Access and Belonging in Adult Choirs as a Societal Benefit

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    - Pat Guth
    - Jonathan Palant
    - Coty Raven Morris
    - Rollo Dilworth
    - Maren Amdal
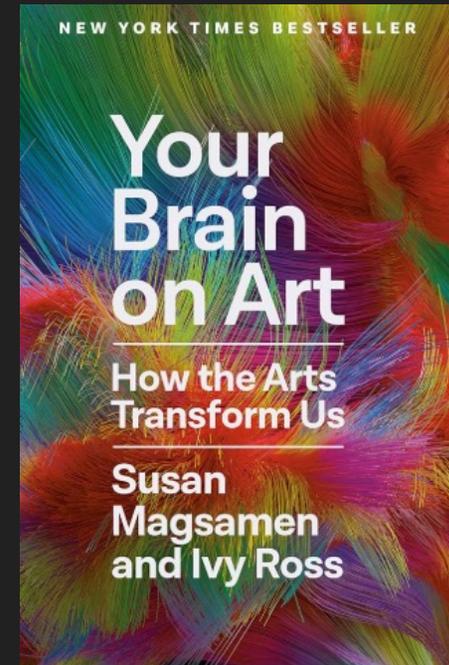   - Natasha Hendry

Presentation and Resources

Sources and Presentation available at:

www.helenavonrueden.com

> *We really wanted to emphasize the idea of art as a beneficial practice, just like good nutrition or exercise*

-Susan Magsamen[1]

We think of physical fitness as a practice, as something we do to maintain our bodies. Our social life … needs maintenance too.

- Robert Waldinger[2]

The world would be a better place if more people sang together

-every choir director everywhere

Today's presentation will explore:

I. Societal and public health challenges in America

II. How group singing is a relevant solution, given its health and social benefits

III. How accessibility and belonging maximize these benefits

IV. Provide suggested practices used by singing organizations to effectively creating these environments

I. Societal and Public Health Challenges
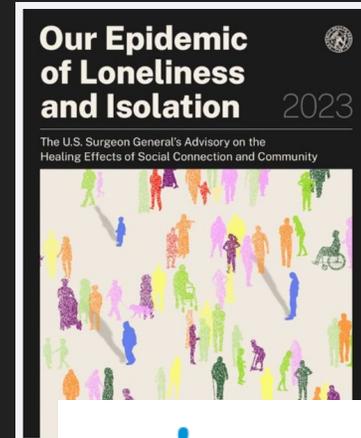
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The mental health crisis

- In 2023[3]:
  - ~23% across all ages had mental illness
  - ~36% among adults 18-25

- High school students data from 2023[4]
  - 40% of high school students felt persistent sadness or hopelessness in the past year
  - 53% among females
  - 65% among LGBTQ youth

The loneliness epidemic

- 15-24 year olds spend 70% less time with others than 20 years ago[5]

- 50% increase of dementia risk in older adults, associated with loneliness[5]

- 1 in 6 people are affected by loneliness[6]

Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation 2023

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community

World Health Organization

The loneliness epidemic

- Factors contributing to loneliness are:

'poor health, low income and education, living alone, lack of adequate community infrastructure and public policies, as well as certain aspects of digital technologies'[6]
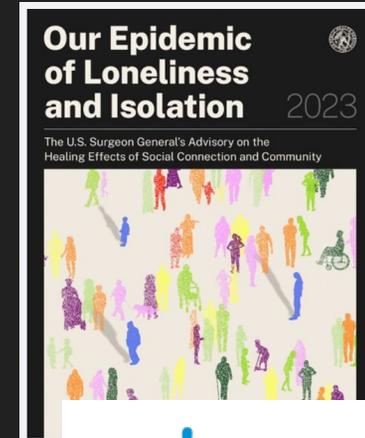
Civic engagement divide

- Americans with a high school degree or less[7]:
  - have reduced access to community spaces compared to college-educated Americans

  - report lower rates of involvement in hobbies, community and neighborhood groups, and sports leagues

