype House model to promote emotional awareness, community building, and healthy peer relationships among adolescents.

Presenter Bio: Kristy Hinz, MA, LPC is a Licensed Professional Counselor with experience in adolescent mental health, school-based counseling, social-emotional learning, family support, and psychoeducational program development. Experienced presenter and educator skilled in facilitating engaging, relationship-centered learning experiences for adolescents, caregivers, educators, and helping professionals. Passionate about emotional safety, healthy relationships, authenticity, and practical SEL strategies that support youth development in schools and community settings.





BREAKOUT DESCRIPTIONS & PRESENTER BIOS

BREAKOUT SESSION I (CONT'D) - 10:15 AM

The Grief Gap: Beyond Acceptance — A Way Through the Space Nobody Names **| Lisa Orris | Room XXX**

There is a gap nobody talks about. It is the space between the life you had before and the life you are somehow supposed to be living now. Between the grief you are still carrying and the hope you are not sure you are allowed to feel. Most grieving people live there — alone, in silence — because nobody has given them a name for it, let alone a way through it. For decades we have been told that grief ends in acceptance. But that word has done quiet, lasting damage to people brave enough to grieve honestly — because accepting that someone you love is gone can feel less like healing and more like resignation. In this workshop we will name what is really happening in the gap and explore the tools to navigate it: the difference between aspirational hope and adaptive hope, the continuous bond theory and why we never have to "let go" of our person, and how to build real resilience in the in-between. If you are grieving or are helping someone who is, this is not about getting better at grief. It is about learning to live in The Grief Gap with more courage, more clarity, and more hope than you thought was still available to you.

Objectives:

- Name and understand The Grief Gap — the in-between space most grieving people inhabit alone
- Explore why acceptance as a final destination has failed grieving people — and what to replace it with
- Learn the difference between aspirational hope and adaptive hope, and how to move from one to the other
- Examine the continuous bond theory and why it is necessary in the grieving process
- Discover that moving forward and honoring your loss are not opposites
- Leave with new language, new permission, and a clearer path through the gap

Presenter Bio: [Lisa Orris](#) is the founder of Grief Guide, a nonprofit dedicated to guiding individuals and communities through loss. A 2023 McHenry County Woman of Distinction, she is an ordained minister with a Master of Divinity from North Park Theological Seminary and a degree in Criminology from Gannon University. Lisa frequently presents at regional forums and professional summits on grief support. She lives in Illinois with her husband, Bill, and balances her work with her family, including their three children and three grandsons.





BREAKOUT DESCRIPTIONS & PRESENTER BIOS

BREAKOUT SESSION I (CONT'D) - 10:15 AM

You Can't Do Life Alone: Peer Support Matters | Nicole Moreno and Nancy Bernal | Room XXX

This session highlights the role of peer support in helping people navigate complex systems, difficult conversations, and everyday challenges. Participants will learn how connection, trust, and lived experience improve engagement and outcomes while exploring how peer support complements formal treatment by providing encouragement, accountability, and ongoing support throughout the recovery journey. Attendees will also gain practical strategies to integrate peer support into their work and communities, strengthening recovery, improving engagement, and fostering lasting connections.

Objectives:

- Understand the role of peer support in navigating systems, difficult conversations, and everyday challenges.
- Identify how lived experience and trust improve engagement, complement formal treatment, and support positive outcomes.
- Apply practical strategies to integrate peer support into professional and community settings.
- Recognize how peer support can strengthen recovery by fostering connection, reducing stigma, and encouraging continued engagement beyond formal treatment.

Presenters Bio:

Nicole Moreno currently works at New Directions Addiction Recovery Services. She currently serves as the Team Lead Community Navigator for the A Way Out Program in McHenry County since 2022. She believes strongly in their mission to inspire recovery, foster community, and saving lives. She is passionate about meeting people where they're at and helping people reach their recovery goals, whatever they may look like. She is also bilingual in Spanish and serves as one of the Spanish liaisons for the program.

Nancy Bernal is a dedicated bilingual and bicultural advocate passionate about driving meaningful change in substance use disorder recovery, with a focus on empowering and serving the Hispanic community. My mission is to **Touch** hearts, **Impact** lives and **Inspire** people to be their best version.





