Transforming Isolation into Connection:
High-Quality Connections for the Cystic Fibrosis Community

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Abstract

This paper proposes a training toolkit for facilitators from the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation (CFF) on how to build high-quality connections (HQCs) through small group discussions to enhance the well-being of the cystic fibrosis (CF) community at scale. The relevance of initiatives for connection and relationship building is paramount to the CFF because people with CF tend to be isolated as a mechanism to prevent infections. We propose that HQCs, which are short moments characterized by shared mutuality, vitality, and positive regard, are an effective tool for facilitators to rapidly foster a sense of belonging during short, small group discussions. Our training toolkit helps the Connection and Support team at the CFF equip facilitators in three categories: high-level facilitation meta-skills, powerful beginnings and endings for sessions, and interventions that can be used during a session to deepen connections. The Connection and Support team is planning to incorporate the toolkit in their updated facilitator training. Applying HQCs in small group discussions within the CFF may increase the well-being of the facilitators, people with CF, and potentially their caregivers.

Keywords: positive psychology, positive psychology interventions, cystic fibrosis, chronic illness, resilience, facilitation, high-quality connection, character strengths, positive emotion, relationships

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Transforming Isolation into Connection:
High-Quality Connections for the Cystic Fibrosis Community

There is hope for finding a cure for cystic fibrosis (CF), and the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation (CFF) is hot on its trail. With over seventy years of innovative thinking, strong strategic planning, successful risk-taking, and effortful community engagement, the CFF catalyzed enormous advances in research, treatment, and connection for people with CF. Due in part to the CFF’s focused and driven work, people with CF are living longer, fuller lives (CFF, n.d.).

Nonetheless, living with CF remains challenging for many of the nearly 40,000 people with CF in the United States. Managing the illness requires energy, time, discipline, financial resources, adequate insurance, ongoing medical care, and attention to sanitation. Yet, it still can result in infections requiring hospitalization, advancing disease, and mental health challenges. Just as the CFF has sought effective medical treatments for people with the disease, they seek effective mental health and well-being support for people with CF and their loved ones.

Extensive research documents the crucial role that social connection plays in individual and collective health and well-being (Peterson, 2006). Leveraging research from positive psychology—the study of the science of human flourishing—our team worked to understand the strengths, goals, and opportunities of the CFF’s Support & Connection (S&C) team to bolster the relationships of people engaging in CFF’s virtual community conversations. This paper outlines research and develops interventions that the CFF’s S&C team can use to train volunteer facilitators who host virtual small group discussion sessions during CFF-sponsored conferences, ultimately enhancing the well-being of people with CF and their loved ones by cultivating high-quality connections (HQC).
Situation Analysis

Overview of CF

CF is a chronic, lifelong illness caused by a recessive genetic mutation in the CF transmembrane conductance regulator that creates sticky mucus and prevents effective mucus clearance throughout the body (Elborn & Prof, 2016). As a result, CF can cause infection and inflammation in the lungs, pancreas, and other organs, leading to significant, adverse respiratory and gastrointestinal symptoms and nutritional deficits (CFF, n.d.).

There is a great deal of variation within the population of people living with CF, including different genetic mutations, severity of symptoms, access to medical care, time of diagnosis and access to early care, and treatments for their specific needs. Although CF is primarily diagnosed in early childhood, a small portion of cases are diagnosed with CF later in life (Trivedi, 2020). Race can be a factor in delayed diagnosis as CF has been widely, and falsely, perceived to affect only White people of Northern European descent (CFF, 2021).

CFF-funded advocacy and pharmaceutical research have produced recent successes. Medical therapies such as the modulator-class drug Trikafta, approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 2019, have been revolutionary for many people with CF over age two, improving their day-to-day health and life expectancy (Vertex, 2023). Although modulator-class drugs can help up to 90% of people with CF, the remaining 10% have specific genetic mutations that make them ineligible for Trikafta (Trivedi, 2020). The CFF remains committed to engaging and supporting all people with CF and has made strides along the path toward a cure, funding and advocating for medical care that has helped to increase the median predicted life expectancy from early childhood to 53 years for those born between 2017 and 2021 (CFF, 2023). Today, more than half of the people with CF are older than 18 (CFF Patient Registry, 2021), and people
with CF are leading fuller lives. These welcome improvements create new considerations and opportunities for the CFF’s work.

Despite significant advances in treatment and life expectancy, people living with CF and their caregivers still face many challenges including cost, access, time spent in treatment and working with insurance and medical professionals, monitoring health symptoms and nutrition, and ongoing mental and physical health treatment and support (KC White, personal communication, January 17, 2023; Quittner et al., 2016). Many people with CF and their caregivers experience high levels of anxiety and depression (Quittner et al., 2016; CFF Patient Registry, 2021). Due to the heightened risk of infection, people with CF are also not able to be physically near others with CF. They often must maintain social distance from others, adding to the challenges of establishing and maintaining positive relationships and sustained engagement with others (Conway, 2008). Additionally, modulator-class drugs and other CF treatments are costly, and some insurance plans do not cover the full cost (CFF, 2023). Although modulators have significantly reduced the symptoms and improved the health of those living with CF, they have also led to new questions, such as long-term financial, career, academic, and family planning (A. Jeffrey, personal communication, January 19, 2023).

