

# Social Belonging and Youth Success: Research and Promising Strategies

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# Today's Presenters



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the  
**forum**  
FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT



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northwest  
CREATING STRONG  
SCHOOLS & COMMUNITIES

INSTITUTE FOR  
**youth**  
success  
at Education Northwest

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# Today's Objectives

- Present research on how social belonging relates to academic, health, and other life outcomes
- Introduce strategies to boost social belonging
- Invite you to share your ideas (please use the chat window anytime to send your questions and comments)

# Belonging: What Is It?

Feeling like an accepted, valued, and legitimate group member





# Belonging: Why does it matter?

- It's a fundamental need. We're inherently social creatures that seek relationships with other people
- We constantly monitor belonging status
- We are sensitive to even very subtle indicators that belonging is threatened
- Neuroscience suggests social pain and physical pain activate some of the same regions of the brain

# Belonging is a Fundamental Need

The need for social connections is innate and universal

It is a *need*



not a *want*





# Exclusion Is Painful

- Psychological consequences
  - Sadness, anger
  - Decreased self-esteem
  - Impaired self-regulation
  - Poorer cognitive functioning
- Physical consequences
  - Loneliness poses the same health risks as smoking, drinking, and obesity



# Belonging Matters for Everyone

- Particularly key moments
  - Adolescence
  - Times of transition

Do I belong here?

# Belonging Matters for Everyone

- Particularly key moments
  - Adolescence
  - Times of transition
- Particularly important for anyone with an underrepresented and/or marginalized identity

Do people like me  
belong here?