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BREAKOUT SESSION II - 12:00 PM

Before the Crisis: Conversations That Build Safety, Trust, and Belonging | Josh Novick, MA LPC | Room XXX

Communities often wait until pain becomes visible before they begin asking the most important questions. By then, disconnection, grief, shame, fear, and unmet need may have already taken root. This 60-minute session explores how meaningful conversations can become a form of prevention, healing, and community building. Drawing from clinical counseling, school-based crisis response, MTSS, community mental health, and post-crisis support, this session will help participants understand how trust is built before a crisis, how people communicate distress long before they say it directly, and how professionals across systems can create spaces where people feel seen, safe, and connected. The session will also explore common communication breakdowns between schools, private practices, hospitals, families, and community providers. Participants will learn how different systems often speak different languages, and how translating across those systems can reduce confusion, strengthen care, and improve outcomes for the people we serve. At its core, this session invites participants to consider one central question: What would change if we treated connection as infrastructure?

Objectives:

1. Identify how disconnection, shame, trauma, and unmet need can show up across schools, families, workplaces, and community settings.
2. Describe how trauma-informed and relationship-centered conversations can support regulation, trust, and belonging.
3. Apply a practical framework for improving communication between schools, families, private providers, hospitals, and community organizations.

Presenter Bio: Josh Novick, MA LPC, is a licensed professional counselor and founder of Trust and Grow Consulting, specializing in trauma intervention and resilience. After teaching at Chicago alternative high schools, he co-led the 2022 Highland Park emergency response center—mobilizing 600 volunteer therapists and earning the Illinois State Senate Award. He holds degrees from Indiana University and Northeastern Illinois University, and now consults to foster psychological safety and post-traumatic growth.





BREAKOUT DESCRIPTIONS & PRESENTER BIOS

BREAKOUT SESSION II - 12:00 PM

Connected by Conversation: When Communities Talk, Families Grow | Allison Kranich, MS, LCPC, CADC | Room XXX

As technology continues to shape the daily lives of children, adolescents, and families, there is a growing need for thoughtful, developmentally informed conversations that support healthy connection and well-being. This presentation will examine the role of smartphones and digital media in family life, with attention to child and adolescent development, family functioning, and the ways community members can respond with curiosity, compassion, and practical guidance. Rather than focusing solely on the challenges of technology use, this session will highlight the opportunity for meaningful dialogue that strengthens relationships, promotes healthier habits, and builds shared understanding across families, schools, and communities. Participants will leave with a deeper appreciation for the importance of these conversations and concrete strategies to engage in ways that are both clinically grounded and relationally supportive. This session will highlight the power of meaningful conversation to support families navigating digital-age challenges. Participants will leave with practical, relationally grounded strategies to engage children, adolescents, and caregivers in open dialogue that fosters trust, connection, and healthier technology habits.

Objectives:

1. Describe the importance of meaningful conversations in supporting child, adolescent, and family well-being in a technology-rich world.
2. Identify common barriers and opportunities for engaging families in open dialogue about technology use and related developmental concerns.
3. Use strategies to foster curiosity, compassion, and connection in conversations about smartphones, digital media, and everyday family challenges.
4. Apply communication approaches that support healthier habits, stronger relationships, and shared understanding across families, schools, and communities.
5. Recognize how thoughtful, developmentally informed conversations can help families navigate technology in ways that promote well-being.

Presenter Bio: Allison Kranich, MS, LCPC, CADC, has been a behavioral health counselor in McHenry County for over 15 years, currently serving as an outpatient counselor at Northwestern Medicine. Specializing in children, adolescents, and families, her work focuses on how technology and smartphones impact development and relational well-being. She is passionate about helping caregivers and professionals support healthier relationships in a digital world.





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BREAKOUT SESSION II CONT'D - 12:00 PM

Supporting Youth and Families Impacted by Incarceration or the Justice System | Cheryl Niemo, LCSW | Room XXX

We can provide a path back, with inspiration from IFS, Internal Family Systems, Narrative Therapy and Restorative Justice. This session will provide knowledge and skills to better address the needs of children and families impacted by adversity to increase resiliency, connection and functioning.

Objectives: Learn strategies and interventions to offer families during tumultuous and uncertain times. Increase your knowledge about the needs of youth and families coping with adverse experiences and how to better respond in an impactful way. Increase your competence and comfort in holding space for and walking alongside individuals and families in their most tender states. Discuss how to create a safe, respectful environment that offers hope and empowerment. Explore how language can help with the expression and processing and healing of the impact.