  - report decrease in number of friends from 1990 to 2024

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Political divisions

- In 2022, 72% of Republicans and 63% of Democrats viewed the opposing party as more immoral than other Americans—up dramatically from 47% and 35% in 2016[8]

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Social media and polarization

- Social media algorithms bring content most likely to cause emotional responses[9]

- "posts gain strong traction when they reinforce in-group identity by criticizing out-groups"[10]

Recommended solutions

○ More time together in social activities that build connectedness and community can improve mental health and reduce loneliness [2,3, 7, 11]

○ Collaborations among members of different social groups toward a common objective, which decreases perception of difference and promotes shared identity and connection[12]

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II. Group singing as a solution

Addressing mental health and loneliness:

- Group singing increases positive emotions and positive mood changes in participants [13, 14, 15, 16] including increased oxytocin production in some cases [18]

- Group singing decreased cortisol levels in the right conditions [19]

- Rhythmic entrainment increases social bonds [17]

- Loneliness is reduced with group activity

Addressing social division through musical dialogue:

"Group singing requires participants to engage with each other in a simultaneous musical dialogue in a pluralistic and emergent context, creating a coherent cultural expression through the reflexive negotiation of (musical) meaning manifest in the collective power of the human voice."
                              –David Camlin [17]

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Creating identity reduces divisions

- Psychological concept of "in-group" and "out-group" tells us that established identity groups can form new bonds around new kinds of identity easily[12]

- Increase in trust and breakdown of barriers

- Social networks with diversity of people show "high levels of social cohesion [and] increased personal well-being"[22]

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More group singing = more benefits

- Creation of community through repeat interactions in a shared activity [23]

- Measurable mental health and wellbeing effects from group singing that increase with more time per week, more cumulative time, and level of engagement [23]
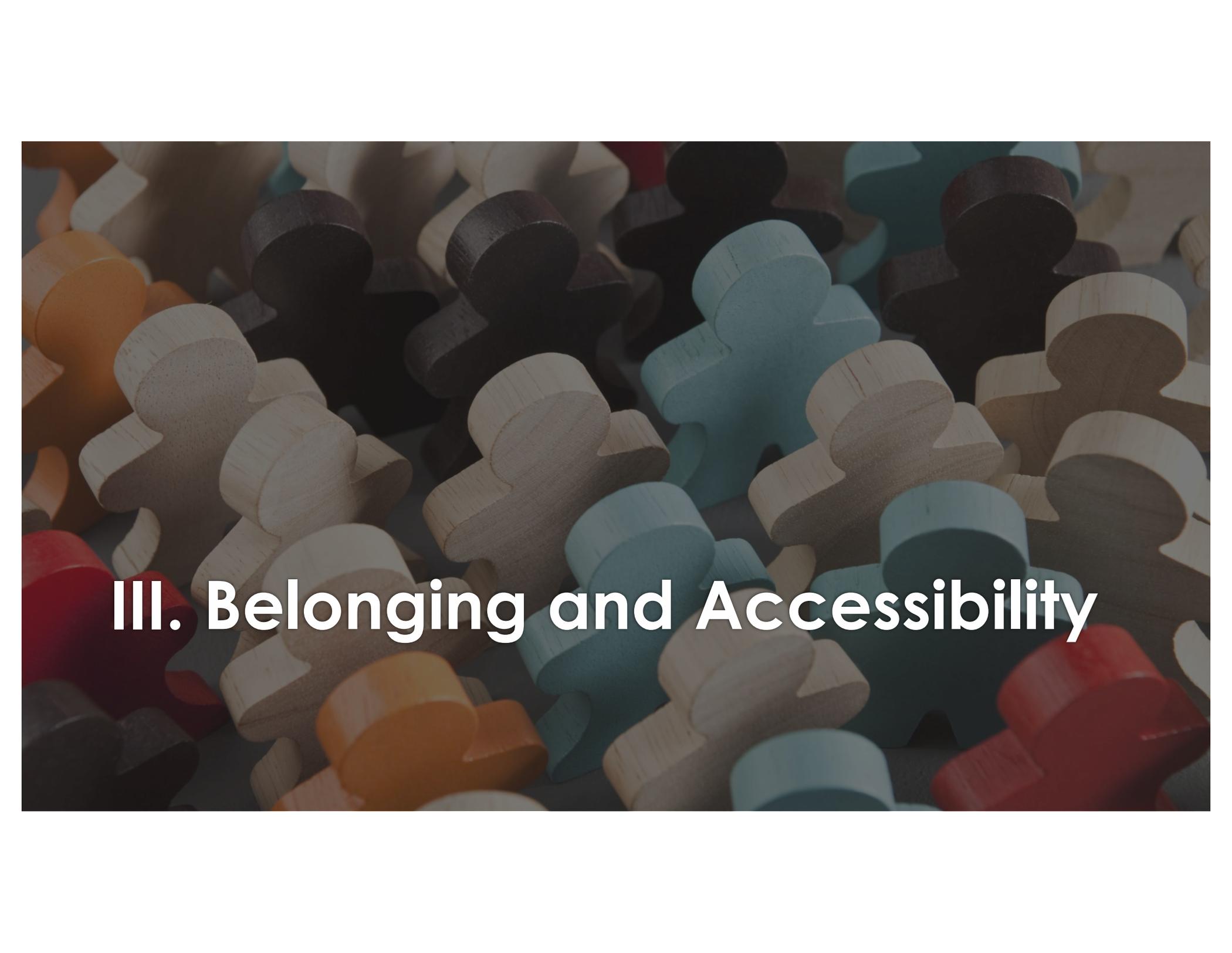