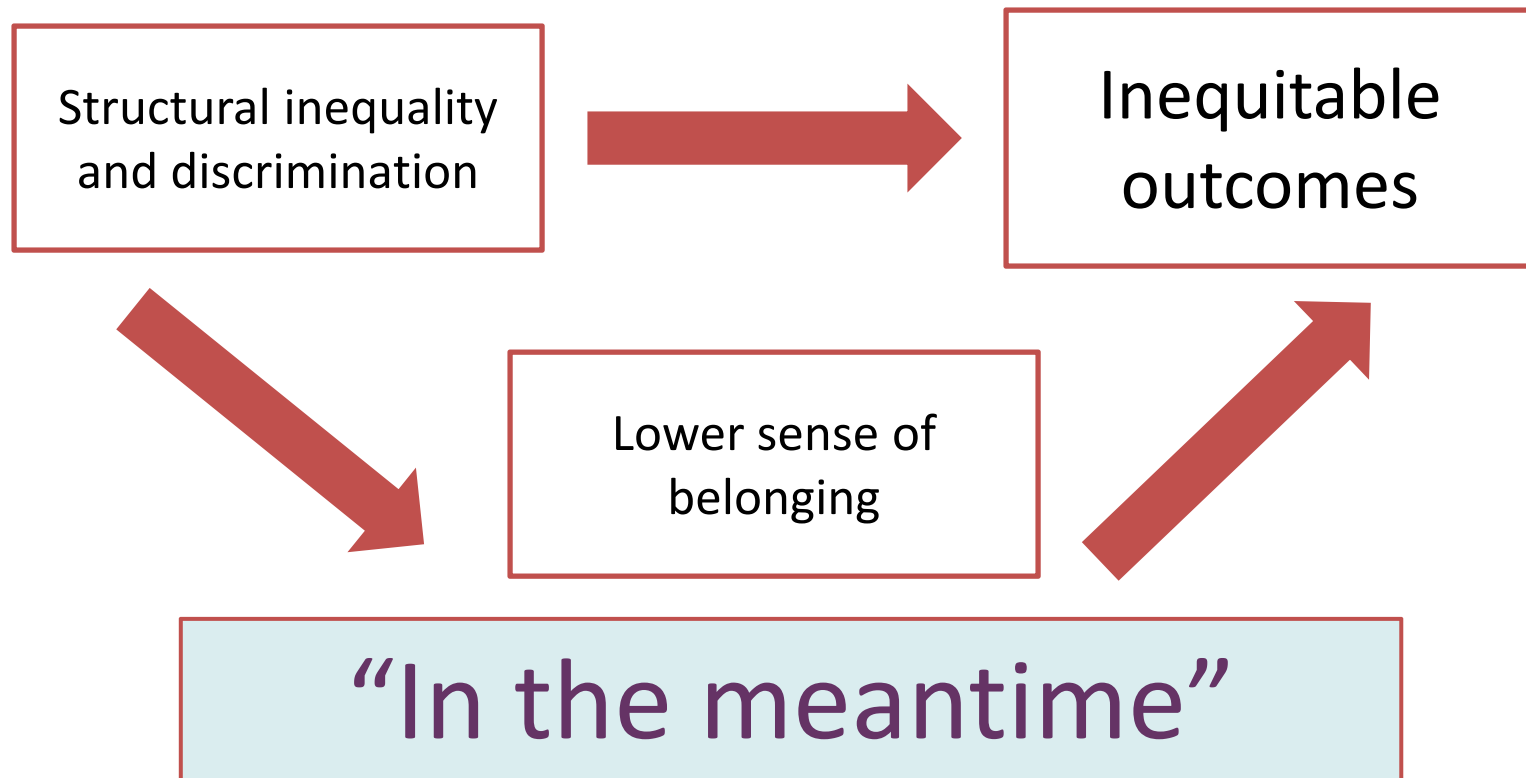
# Belonging and Equity

Addressing educational achievement gaps and other inequitable life outcomes

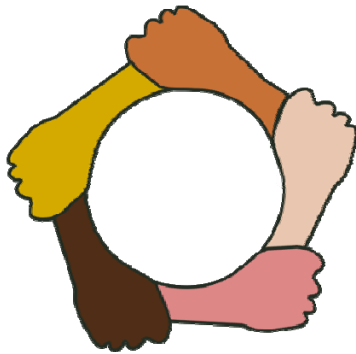


# Belonging and Equity

Addressing educational achievement gaps and other inequitable life outcomes



# Belonging and Identity

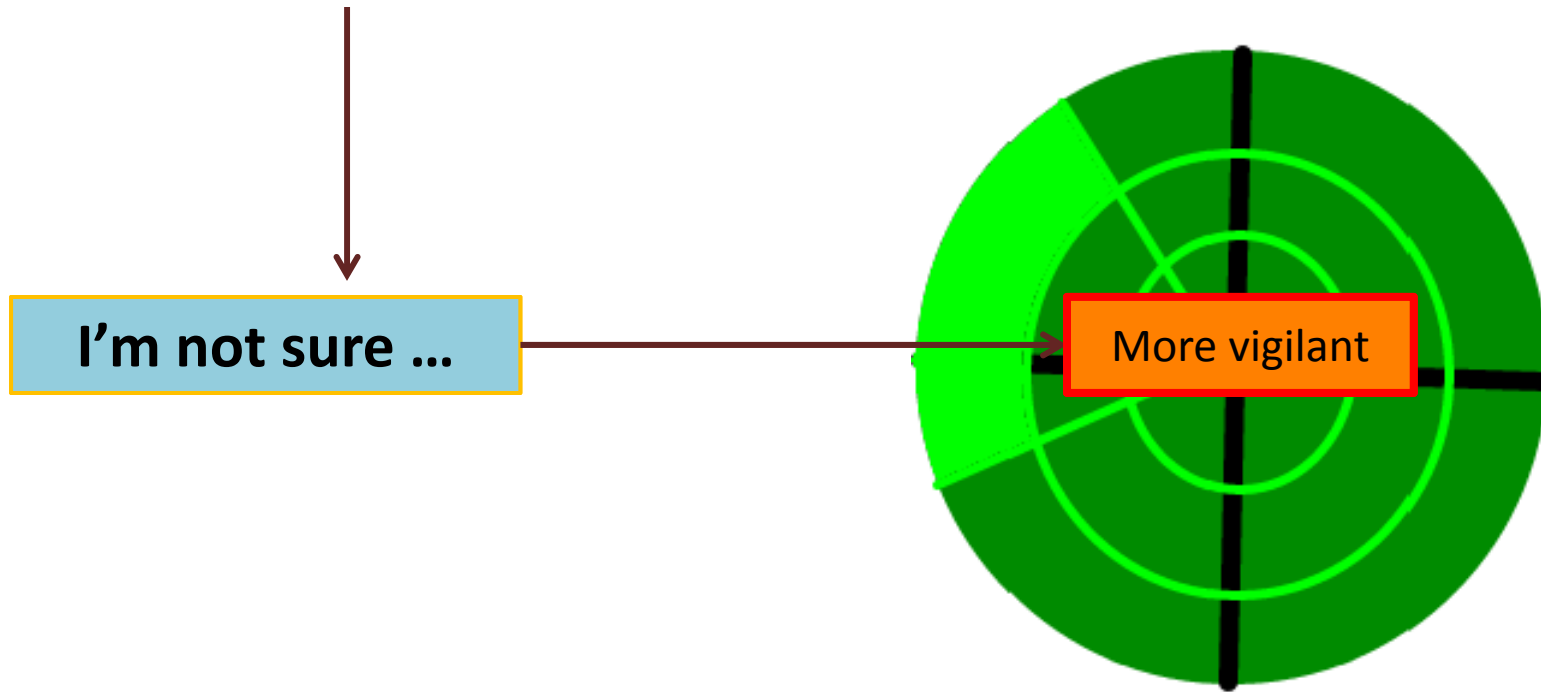


## **Belonging Reflection:** **Use the chat window to respond**

- Think about a time you experienced a sense of belonging in a group.
  - **How did you know you belonged?**
- Think about a time you didn't experience belonging in a group.
  - **What did you notice?**