The CFF

Founded in the 1950s by five families affected by CF, the CFF has been laser-focused on its mission to find a cure for CF (Trivedi, 2020). In 2023, the 501(c)3 nonprofit organization reported growth to more than 800 staff between its headquarters in Bethesda, Maryland and over 70 chapters across the United States, with over $5 billion in assets (Internal Revenue Service, 2020). Amid its successful growth, the CFF has held steadfast to its primary focus of curing CF using innovative thinking and strategic planning to catalyze crucial early stage pharmaceutical
investment, policy engagement, effective operations, and community support around research, care, and connection among those with CF.

The CFF leads scientific progress by incentivizing researchers and pharmaceutical companies to focus on finding a cure for CF. The creation of the modulator-class drugs began when the CFF reached out to a pharmaceutical company in 1998 (Trivedi, 2020) to invest resources in their CF research. The CFF was able to build an effective, high-performing venture philanthropy business model that has since raised hundreds of millions of dollars to successfully reinvest in research and development of new drugs for CF (Kim & Lo, 2019).

In addition to its strength in research and innovative strategic planning, the CFF provides a bridge to holistic medical care of people with CF and their loved ones. The CFF accredits a network of over 130 CF Care Centers nationwide that convene multidisciplinary CF care professionals in one place, including doctors, physiotherapists, nurses, social workers, and nutritionists (CFF, 2023). The CFF also offers a personalized navigation support service called Compass, whereby people living with CF and their families can get personalized support navigating complicated insurance systems, financial assistance, public benefits, and legal questions regarding life with CF (CFF, 2023).

As treatments and care have increased the quality-of-life and life expectancy of those living with CF, the CFF also desires to improve community support for adults living with CF and their family members and/or caregivers. As previously mentioned, people living with CF must practice social distancing, which can exacerbate feelings of loneliness. True to its innovative nature, the CFF is responding to this need to combat loneliness and increase the well-being benefits of social connection by explicitly designing virtual peer supports, community conferences, and engagement opportunities for adults with CF and their families.
Strengths and Opportunities of the CFF

Although the CFF has a crucial mission, a strong track record of results, and a large community of engaged supporters, it is not exempt from challenges. As the organization has scaled to 800 employees (Internal Revenue Service, 2020), coordinating efforts and effectively communicating across functions has become more complex, further exacerbated by the shifting priorities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, processes are slow to start, and initiatives can take multiple years to launch (A. Jeffrey, personal communication, January 19, 2023). Another challenge for the organization concerns the health disparities in the CF population, not only between the different levels of illness severity and progression, but also considering the variety of backgrounds and financial resources experienced by people with CF and their families. Members of the CF community may want and need different types of support, have different goals in their connection with the CFF, and engage differently with technology, programming, and other people. The nature of these nuances drives the CFF in general, and S&C team in particular, to build solutions that are not one-size-fit-all. While the equity and access focus of this work is necessary, it creates challenges of capacity and scale.

Despite these challenges, the CFF is a high-performing organization that possesses many strengths. Their singular mission of finding a cure undergirds a solid business strategy that has raised a significant amount of capital to reinvest in research and development. The organization’s streamlined and clear, constituent-focused communications address the realities of life with CF and the efforts that will take to find a cure. Amid all of this, the CFF provides high-quality care of its community through effective coordination and resources.
Locus of Impact: The Support & Connection Team

The CFF turned to the field of positive psychology to strengthen these important connections across the community and partnered with the University of Pennsylvania’s Master of Applied Positive Psychology program to develop and implement relevant interventions within the CFF’s peer and community support initiatives led by the S&C team (A. Jeffrey, personal communication, January 19, 2023). The S&C team’s explicit goal is to provide an environment for those with CF and their families to build connections. The team facilitates numerous initiatives that connect people with CF to peers, including conferences and the Peer Connect mentorship initiative. Conferences are a large endeavor with potential for impact at scale. The S&C team organizes four annual conferences each year, each focused on a different target demographic: Adults with CF, families and caregivers of people with CF, researchers, and people who are pre- and post-lung transplant.

Each three-day virtual conference includes speakers and breakout sessions, providing an important opportunity for people to get to know one another while discussing a topic. Facilitated group discussions are a critical component of the CFF’s community connection-building and provide a regular opportunity for positive impact on the organization and community. For many people with CF, virtual small group discussions are some of the only times they might talk with other people with CF or other caregivers in similar situations. It is, therefore, crucial that all people who attend these discussion sessions feel welcome and included.

To achieve environments of belonging where individuals can explore their identities, strengths, and concerns, the S&C team ensures the conferences are designed with the core demographic in mind and that community members lead the conference itself: Each target population is in control of the topics and the dynamics of their conference, and conferences
follow a continuous process of iteration and improvement. Volunteer facilitators, often individuals with CF and/or their caregivers, lead small group breakout sessions for the conference. These volunteer facilitators play an essential role in creating inclusive, virtual discussion environments that enable others to share, explore their own thoughts and feelings, and seek and find a connection to and a sense of belonging with others. As volunteers have varying facilitation experience and expertise, the S&C team provides brief, generic video training sessions volunteers review before they facilitate a breakout group discussion session. The S&C team sees an opportunity to strengthen volunteer facilitator training by increasing facilitators’ sense of self-efficacy in their role, further equipping them with the ability to create a discussion environment that strengthens connections among breakout group participants. Because thousands attend conferences annually, there is an opportunity for significant impact through improved experiences within the breakout group discussions