Presenter Bio: Cheryl Niemo, LCSW, has three decades of experience as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in private practice who holds an MSW from Aurora University. Grounded in a strengths-based, "Everyone has mental health" philosophy, they build relationships rooted in trust, safety, and authenticity to help clients break free from negative emotional patterns and develop effective wellness strategies. Additionally, drawing from personal experience with a loved one's incarceration, they are deeply committed to providing a safe space of healing and community support for justice-impacted individuals and their families.





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BREAKOUT SESSION II CONT'D - 12:00 PM

Bigger Together: How Mentorship Creates Connection | Anna Buckingham | Room: XXX

Research shows that intentional connections are essential for mental health. In this interactive workshop, participants will explore how connections that once occurred organically can be intentionally created through mentorship. We will explore how these reciprocal relationships not only help youth thrive, but adults also develop patience, empathy, cultural competence, and rediscover joy and playfulness.

Objectives:

Attendees will: participate in empathy building activities, increase understanding of what mentoring is, identify how safety is essential for successful connections, workshop meaningful conversations through facilitation, be empowered to take action.

Presenter Bio: Anna Buckingham is a youth-serving professional with experience working in community-based organizations, public schools, residential facilities, and youth detention. She currently works with Big Brothers Big Sisters of McHenry County. Anna holds a Master's degree in Mental Health Counseling and Expressive Therapy. Her work is grounded in trauma-informed practice, with a strong focus on youth safety, gender equity, inclusion, and justice. Outside of work, Anna enjoys volunteering in her community and spending time with her family. She is the proud mother of three girls, who inspire her commitment to building safer and more equitable spaces for youth.





BREAKOUT DESCRIPTIONS & PRESENTER BIOS

BREAKOUT SESSION III - 1:15 PM

Nourishing the Family: Supporting Recovery Through Compassionate Conversations About Eating Disorders | Carolyn Schofield and Mia Greco, MS, MPH, RD, LDN | Room XXX

Conversations about eating disorders can feel overwhelming for families, caregivers, educators, and professionals. Many people worry about saying the wrong thing, unintentionally reinforcing disordered behaviors, or creating conflict around food. This presentation will provide practical, evidence-informed strategies for approaching these conversations with empathy, curiosity, and confidence. Grounded in weight-inclusive, family-centered care, participants will learn how eating disorders affect the entire family system, recognize common communication pitfalls, and develop skills to foster connection while supporting recovery.

Objectives:

- Identify common myths and misconceptions surrounding eating disorders and explain how these beliefs can impact family communication.
- Demonstrate compassionate communication strategies for navigating challenging conversations about food, body image, and eating disorder recovery.
- Recognize ways caregivers and support persons can create a home environment that promotes recovery while reducing shame, blame, and food-related conflict.
- Apply weight-inclusive, evidence-based principles to support individuals experiencing eating disorders across various stages of recovery.

Presenters Bio: Carolyn Schofield is a mother of three whose family's experience with eating disorders strengthened her commitment to mental health advocacy. Drawing on both lived experience and years of public service, she was appointed to the McHenry County Mental Health Board in 2023 after serving on the McHenry County Board. She brings a compassionate, family-focused perspective to her work and is dedicated to improving access to mental health resources across the community.

Mia Greco, MS, MPH, RD, LDN, is the founder of Olive Branch Nutrition, a weight-inclusive private practice specializing in eating disorders, disordered eating, chronic dieting, and body image concerns. She is a Certified Intuitive Eating Counselor who provides compassionate, evidence-based nutrition therapy for adolescents and adults. Mia is passionate about empowering families with practical tools that foster healing relationships with food and body while supporting long-term recovery.





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BREAKOUT SESSION III CONT'D - 1:15 PM

Sensory-Friendly Events: Building True Inclusion for Individuals with Autism and Developmental Disabilities | Linda Lynn and Elizabeth (Lizzy) Lynn | Room XXX

This session will guide participants through creating sensory-friendly, inclusive events that go beyond basic accommodation and foster true belonging. Attendees will learn practical, real-world strategies to support individuals with autism, sensory sensitivities, and developmental differences in community settings.