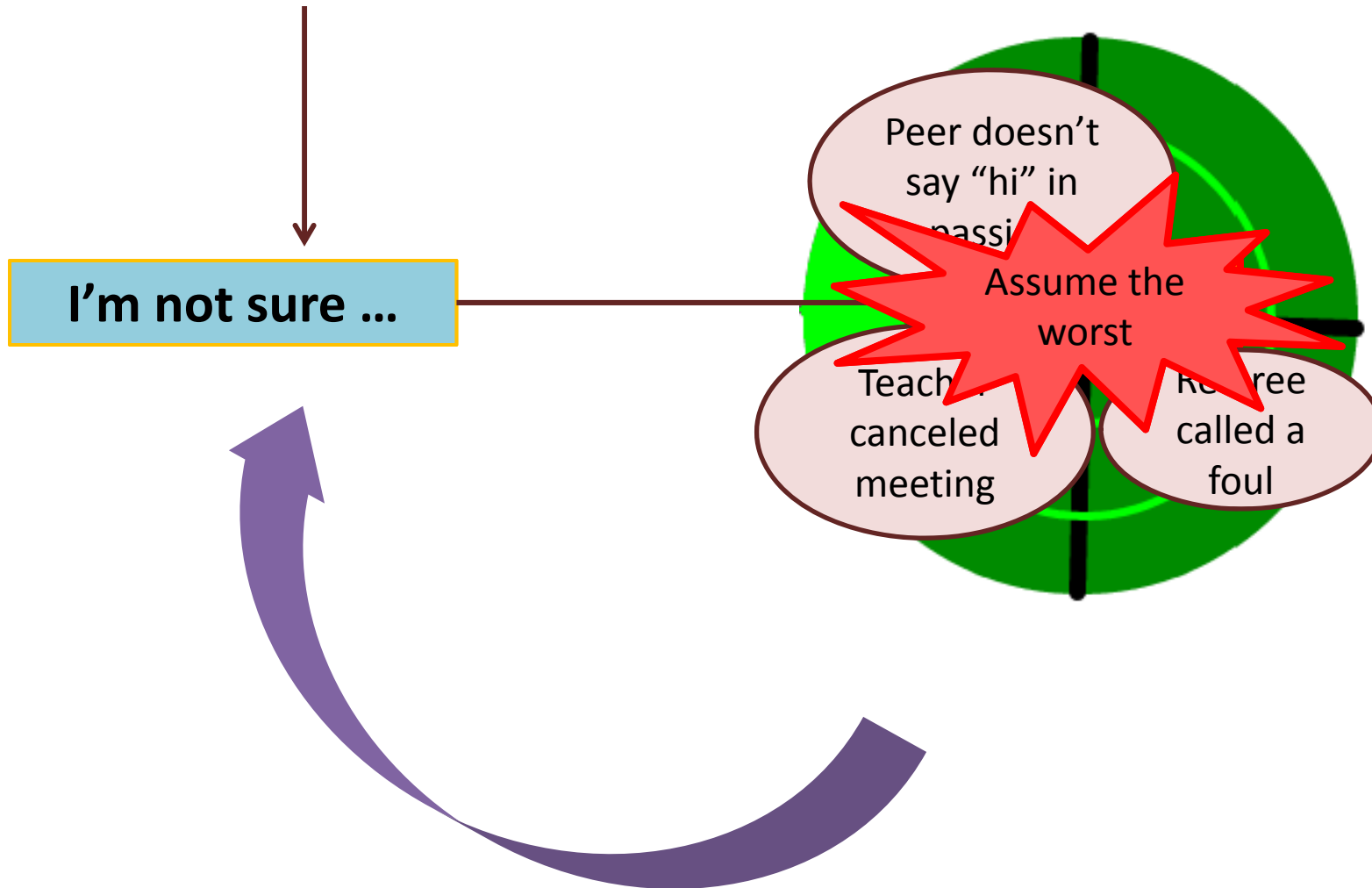
It is important to be in touch with one's personal experience with belonging before we can affect change in others.