**Literature Review**

**A Pathway Toward Positive Relationships**

Social connection is an essential component of well-being which outlines five elements contributing to human flourishing: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) (Seligman, 2011). The relationships element of PERMA is not limited to dyadic forms of friendship or romantic partnership; all forms of positive relationships can benefit our well-being as they can contribute to our sense of mattering and belonging (Prilleltensky, 2012). For example, relationships improve life satisfaction (Gable et al., 2019), resilience in the face of adversity (Reivich & Shatté, 2003), physical and mental health (Peterson, 2006), and belief in an ability to grow and change self-concept (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). Positive relationships play a crucial role in the well-being of individuals with CF and their
families. Waters et al. (2022) articulate that positive psychology mechanisms such as positive connections and use of character strengths buffered against mental illness and bolstered mental health during COVID-19 while broadening positive capacities. Their findings are especially relevant for people with CF, who similarly rely on social distancing to avoid infections.

Within the CFF, frequent small group breakout sessions at conferences spark social connection and enhance relationships with peers. Volunteer facilitators have a key role in creating group discussion environments that foster the building blocks of relationships, HQCs. Specific, effective, tailored training can help volunteer facilitators confidently cultivate these discussion environments. In the subsequent literature review, we explore how positive psychology research on HQCs, and the complementary topics of positive emotions and character strengths, can help bolster relationships within CFF facilitated group discussion sessions.

**HQC**

HQC's are brief, positive connections that enrich a social interaction with vitality, positive regard, and a sense of mutuality (Stephens et al., 2011). These short interactions act as building blocks of positive relationships and thus significantly impact both people. HQCs can improve physiological health (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008), the capacity to create and think (Carmeli et al., 2015), and resilience (Stephens et al., 2013).

Moments of HQC do not require previous knowledge about the lives of the participants or an extended interaction to have an effect; in fact, HQCs may occur within just 40 seconds of a positive caring interaction (Fogarty et al., 1999); even a small cue of social connection can spark a sense of belonging (Walton et al., 2012). HQCs can be a helpful strategy to boost relationships during short and sporadic group discussion sessions.
HQC's offer many well-being benefits. Experiencing HQCs can contribute to improved health, including improved immune response to stress and the release of oxytocin (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008). Research also suggests that HQCs may contribute to recovery from loss or illness (Lilius et al., 2008). This is not to say HQCs can help people recover from CF, but given the complex health challenges caused by CF, that HQCs may have a positive impact on physical health is an important factor to consider.

HQC's can build attachment toward a community, developing feelings of connection and belonging (Blatt & Camden, 2007). Additionally, research on HQCs demonstrates that these important moments can contribute to feelings of validation and being understood (Stephens et al., 2011). These benefits can be particularly relevant for people with CF, as HQCs can be implemented as an intervention that may decrease their feelings of isolation, contribute to their adaptation during difficult moments, and support their overall health and well-being. Although there are many ways to generate an HQC, Dutton (2003) indicates that individuals have a lot of control and power over establishing the conditions within which HQCs can occur. Facilitators can set the important tone of respectful engagement, trust, curiosity, directly dealing with individuals who are corrosive to others’ positive interactions, and enabling others to leverage their strengths to achieve tasks (Dutton, 2003).

**Character Strengths**

An effective way to bolster HQCs is to amplify each person’s positive character strengths. Using the Values in Action Character Strengths (VIA) framework can help guide CFF facilitators and community members along this path. The VIA framework is a ubiquitous, cross-cultural classification system encompassing 24 strengths that “are personally fulfilling, do not diminish others, ubiquitous and valued across cultures, and aligned with numerous positive
outcomes for oneself and others” (Niemiec, 2018, p. 2). Everyone has access to all 24 character strengths. Everyone is unique in how those strengths show up within the range of top five signature strengths that feel effortless to use, middle strengths, and lesser strengths that require more intentionality to call forth. (VIA Institute, n.d.) (see Appendix A). None are considered weaknesses; all strengths can be leveraged and even further developed over time.

Whereas in traditional psychology the locus of impact is on mitigating deficits, in positive psychology the focus is on leveraging strengths to maximize an individual’s potential (Niemiec, 2018), even throughout life’s adversities and uncertainties. Signature strengths are the top five character strengths that come most naturally and represent the central core of who a person is, and how they might describe their unique, authentic self. Using signature strengths feels energizing and vital. As an individual engages in life in a way that feels effortless or natural to them, experiences seem more pleasant and energizing (Schueller, 2014). Character strengths show up as behaviors within the contexts of work, school, family, social life, and community, and within each context there are innumerable situations—thus character strengths can have a role in daily life (Niemiec, 2018).

Building self-awareness of our character strengths, particularly our top five signature strengths, is a simple and effective way to increase flourishing, as it can support increases in autonomy, relatedness, and competency (Niemiec, 2018). Indeed, those who are aware of their character strengths are nine times more likely to flourish compared to those who are unaware (Hone et al., 2015), and those who actively use their top character strengths are eighteen times more likely to flourish compared to those who do not regularly use their strengths (Hone et al., 2015). Waters et al. (2022) demonstrate that this very awareness and use of character strengths can positively affect mental health during challenging circumstances. For example, the strengths
of appreciation of beauty and love of learning can benefit those experiencing psychological
difficulties (Peterson et al., 2006), and using the character strengths of bravery, kindness, and
humor can reduce the negative impact of physical illness on overall well-being (Peterson et al.,
2006). Certain character strengths are particularly notable for their correlation with peer
acceptance, as well: kindness, social intelligence, and love (Wagner, 2018). Furthermore, several
studies suggest that verbalizing strengths seen in others correlate with higher relationship
satisfaction (Kashdan et al., 2017). The concept of character strength is particularly relevant for
the CF community; as Trikafta treatment improves the quality of life for many individuals with
CF. Now, they face the daunting task of adjusting to the shift in their quality of life, life
expectancy, and sense of identity.