Objectives:

- Identify common sensory challenges individuals may experience in community events
- Apply simple strategies to reduce sensory overload and increase accessibility
- Create inclusive environments that support participation and comfort

Presenters Bio: Linda J. Lynn is the Founder and Executive Director of Rockin' the Spectrum Corporation, a nonprofit dedicated to creating inclusive opportunities for individuals with autism and developmental disabilities and the families who support them. As the mother of an adult daughter with Level 3 autism, Linda brings both personal experience and more than 25 years of working with children with special needs. Inspired by her family's journey, she founded Rockin' the Spectrum to provide programs, resources, and community support that help individuals and families thrive. Linda is passionate about building communities where inclusion, compassion, acceptance, and belonging are available to everyone.

Elizabeth (Lizzy) Lynn is the co-founder and Assistant Executive Director of Rockin' The Spectrum, a nonprofit dedicated to creating inclusive opportunities for individuals with disabilities and their families. Inspired by her relationship with her autistic sister, Lizzy helped build the organization to break down barriers to inclusion and support. Over the past seven years, Rockin' The Spectrum has expanded from four adult programs to serving individuals of all ages. Guided by the belief that behaviors are communication, Lizzy is committed to ensuring every family feels seen, supported, and truly valued.





BREAKOUT DESCRIPTIONS & PRESENTER BIOS

BREAKOUT SESSION III CONT'D - 1:15 PM

Pet Loss Bereavement | John Mysz, LCSW, VSW | Room XXX

Nearly all pet owners consider their pets a part of the family, with just over half considering them as much a part of their family as a human member. When someone loses their pet, they can experience debilitating grief – unfortunately, not everyone in their life will understand the depth of this loss. This session will discuss this kind of disenfranchised grief and give the listeners concrete ways to work through the pain of loss.

Objectives:

- Understand the concept of disenfranchised grief and how it relates to pet loss.
- Describe what can be considered "normal" grief.
- Discuss tools and frameworks to help our clients/ourselves through this loss

Presenter Bio: John Mysz, LCSW, VSW, has a certificate in Veterinary Social Work (VSW) from University of Tennessee. He graduated from Dominican University in River Forest with a BA in Psychology and Masters of Social Work with an emphasis on interdisciplinary work. He currently works full time at an employee-owned emergency and specialty veterinary hospital as the in-house social worker where he serves as a mental health resource for both the staff of the hospital and the pet parents. Most of his day is spent in sessions working with staff through the struggles that come with helping professions and walking through grief with bereft pet parents. John also started his private practice, ADR Therapy, where he continues this work outside of the hospital. Prior to his move to the VSW world, John's work was more focused on crisis intervention. He worked on a suicide hotline, in human emergency rooms, and did an internship with a police crisis work team. He's excited to be here to spread his passion about all things Veterinary Social Work related.





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BREAKOUT SESSION III CONT'D - 1:15 PM

Addressing Non-Belonging in Tech-Savvy Schools | Adrian Harries and Sydney (Syd) Osborn | Room XXX

This session explores the crisis of loneliness and isolation among students and educators, the consequences of non-belonging, and the urgent role schools play in cultivating healthy, authentic connection. Participants will examine how belonging functions as both a protective factor and a powerful social force that can be weaponized through extremist groups, harmful online communities, and unhealthy dependency on digital connection spaces such as AI chatbots.

Objectives:

- Analyze how belonging can be manipulated or weaponized.
- Develop long-term systems that prioritize educator belonging.
- Evaluate how educators burn out impact's student belonging. Implement wise interventions and relational practices for connection.

Presenters Bio: Adrian W. Harries is an experienced education leader and the Director of Student Learning and Development for Community Unit School District 300. With over 29 years in education, he focuses on supporting diverse student populations and promoting equity. Previously, he served as a principal in districts 65, 86, and 89, where he developed impactful mentoring programs and professional learning series centered on belonging and equity.

Sydney (Syd) Osborn started their career as an ESL teacher before transitioning to an instructional coaching role helping educators to meet the needs of their ever-diversifying classrooms. Since becoming the Coordinator of Student Learning and Development for District 300, they have been driven to create trauma-informed and culturally responsive systems to build belonging for students and staff.





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CLOSING KEYNOTE PRESENTATION - 2:30 PM

One More Conversation | Shira Greenfield, LCPC | Luecht Auditorium B170

This training will focus on translating insights on social connection into everyday practice, equipping participants to combat isolation and build healthier relationships.

Objectives:

1. Integrate key insights from the conference and current research on social connection to identify practical ways of fostering meaningful relationships through everyday conversations.
2. Develop a personal action plan for initiating one intentional conversation that promotes connection, reduces isolation, and supports relationship health.

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