# Do I Belong Here?

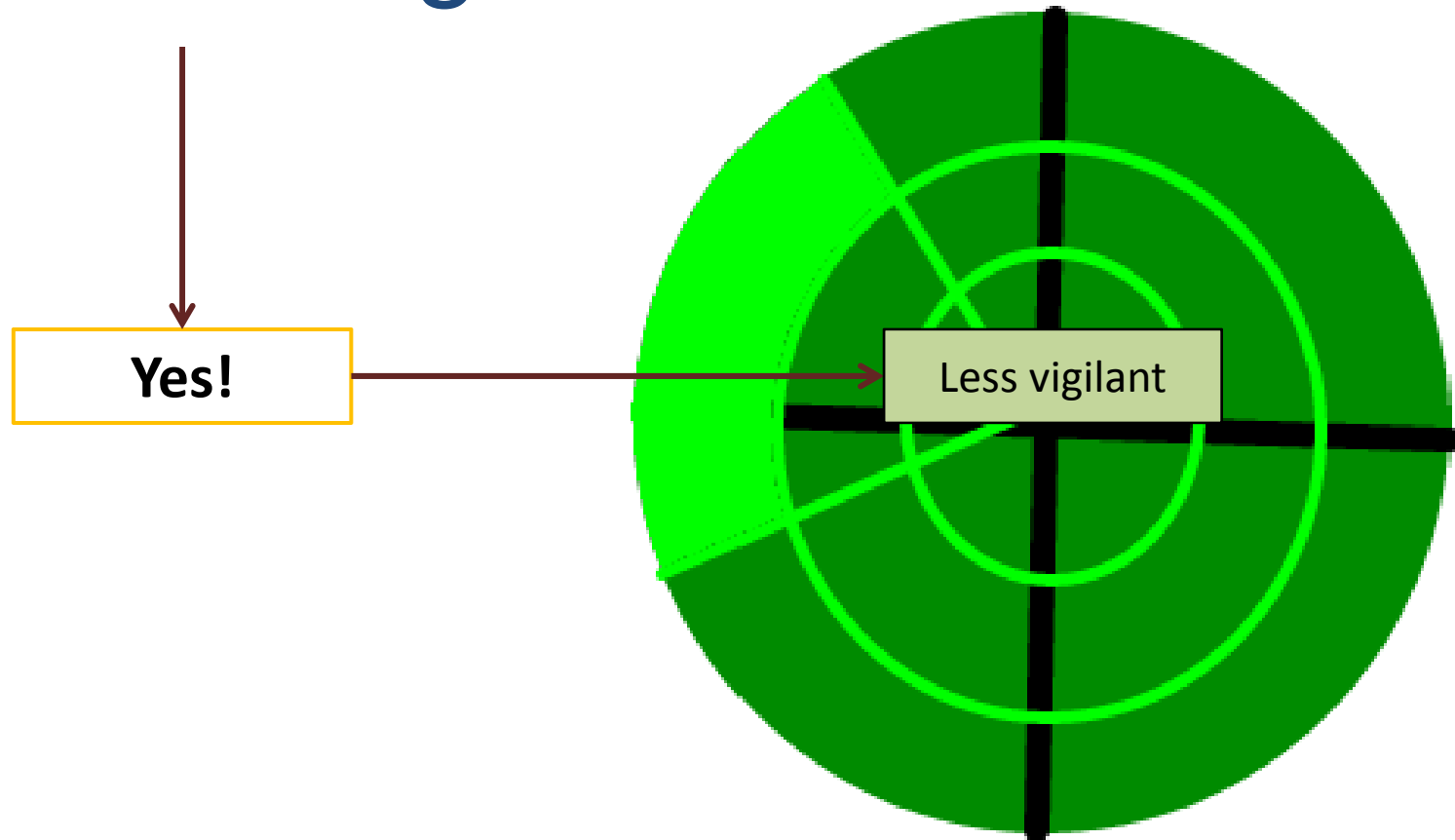




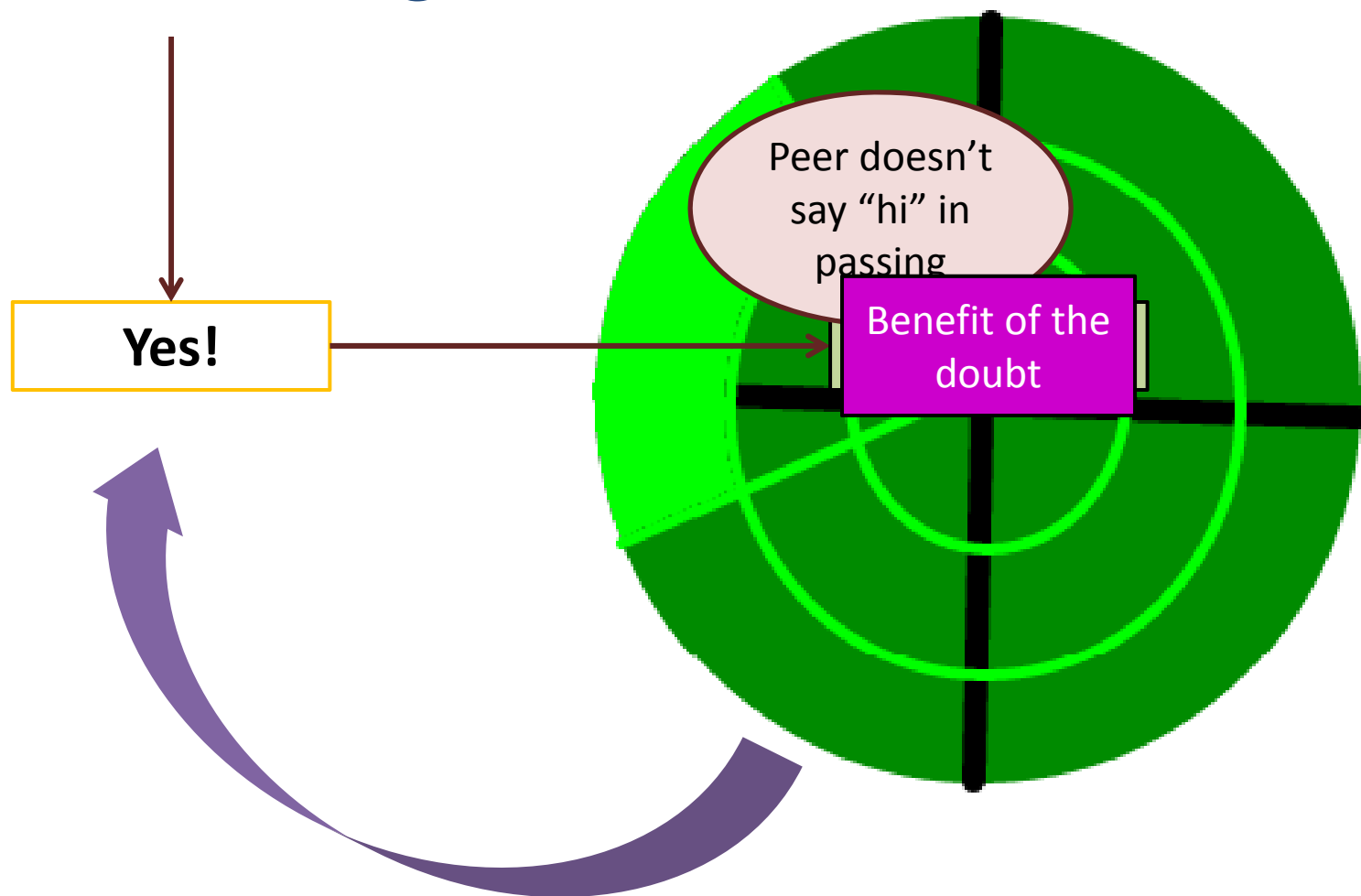
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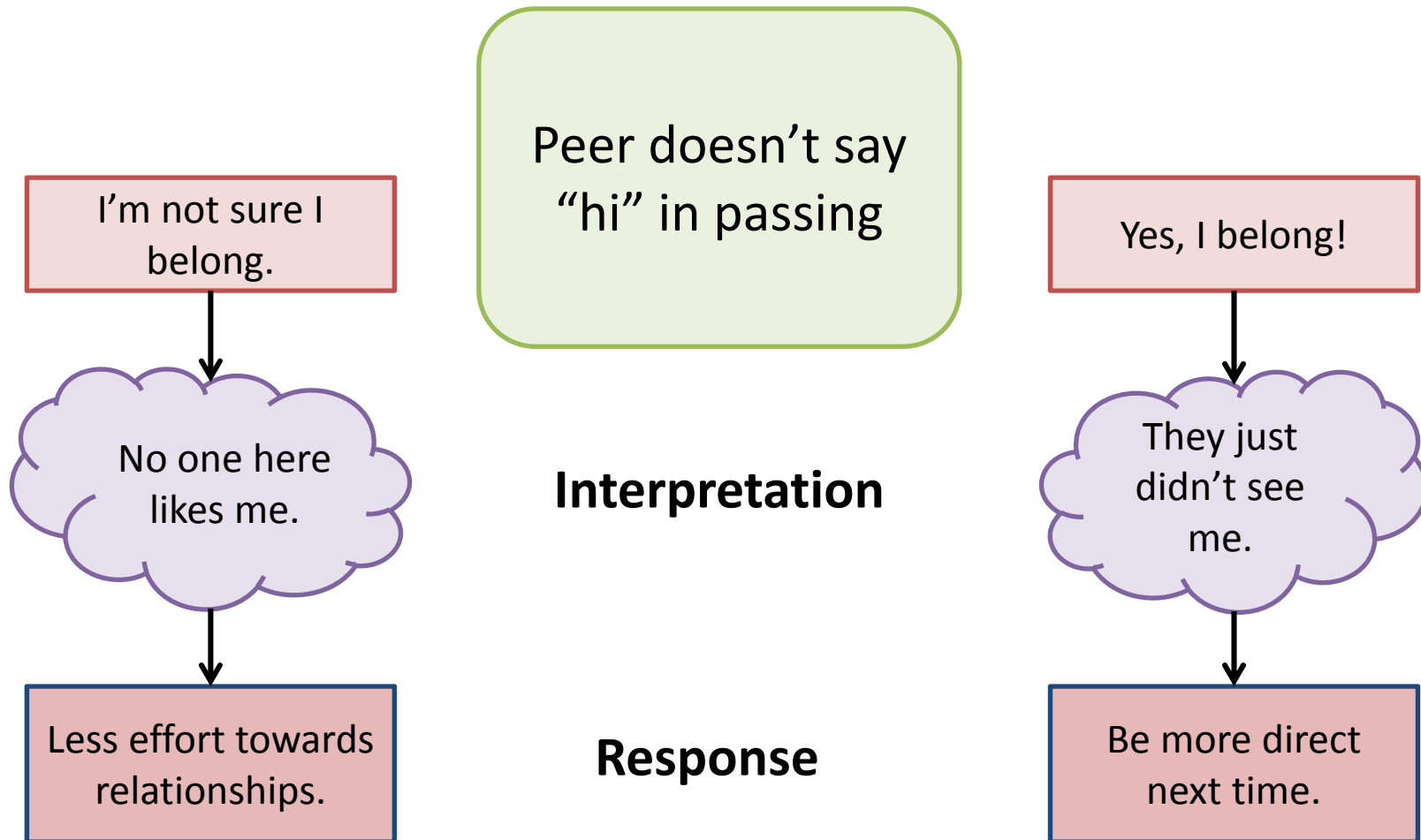
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