Positive Emotions

Positive emotions are an important element of PERMA (Seligman, 2018). According to
Fredrickson (2009), positive emotions are short, pleasurable feelings that arise in response to
positive experiences. A common misconception is that “positive emotion” means really intense
positive moments, but research demonstrates the positive emotions arising from the many small
positive moments that happen all the time are also impactful in terms of well-being (Cacioppo et
al., 1999). For those living with CF, where big and sustained positive emotions may be hard to
realistically achieve amidst the roller coaster of treatments and symptom management, this
nuanced understanding of micro-moments of positive emotions matters.

Positive emotions help to broaden perspectives and build resources that help us thrive in
the long term, increasing creativity and the ability to be more resilient in the face of stress
(Fredrickson, 2009). Positivity resonance theory (Fredrickson, 2016) outlines how sharing
positive emotions and mutual positive regard can increase well-being. The research shows that
sharing positive news with others helps us savor the moment and experience positive emotion above and beyond the event, lengthening the enjoyment from the experience and causing the memory thereof to be stronger (Fowler & Christakis, 2009). Furthermore, emotions (both positive and negative) can be contagious (Fowler & Christakis, 2009)—an important concept for facilitators to understand and navigate throughout group discussion sessions.

Although there are many positive emotions, ten of the most common include love, amusement, pride, awe, joy, gratitude, interest, serenity, inspiration, and hope (Fredrickson, 2009). Of these, gratitude can be particularly relevant in fostering HQC. Gratitude is the act of recognizing something good and it can be directed toward a specific person, an event, or oneself. In some ways, gratitude is a superordinate positive emotion, as it is correlated with numerous positive outcomes, including improved physical and mental health, greater resilience, and stronger relationships (Stephens et al., 2011). When group members share gratitude, they also experience long-term effects characterized by an increase in shared appreciation and connection over time (Walsh et al., 2022). Crafting interventions that enable CFF community members to have HQCs by leveraging character strengths and positive emotions could enhance their feeling of belonging, connection, and sense of identity.

**Application of the Research**

**A Facilitator Training Tool to Cultivate HQCs**

The CFF volunteer facilitators’ main responsibility is to foster a welcoming virtual group environment where participants feel a sense of belonging and have opportunities to engage in HQCs. To equip facilitators with the confidence, skills, and strategies to do this, we developed a teaching tool (See Appendix C for the slide deck) that the CFF S&C team can use as a script to record their facilitator training videos. Using these slides, the presenter script, and the enclosed
references, the S&C team can plug and chug with this tool when they video record the training. Additionally, the teaching tool and script could have broader application as well, as staff of the CFF could enhance their own facilitation skills with this teaching tool.

The final teaching tool and script delivered to the CFF S&C team for facilitator training includes three pillars: Core facilitator meta-skills, interventions that can be used for powerful beginnings and endings of group discussions, and interventions that can be leveraged to specifically deepen connections throughout a session. Facilitators are encouraged to re-train on the interventions to keep the material fresh and practice new skills before every facilitation session.

Each intervention page follows the same template:

1. It starts with a catchy title, representative icon, and a short one-sentence description of the intervention.

2. Next there are simple and clear instructions to empower facilitators to apply the intervention during their group discussion session.

3. Each slide includes a pro tip to equip the facilitators for success.

4. At the bottom of each intervention slide, there is an indicator for the level of facilitation expertise (beginner, intermediate, or advanced) and the estimated duration of the intervention to help with planning. Facilitators can select specific learning pathways based on their skill level.

5. A subsequent slide shows an example of the intervention for those that are more difficult to conceptualize in writing only.
Facilitator Training Pillar: Meta Skills

Facilitation requires a range of cognitive and affective abilities such as time management, engaging diverse interests, and adapting to challenges in the moment. Practicing a set of meta-skills aligned with positive psychology can form a solid foundation for positive interventions in facilitation. These five meta-skills are high-level facilitation skills useful for managing group discussions and improving facilitator real-time resilience. Facilitators will be encouraged to use all these skills during every session, and to re-train on these core skills before every session they facilitate.

Meta-Skill #1: Athlete’s Trick

This skill normalizes the body’s physiological response when stepping up to the plate—whether that is feeling nervous, sweaty, or having a quicker pulse. The Athlete’s Trick calls on the research from Brooks (2014) to encourage facilitators to tell themselves, “I am excited,” before the session to shift their mindset from anxious to excited.

Meta-Skill #2: Positivity Ratio

Becoming aware of the positivity ratio helps facilitators learn why and how to focus on positive rather than negative emotions during and after a session, which can improve facilitator resilience and avoid a downward spiral when faced with a negative moment. The positivity ratio skill supports facilitators in recognizing that, even though negative emotions grab our attention more than positive emotions (Baumeister et al., 2001), a single negative moment will not ruin a facilitated session if there is a generally higher ratio of positive moments and emotions to negative ones (Fredrickson, 2013).
Meta-Skill #3: Ready for Take-Off

Facilitators are encouraged to create a checklist to ensure their own—and others’—presence and engagement in the session. Checklists can be a powerful tool to consistently and reliably lead groups of people and encourage collaboration (Gawande, 2009). Facilitators are invited to use three checklist items: removing distractions such as cell phones from the space (and explaining why), explicitly inviting participants to engage in a variety of ways, and asking if participants have any questions or concerns before beginning.