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Group-singing is uniquely beneficial

- Ice-Breaker Effect: group singing promotes quicker bonding between unfamiliar individuals than other group activities [17]

- Synchronous activities like singing and dancing have been shown to increase likeability and trust among people [21]

III. Belonging and Accessibility

Where do access and belonging come in?

Health and social benefits are maximized when singing group models intentionally use practices that enhance access and belonging.

What are the goals?

1) Get more people singing in groups by addressing accessibility (writ large).

2) Create opportunities for belonging in our choral spaces.

Action Items:

○ What keeps people from joining singing groups?

○ What can be enhanced to create a sense of belonging that values individuals and their experience?

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IV. Best practices from the field

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What can community choirs do?

- Not all ensembles can address all things.

- Choose what is needed in your community. and what is possible given your circumstances

- Some choirs prioritize Access, bringing together different populations in ways that can reduce social divides

- Some choirs prioritize Belonging for specific populations, centering the mental health and shared identity

Dallas Street Choir, director Jonathan Palant

Bucks County Women's Chorus, director Pat Guth

Oakland Interfaith Community Choir, executive director Maren Amdal

Me-Time Pop Choir, Natasha Hendry

Being Human Together, director Coty Raven Morris

The Singing Owls, director Rollo Dilworth

Please add to the list of practices!

○ What similar ideas do you all use with your ensembles?

Form:

Group Ideas:

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Accessibility and Resources

- No Auditions *(true for all surveyed ensembles)*

- Physical rehearsal space and neighborhood location *Bucks County Womens' Chorus*

- Large print scores *Dallas Street Choir*

- Rehearsal tracks *Bucks County Womens' Chorus*

- 6-week pre-season notation instruction *Bucks County Womens' Chorus*

- Pre-rehearsal notation class period *Singing Owls*

- Start with familiar genres and songs: "meet them where they are" *Me-Time Pop Choir / Being Human Together*

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Recruitment and Community Considerations

- Consider/Inquire about the needs of the community around you

Palant/Dallas Street Choir, Dilworth/Singing Owls

- Reach out groups underrepresented in your ensemble, don't wait for them to come to you *Hendry/Me-Time Pop Choir*