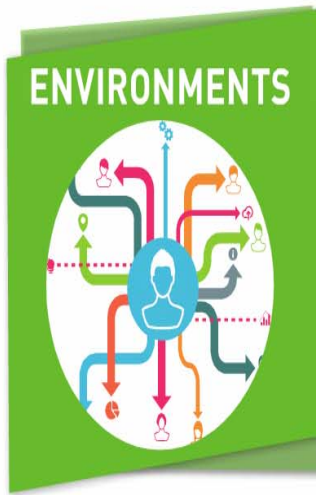
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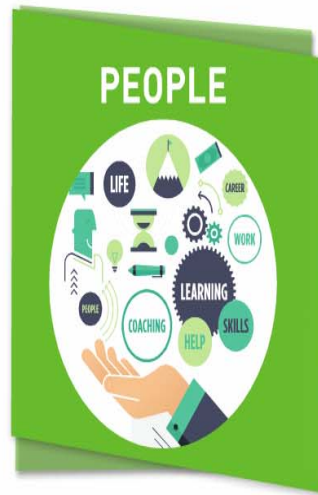
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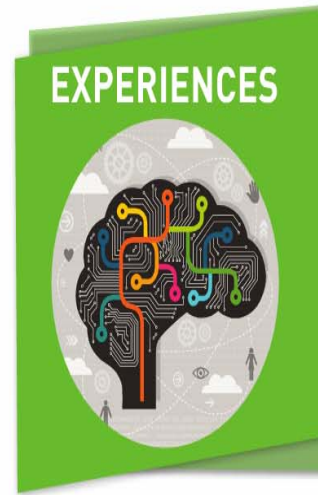
# The Readiness Practices