Meta-Skill #4: Create Space

This meta skill equips facilitators to give participants an equal opportunity to participate in the session by allowing at least 5 seconds of silence before jumping in (Rowe, 1974), encouraging conversation dominators to allow space for others to share, and inviting quieter participants to speak up. Group dynamics, flow of ideas, and creativity are enhanced when all members of the group have an opportunity to speak equally (Kim et al., 2008). Encouraging facilitators to set the tone with the group session by articulating the importance of all voices in the conversation.

Meta-Skill #5: Action Movie

This meta skill provides facilitators with the methods, tools, and confidence to change things up during a facilitated session to avoid group participants’ attention from waning. Facilitators are encouraged to change an activity or style of discussion approximately every 10 minutes with strategies such as group-wide discussion, think-pair-share (Brookfield & Preskill, 2016), quiet individual reflection time, leveraging the virtual meeting chat feature, or powerful beginnings and ending activities.
Facilitator Training Pillar: Beginnings and Endings

The second pillar of the facilitator teaching tool focused on the powerful beginnings and endings to enhance interactions. Calling on research that suggests that the first moments of an interaction set the trajectory for potential HQCs (McGlynn, 2001; J. Dutton, personal communication, January 14, 2023), and that the most memorable moments of an experience are its peak and its end (Kahneman et al., 1993), the four beginnings and endings interventions for facilitators will set the tone right from the beginning and stick in participant’s memory. Facilitators may choose to use one of two of these interventions for each session, using the concept of person-activity fit to select interventions best suited to their personal preferences, the session topic, current events, group size, and group demeanor (Lyubomirsky, 2008).

Intervention #1: Scavenger Hunt

The Scavenger Hunt is a playful activity that gets people engaged and sharing with one another from the start. Fear of rejection or lack of confidence in speaking to strangers can hinder social connection (Sandstrom et al., 2022), so a scavenger hunt is a playful way to encourage equal participation and build rapport from the start within a newly formed group. Play can create HQCs in small group discussions by expressing humanity (Sandelands, 2010).

Intervention #2: Positive News

The Positive News intervention encourages group participants to share a piece of good news with others, to boost positive emotion among the group. This is useful because emotions—both positive and negative—are contagious, and sharing good news with others helps to savor the moment, relieve it, and experience positive emotions beyond the initial event (Fowler & Christakis, 2009).
**Intervention #3 Task Enabling**

Task enabling invites participants to take on specific tasks during the group session to feel they are adding value to—and valued by—the group, thus building their sense of mattering and accomplishment. Welcoming others’ skills and enabling them to complete a task generates energy, commitment, and HQCs (Dutton, 2003) by demonstrating that the facilitator values another person’s contributions and affirms their skills. It positively impacts the task enabler’s self-image and self-confidence (Dutton, 2003). Additionally, task enabling may potentially introduce more participants to the idea of becoming a volunteer facilitator in the future.

**Intervention #4: Shout-Out Send-Off**

Endings are critical as one of the most memorable parts of an experience (Kahneman et al., 1993). The Shout-Out Send-Off wraps up the session by affirming others and ending the session on a positive note of gratitude and elevation. This intervention aims to increase the effectiveness of the complete workshop by deploying a final action that cements the positive emotions of the participants. To do this, the intervention will focus on gratitude and elevation, which is the appreciation of an exemplar (Algoe & Haidt, 2008).

**Facilitator Training Pillar: Interventions to Deepen Connections**

Although we know that strong facilitator meta skills and powerful beginnings and endings will also deepen connections among group participants, these three intentional Deepening Connections interventions are specific activities that can be used throughout a facilitation explicitly for strengthening HQCs.

**Intervention #5: Savoring the Connection**

Moments of HQC contribute to feelings of validation and being understood (Stephens et al., 2011). Savoring the connection, when we slow down and listen to understand rather than to
reply, shows respect and creates trust among two or more people. This intervention helps participants practice simply being present for others instead of “doing”—listening intently and nonjudgmentally—to develop deeper connections. These short but effective HQCs are the building blocks of strong relationships (Stephens et al., 2011). Additionally, this facilitation technique is particularly helpful to slow the group's pace, especially if attempts to "Create Space" (from the Meta Skills section) are not working as desired.

**Intervention #6: Strengths Bingo**

Verbalizing strengths seen in others correlates with higher relationship satisfaction (Kashdan et al., 2017; Murray et al., 2000; Habenicht & Schutte, 2023). The character strengths of kindness, social intelligence, and love are most highly correlated with positive relationships (Wagner, 2018). Strengths Bingo is a playful way to help participants identify these three character strengths in others. It also invites full and sustained engagement in the discussion, thus encouraging connections between session participants.