- Build foundational relationships in your community by getting to know local churches, local homeowner groups, libraries, schools, etc, and cater to what they want/need. *Dilworth/Singing Owls*
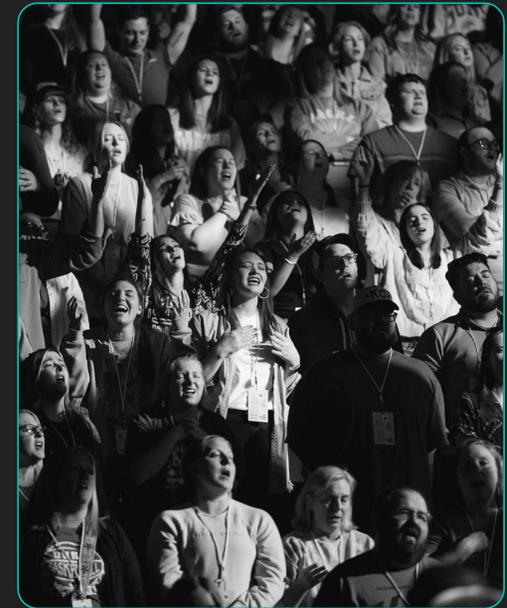

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Leadership Models

○ Take regular feedback from members on how to best run the group

Hendry/Me-Time Pop Choir

○ Delegate and create a democratic leadership model (also helps with director burnout)

Morris/Being Human Together

Photo by Small Group Network on Unsplash

Scheduling Flexibility

○ Attendance not taken (but expectation set not to miss too much)

Palant/Dallas Street Choir

○ Shortened seasons or mini-seasons (6-8 weeks), timed with community needs

Dilworth/Singing Owls

○ Include impromptu or one-off events

Morris/Being Human Together

○ One rehearsal a month, commit to a 4 rehearsals over a 6-month period

Amdal/ Oakland Interfaith Community Choir

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Financial Accessibility

- Pay-as-you-go model

Hendry/Me-Time Pop Choir

- Financial aid offered to families who need it, facilitated by merged chorus model

Amdal/Oakland Interfaith Community Choir

- Modest membership fee, offered as a class at a college

Dilworth/Singing Owls

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Repertoire/Literacy Considerations

○ Teach at least some music by ear

Dallas Street Choir / Being Human Together, Me-Time Pop Choir, Oakland Interfaith Community Choir

○ Wide-variety/potpourri of styles and traditions to create "something for everyone"

Singing Owls / Bucks County Womens' Chorus / Being Human Together

○ Specialize in one genre that is easy to learn by rote

Oakland Interfaith Community Choir / Me-Time Pop Choir

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Community Support

- Rehearsal in a retirement home so residents can listen
Guth/Bucks County Womens' Chorus

- Pair music making with community services and wellness goals
Morris/Being Human Together, Palant/Dallas Street Choir

- Membership tied to an identity or shared experience
Bucks County Womens' Chorus, Me Time Pop Choir, Dallas Street Choir

- Childcare program that doubles as a children's choir during adult rehearsals
Amdal, Oakland Interfaith Community Choir

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Socializing

○ "Kitchen sectionals" at people's houses
Guth/Bucks County Womens' Chorus

○ Social activities in addition to rehearsal like dinners, movie nights, and trips
Guth/ Bucks County Womens' Chorus, Hendry, Me-Time Pop Choir

○ Bonding over identity or shared experiences
Guth/ Bucks County Womens' Chorus

○ Meal trains during challenging life experiences
Amdal/ Oakland Interfaith Community Choir

Value Experience over Product

○ Final "concert" is more of a final "share"

Amdal, Oakland Interfaith Community Choir

○ Don't focus on perfection, focus on the joy of the experience

Guth/ Bucks County Womens' Chorus, Palant/Dallas Street Choir

○ Set growth expectations which, when met, builds confidence

Palant/ Dallas Street Choir, Morris, Being Human Together

"Make sure everyone leaves feeling like they have gained something. Create an experience where people get something out of if for themselves"   Dilworth/ Singing Owls

Photo by Samuel Yongbo Kwon on Unsplash

In conclusion, today's presentation explored:

I. Societal and public health challenges in America

II. How group singing is a relevant solution, given its health and social benefits

III. How accessibility and belonging are crucial to achieving these benefits

IV. Provide suggested practices used by singing organizations to effectively creating these environments

Resources

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