**THAT ARE**  
 community-oriented  
 relational  
 resourced  
 safe and structured  
 socially and culturally responsive  
 strengths-based  
 youth-centered



**WHO**  
 coach and care  
 equip and empower  
 skillfully plan and execute  
 train and assess



**THAT**  
 are stage and age appropriate  
 build skills and mastery  
 challenge and engage  
 connect to real life  
 encourage agency and choice  
 promote group work



**TO**  
 observe and explore  
 practice and demonstrate  
 apply and connect  
 reflect and refine

# Strategies to Promote Belonging



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# Strategies to Promote Belonging

- Adults are responsible for creating environments that promote belonging.
- This must be an intentional part of every youth program.



# Strategies to Promote Belonging

- Two routes to intervene:
  - How can we **change the environment** to promote relationships and foster more belonging? *Practitioner evidence*
  - How can we **help youth perceive more belonging?** *Research evidence*



# Strategies to Promote Belonging

- Important interplay of the youth and the environment
- Two routes to intervene:
  - How can we **change the environment** to promote relationships and foster more belonging?
  - How can we **help youth perceive more belonging?**

# Strategies to Promote Belonging: Promote Relationships

- Emphasize similarities between yourself and the youth you work with
- Practice inclusivity, participation, and mutual respect
- Create formal and informal ways for adults and young people to learn about each other's interests, aspirations, and the good things going on in their lives

# Strategies to Promote Belonging: Change the Environment

- Create a welcoming and inclusive physical environment.
  - Physical objects serve as cues about who belongs in a particular environment, and signals the culture of people associated with that environment.