**Intervention #7: Question Burst**

The strength of curiosity is one of the twenty-four VIA character strengths; when leaders demonstrate curiosity it can create a sense of psychological safety for others present (Thompson & Klotz, 2022). Psychological safety is important for cultivating a trusting environment where HQCs can flourish and relationships can deepen. Gregersen’s (2018) question burst strategy uses three steps to generate group energy, create an equal playing field for all to engage, and produce an array of topics from which the group can discuss. This intervention fosters curiosity through questions to encourage building positive connections.
Summary

The three training pillars for facilitators (meta-skills, beginnings and endings, and deepening connections) outlined above are designed to grow facilitators’ confidence in their facilitation skills, ability to create a welcoming, inclusive environment, and capacity to engage the group in HQCs. Encouraging facilitators to engage in training shortly before facilitation, within a week of the session, will ensure they actively practice the material shortly after learning it. An important aspect of designing and implementing these interventions is understanding their efficacy. An evaluation plan (see Appendix B for the suggested evaluation plan) outlines a suggested method for assessing the efficacy of the facilitator training tool on facilitators’ confidence, sense of expertise, and learning.

Limitations

Although the facilitator training skills and interventions outlined herein have a robust foundation of research, they are not exempt from limitations. Most positive psychology research upon which these interventions are based, was conducted within western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic (WEIRD) populations (Henrich, 2021) and therefore may not be fully generalizable to the entire CFF community. Therefore, it is important to consider potential variations when applying the interventions to a more diverse population.

As facilitators and group participants shift, and the number of conferences and small groups sessions hosted annually is limited, it may be difficult to notice significant differences between facilitators and participants' relationships, when applying the proposed interventions given the lack of interaction consistency. Finally, it is important for facilitators to consistently practice their skills, learning through trial and error, adjusting their facilitation to the needs and
preference of their audience. This might be a challenge considering the on-demand nature of their role.

**Conclusion**

The CFF offers support, advocacy, funding, and community for people with CF and their loved ones. Despite the physical and mental hardships caused by CF, people affected by CF demonstrate an incredible amount of resilience, hope, and grit as they build full and fulfilling lives. Relationships are a crucial element of human flourishing, and especially important for people with CF, for whom social distancing is a norm. By increasing the confidence and skills of the CFF’s volunteer facilitators through targeted, tailored, and effective training, members of the CFF community who engage in the facilitated group discussion sessions will have more opportunities to develop and strengthen the building blocks of positive relationships through HQCs, leveraging character strengths, and growing positive emotions.
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Appendix A. List of 24 VIA Character Strengths and descriptions, organized by virtue (VIA Institute, n.d.)
Appendix B

Intervention Evaluation

The goal of implementing our positive psychology informed short series of teaching modules is to enhance the quality of connections that participants of small group discussions experience, increasing their sense of belonging, connection, and exploration of their identity. To align with the CFF's goal of low barrier-to-entry for volunteer facilitators, a brief pre-training survey with four short quantitative questions can help the CFF and facilitators themselves understand the baseline of a facilitator’s confidence and expertise. The same quantitative questions should be offered in a post-training survey, along with three short, open-ended qualitative questions that help the facilitator reflect on and further imprint their learning, while giving CFF staff an understanding of the elements of the training that are most and least useful.

Quantitative Survey Questions for Pre- and Post-Training

There are four recommended quantitative questions for facilitators to take, once before they complete the training, and once after the training. CFF staff can compare the pre- and post-training data to understand if, and where, there were changes. The first quantitative question is adapted from the Gallup Q12 survey, (Thackray, 2001) while the remaining quantitative questions capture the learning goals for the facilitation. Although facilitators are volunteers, drawing upon Gallup's workplace engagement research is relevant and valuable.
Qualitative Survey Questions for Post-Training

Qualitative measures provide insights into which elements of the training facilitators find most engaging and least helpful and will help CFF staff assess facilitator learning. Use qualitative questions to gather open-ended feedback and to serve as an active learning engagement tool for facilitators-in-training. While learners often self-report preferring to be passive in the classroom (“feeling of learning”), research indicates that active engagement significantly improves actual learning (Deslauriers et al., 2019). Asking people to recall what they learned significantly improves their memory (Spitzer, 1939), and since giving people a reason for a behavior makes them more likely to do it, including the fact that writing things down improves memory generally may increase the amount of information facilitators write down when answering question #3.
Figure B2

*Qualitative Survey Questions*

1. What resonated from this training?

2. What didn't resonate from this training?

3. Besides what you've written above, what else did you learn today? (By recalling what you learned, you'll improve your memory of it by 17%)
Appendix C

The slides appear on the following pages.
Positive Small Group Discussions

Training Modules for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation

Service Learning Project with the UPenn Master of Applied Positive Psychology program
Ann Parthemore, Bernadette Reichel, Carter Jernigan, Dana Emanuel, Nicole Perez
Introduction

The Cystic Fibrosis Foundation (CFF) provides facilitated conversations through the Support & Connection team, to engage and support their community members affected by cystic fibrosis (CF).

This presentation is a training program for facilitators that goes beyond basic facilitation skills. Our primary goal is to equip facilitators with skills, techniques, and confidence to foster high quality connections between participants.

The techniques and interventions in this presentation are inspired and/or informed by positive psychology research.
How To Use This Slide Deck

Target Audience

Small group facilitators: who lead small group discussions
Trainers: who deliver trainings (live or pre-recorded) to facilitators
CFF staff and designers: who develop teaching materials for the trainers

Navigating Slide Content and Speaker Notes

The slide contents are what we want facilitators to learn.
The presenter's notes (in the notes) are for the trainers to effectively deliver the training.
The pedagogical notes and references are for the CFF staff and designers, so that modifications can be made while preserving the original intention and nuance of the positive psychology grounding of the material.
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<th><strong>Table of Contents</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Strengths bingo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question burst</td>
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Meta Skills

Learning Outcomes

- Introduce common facilitation approach
- Improve collaboration when working in pairs
- Enhance your resilience as a facilitator
- Develop strong facilitation skills
# Athlete’s Trick

*Normalizing the physiological response.*

- Feeling a little sweaty or a faster heartbeat is normal
- Tell yourself: “I am excited”
- Feel a sense of relief, calmness, and confidence

---

**Olympic athletes commonly reframe nervousness into excitement to calm down before their competition.**

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Focusing on positive rather than negative emotions.