Don't underestimate the power of a potted plant!



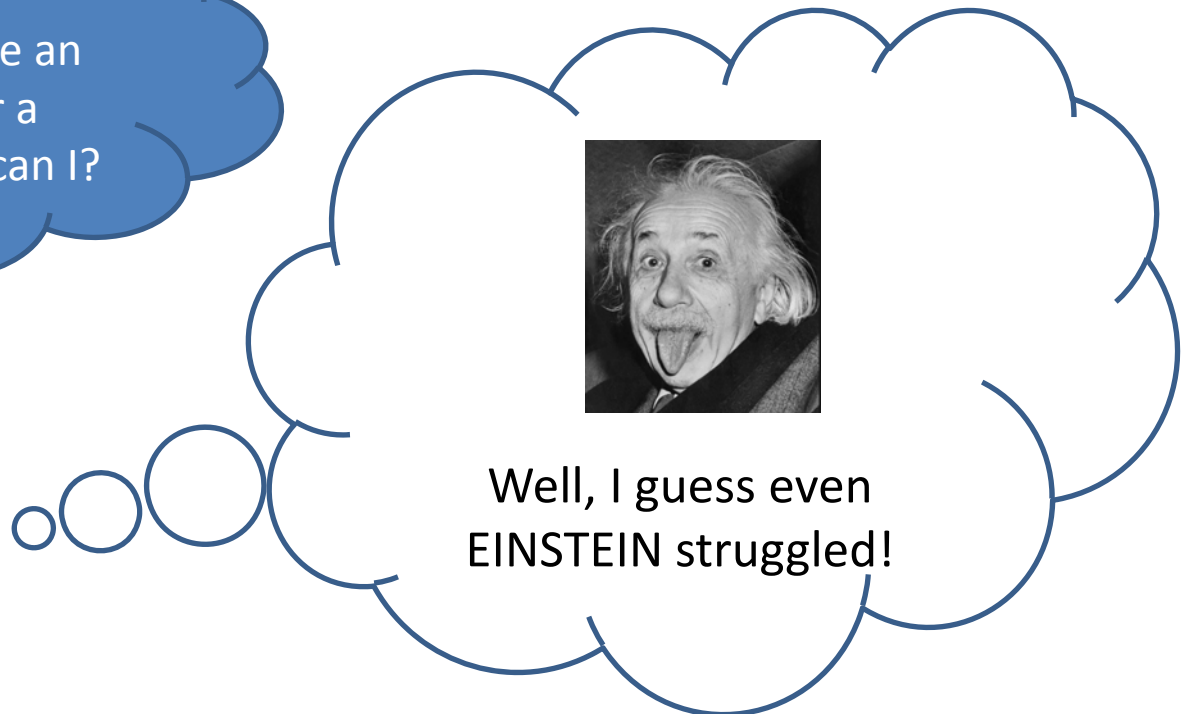
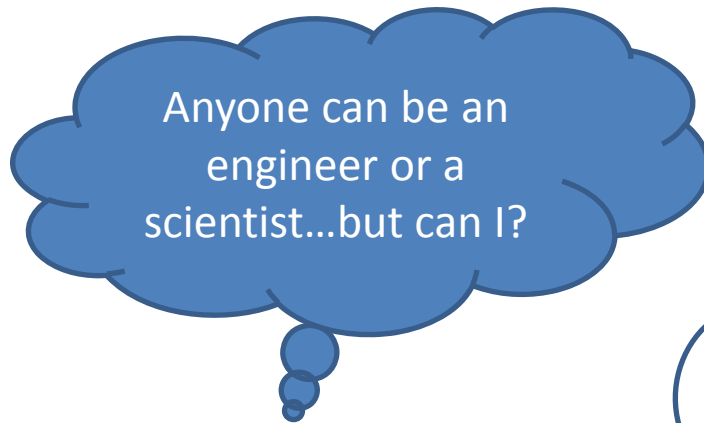
# Strategies to Promote Belonging

- Important interplay of the youth and the environment
- Two routes to intervene:
  - How can we **change the environment** to promote relationships and foster more belonging?
  - How can we **help youth perceive more belonging?**

# Strategies to Promote Belonging: Struggle Stories

Even if young people SAY they believe that everyone has the potential to be successful, these beliefs may not translate into beliefs about their own abilities.

Learning about how famous and accomplished people struggled during their own journeys can help foster a sense of belonging. This has been shown powerful for promoting belonging in STEM.



# Struggle Stories

- An experimental study of early adolescents found that when students read stories about how famous scientists struggled either personally or professionally, they
  - Earned higher grades in science
  - Felt more connected to famous scientists

The effect was more pronounced for low-performing students.

Source: Lin-Siegler et al. (2016)

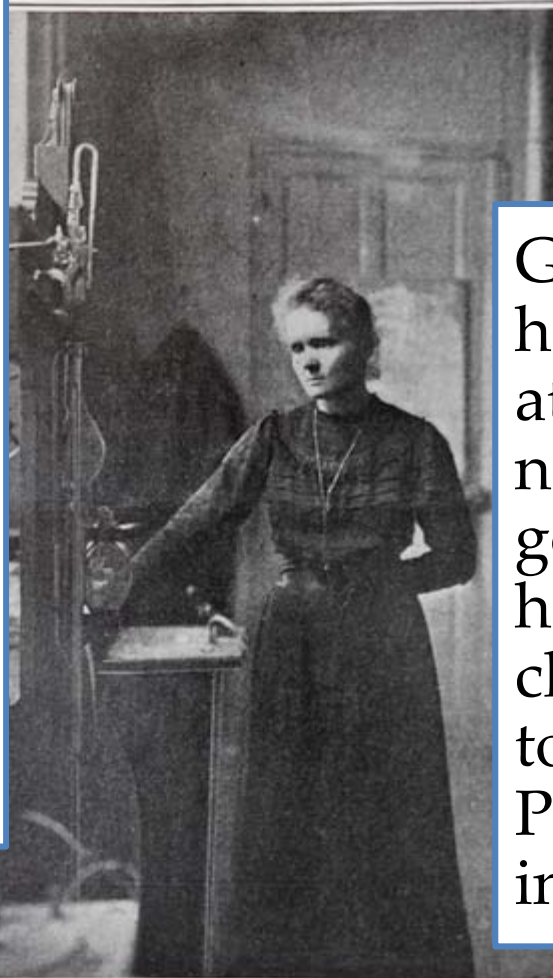


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# Struggle Stories

Many of Marie Curie's experiments did not work at first. However, Curie would not let herself stay sad for too long. Instead, she tried again and learned from her mistakes. She knew that progress was never easy, and later, she said, "I never yield to any difficulties."

**Professional struggle**



MARIE SKŁODOWSKA CURIE

**Personal struggle**

Going to college was hard for Curie because at that time, people did not approve of women going to school. Curie had to study at secret classes, and even had to leave her home in Poland to go to school in France.

# Normalizing Belonging Uncertainty

- Help young people frame setbacks and worries about belonging as common and transitory instead of proof that they don't belong

I've been there, too.  
It gets better.



# Normalizing Belonging Uncertainty

- Reflective reading and writing exercise
  - Part 1: Youth read example letter(s) from older near-peers that convey the message: It's typical to worry about belonging, but over time these concerns fade.
  - Part 2: Saying-is-believing: Writing exercise to give youth the opportunity to internalize the message

# Normalizing Belonging Uncertainty

Letter from a 16-year-old to a 13-year-old,

So, if you're like me when I started at \_\_\_\_\_ (school or youth program), you have some worries. It was so hard to find my way around and to get to know everyone at first! Worst of all, I was really worried that I didn't fit in. I thought I was just different from everyone else. Everybody all seemed so sure they were right for this place. But after a while, I figured out that most of my friends didn't think they fit in at first, either. It's so funny, right? We all felt we were different and didn't fit in. I guess we're more alike than we thought, at least in some ways.

Good luck,

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# Normalizing Belonging Uncertainty

- Reflective reading and writing exercise
  - Part 1: Youth read example letter(s) from older near-peers that convey that it's typical to worry about belonging but over time these concerns fade
  - Part 2: Saying-is-believing: Writing exercise to give youth the opportunity to internalize the message and write a message for younger near-peers.

# Discussion questions

- How do these strategies intersect with work you are already doing?
- How might you adapt these strategies to be effective in your setting?
- What other questions do you have?

# More To Think About

- Do your own investigating and action research about this, if you can
- Share what you're learning with others
- Researchers can help you evaluate how well your ideas work with even more youth

# Free Resources

- Preparing Youth to Thrive
  - Field Guide
  - Methodology and Findings from the SEL Challenge

<https://www.selpractices.org/>
- Readiness by Design  
<http://www.readyby21.org/>
- Understanding and Cultivating SEL  
<http://educationnorthwest.org/resources/understanding-and-cultivating-social-emotional-learning>
- Oregon Department of Education social belonging and formative assessment materials:  
<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=5570>

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# Thank You!

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