- Positive emotions contribute to our well-being
- But negative emotions tend to grab our attention more than positive emotions
- During a facilitation: Remind yourself that one negative moment does not make the entire session negative
- After a facilitation: Identify three positive moments that happened during the session

Look out for small and mundane positive moments, too!

Level 1

Duration 1 minute
Ready for Take-Off

Creating a checklist to ensure presence and engagement.

- Checklists are a helpful tool for consistently and reliably leading groups
- Add these three items to your checklist:
  - Ask for full presence and invite others to eliminate distractions
  - Identify session goal: space for connection and opportunity to participate
  - Ask for questions or concerns before getting started

The simple presence of a silent mobile device hinders us to fully enjoy a social interaction.

Level  

Duration  2-3 minutes
Create Space

*Giving participants an (equal) opportunity to participate.*

- Savoring silence can be a valuable tool to initiate deep conversations
- Manage individual differences in contributing:
  - Politely tell dominators to allow space for others to contribute (their personality often makes them unlikely to be offended)
  - Provide alternatives to allow quiet members into the conversation

---

Small breakout rooms with 2-3 participants are a great way to create space for everyone to participate.

**Level** ★★★ ★  
**Duration** 1-10 minutes
Example: Savoring Silence

... [Daunting silence]

... [Wait for 5 seconds]

Actually, I thought of...

... [Insightful comment kicking off a deep conversation]
Example: Managing Dominators

“I prefer this, and I feel that, and I don’t like it, and she said, but he said, and then I said…”
[One participant dominating the conversation]

This sounds like a great topic to take offline.

I appreciate your engagement today; let's pause and invite other voices to share now.

Why don’t we shift gear and move into small break-rooms.
Example: Managing Quiet Participants

Is there anyone we haven’t heard from today who would like to add something?

[Unmuting and/or showing a facial expression that indicates a desire to speak]

... [Person who quietly listens but hasn’t spoken yet]

Feel free to add your comment to the chat.

[Later: reading a comment from the chat]
Action Movie

*Just like an action movie, change things up to avoid attention waning over time.*

- Ideas:
  - Powerful beginnings and endings (subsequent training module)
  - Group-wide discussions
  - Think-pair-share (see next slide)
  - Quiet individual reflection time
  - Leveraging the chat

Attention starts to wane after about 10 minutes.

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I invite everyone to think about it individually for 2 minutes before I will send you in break-out rooms to discuss.

After 2 minutes, send everyone to breakout rooms to discuss their reflections in pairs. Tell them how much time they have in the breakout.

I would like to open the floor for a few folks who want to share what they discussed.

Example: *Think-Pair-Share*
Summary

**Meta Skills**

- Athlete’s trick: Reframe being nervous as being excited
- Positivity ratio: Don’t sweat a negative moment as long as the session is constructive overall
- Ready for take off: Start the session with a reminder to remove distractions
- Create space: Encourage equal *opportunity* for airtime
- Action movie: Change things up
Beginnings and Endings

Learning Outcomes

☐ The importance of beginnings and endings
☐ Effective ways to begin and end facilitation sessions
Scavenger Hunt

_Playful, high-energy activity._

- Give participants a list of three categories to look for in their home
- Set a 1-minute-timer for the collection of objects that fit the categories
- When time is up, let each person show-and-tell the group about their items (1-2 minutes per person)
- If the group is very large and there will not be enough time for everyone to share, invite participants to hold their items up to the screen so everyone can scroll through and see all the items

_Adjust the number of items depending on the number of participants (fewer items for larger groups)._  

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Ideas: Scavenger Hunt

You have one minute to collect …

… your favorite piece of clothing.

… something nature-related.

… a special memento.

… something yellow, blue, and red.
Positive News

Sharing good news to boost positive emotion in the group.

- Form small breakout groups of 2-3 people
- Instruct the breakout groups to give each individual a one minute turn as a speaker, sharing good news or a positive emotion experienced in the past week
- Encourage them to share small positive moments, too
- Instruct the listeners in the breakout rooms to take about 2 minutes to ask follow-up questions, demonstrating genuine interest and thus helping the speaker savor their good news

💡 Allow participants to opt to just listening if they’ve had a particularly challenging week.

Level ⬤ ⬤ ⬤  Duration ~ 10 minutes
Task Enabling

Inviting participants to take on a task during the facilitation demonstrates that you value their contribution and helps build a sense of accomplishment.

• Explain that you have 3 tasks that you could use 3 volunteers to help with
• Describe that this type of supportive engagement in tasks helps you to focus on the group environment and experience. Some tasks could include:
  • Time keeping
  • Vibe keeping
  • Resource sharing

💡 Make sure to thank each of your volunteers for contributing and invite the group to give them a virtual applause.

Level ★★★★☆ Duration 3 minutes to assign roles
Roles Descriptions: Task Enabling

Chief Vibe Officer
Encourages positive communication in the chat and verbally.
Helps monitor the chat for inappropriate comments.
Helps facilitator to call on hands.

Chief Resources Officer
If someone mentions a resource, material, quote, or idea, make note of it in the chat or post the link to the chat.
Save and download the chat at the end.

Chief Time Officer
Giving the group notice that the time is halfway done.
A 5-minute warning.
Arrival of end of session.
Shout-Out Send-Off

Affirming others and ending the session on a positive note focusing on gratitude and elevation.

- Foreshadow the shout-out ending at the beginning of the session to orient participants thinking toward positive emotions
- Give everyone time to share their words of appreciation, gratitude, or elevation in the chat three minutes before the session ends

The peak-end-rule says that endings are the most memorable part of an experience.

Level  

Duration  
3 minutes
Beginnings and Endings

- Beginnings set the trajectory for your facilitation
- Endings stick in our memories
- Aim for positive beginnings and powerful endings
- Strategies: Scavenger hunt, positive news, task enabling, shout-out send-off
Deepening Connections

Learning Outcomes

☐ Highlight importance of relationships and connections
☐ Specific approaches to enhance connections while facilitating
Savoring the Connection

*Practicing being present for others to develop deeper connections.*

- Give participants one minute in silence to come up with one thought that they would like to share with someone
- Split participants into 1:1 breakout groups and instruct the participants to take turns as a speaker and listener
- While the speaker shares their thought, the listener quietly listens without interrupting or commenting
- Once the speaker is done, the listener summarizes what has been said and gives the speaker a chance to edit or confirm. Then partners switch roles.

💡 Use this intervention when you intentionally want to slow down the pace of conversation.

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Savoring the Connection

Speaker
On my way home from physical therapy today, I noticed the lush green park surrounding me. I imagined the plants and flowers cheering the rain on so that they can grow and start blooming! I love spring!

Listener [listening carefully]

Listener
I heard you say that you noticed how green nature turned with all the rain over the past week. And I sensed gratitude for the four seasons. Am I right?

Speaker
Yes! Now, it is your turn.
**Strengths Bingo!**

*Identifying strengths in others improves well-being and encourages participants to fully engage in the discussion.*

- Introduce one character strength relevant for high-quality connections (see next slide)
- Instruct participants to take note of whom they see demonstrating this strength during the discussion
- When they identified 3 people, they call out Bingo! and explain how these participants have demonstrated this strength.

*If the exercise gets too distracting, move the Bingo! expressions to the chat.*

**Level:** 3

**Duration:** 5 minutes
Love
This strength involves the capacity to value close relationships with others, to give and receive affection, and to be supportive of others.

Social Intelligence
This strength involves the capacity to understand and navigate social situations effectively, including recognizing others' emotions and responding appropriately.

Kindness
This strength involves the capacity to be considerate, helpful, and generous to others.
Fostering curiosity through questions is a great way to encourage building positive relationships.

- Frame an open-ended question prompt (see example on the next slide)
- Invite participants to ask more questions about the prompt instead of answering it. Encourage exploration!
- Summarize the generated questions

Awaken the spirit of exploration by encouraging the participants to come up with as many questions as they can.

Level: ⭐⭐⭐
Duration: 7-8 minutes
Example: Question Burst

**Question Prompt:**
Should I get my own apartment or live with my parents?

- What kind of things would you value in the neighborhood?
- Where do your friends live?
- Will you need a car?
- Do you want a roommate?
- If you get sick, what kind of resources are available to you?
- What kind of furniture would you need to buy?
- How will you develop new connections and friendships?
- How close do you want to be to your family?
- How will you come up with the deposit?
- What is the most appealing thing about getting your own apartment?
- Is there a way to do a trial run? Maybe moving to friends first?
- Is there a way to do a trial run? Maybe moving to friends first?
Summary

Deepening Connections

- Relationships are a key element of well-being
- The role of facilitators it to help deepen connections between participants
- Strategies: Savoring the connection, strengths bingo, question burst
Evaluation

Learning Outcomes

- Ideas on how to evaluate the outcomes of the training module
- Inspirational survey templates
Quantitative Pre- and Post Survey

1. The Cystic Fibrosis Foundation gives me the training I need to facilitate well.

   - Strongly disagree
   - Slightly disagree
   - Neutral
   - Slightly agree
   - Strongly agree

2. I feel confident in my ability to be resilient in the face of challenges while facilitating.

   - Strongly disagree
   - Slightly disagree
   - Neutral
   - Slightly agree
   - Strongly agree

3. I have the expertise to create space for equal participation.

   - Strongly disagree
   - Slightly disagree
   - Neutral
   - Slightly agree
   - Strongly agree

4. I have the expertise to foster high-quality connections.

   - Strongly disagree
   - Slightly disagree
   - Neutral
   - Slightly agree
   - Strongly agree

Qualitative Post-Survey

1. What resonated from this training?

2. What didn't resonate from this training?

3. Besides what you've written above, what else did you learn today? (By recalling what you learned, you'll improve your memory of it by 17%)
We want to express gratitude to:

Our liaison at the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, Aimee Jeffrey, and her Support & Connection team colleagues Allie Stavrolakis, Claudia Rodriguez, Gillian Mocek, Kelsey Logan, and Laura Modarelli. Thank you for the time you invested in this partnership, for your genuine, generous, and continuous feedback, and for your commitment to both the impact of this project and all of your work at the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

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Authors

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