

Brittle Connections & The Connected Flourishing Framework

Relational Health · Identity Formation · Human Flourishing Across the Life Course

Dr. T. Hardy-Sellers · Groundswell Communities · 2025

This document integrates two companion frameworks. **Brittle Connections** names the problem: the widening gap between being connected and truly belonging. **Connected Flourishing** names the response: the conditions, relationships, and supports that allow people to thrive across every stage of life. Together they move from diagnosis to design—and the empirical and theoretical sources underpinning both are documented in the References.

ORIGINAL CONCEPT

The **Brittle Connections** and **Connected Flourishing** frameworks are the original concept and intellectual property of **Dr. T. Hardy-Sellers** (Groundswell Communities, 2025). The term “Brittle Connections,” as defined and developed here—its characteristics, life-course architecture, and progression toward Connected Flourishing—is original to this work. The frameworks synthesize and build upon established research in attachment, developmental psychology, social capital, and social-emotional learning; those foundational sources are credited throughout and listed in full in the References.

Part I · Brittle Connections: Core Concept Framework

WORKING DEFINITION

Brittle Connections are relationships, identities, systems, and social bonds that appear strong on the surface but lack the depth, resilience, reciprocity, and developmental supports necessary to withstand adversity, disagreement, change, or stress.

CORE PREMISE

We are increasingly connected through technology while becoming increasingly disconnected from the relationships, experiences, and institutions that help humans flourish. This tension sits at the heart of the contemporary youth mental-health decline documented by Haidt (2024) and the broader erosion of social connection traced by the U.S. Surgeon General (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023) and Putnam (2000).

CHARACTERISTICS

Brittle connections tend to be shallow, transactional, conditional, fragile, performative, algorithmically influenced, low in commitment, and emotionally thin.

STRONG VS. BRITTLE CONNECTIONS

	STRONG CONNECTIONS	BRITTLE CONNECTIONS
Depth	Deep and reciprocal	Surface-level and transactional
Resilience	Resilient under stress	Fragile under stress
Basis	Trust-based	Validation-based
Orientation	Growth-oriented	Performance-oriented

IDENTITY

Identity is *formed*, not *performed*. Healthy identity develops through relationships, community, purpose, culture, responsibility, and reflection—consistent with Erikson's (1950) account of psychosocial development and Marcia's (1966) identity-status theory, and increasingly shaped today by digital environments (Haidt, 2024; Siegel, 2020).

SYNDEMIC CONNECTION

Brittle connections interact with social-media addiction behaviors, anxiety and depression, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), loneliness, isolation, and social conflict. These conditions compound one another rather than acting in isolation, which is what makes the syndemic framing useful.

LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

Brittle connections affect childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and older adulthood through weakened developmental and social bonds. Because developmental relationships matter within and across the life course (Pekel et al., 2018), brittleness at any stage reshapes the foundation available at the next.

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

Communities become brittle when trust declines, civic engagement weakens, belonging decreases, and social capital erodes—the precise dynamics Putnam (2000) documented in the decline of American associational life.

PREVENTION SCIENCE LENS

Brittle connections function as a **risk factor** that increases vulnerability to mental-health challenges, violence, substance misuse, school disengagement, and civic disengagement. Reframed as a protective target, strengthening connection becomes a preventive intervention.

CONNECTED FLOURISHING — THE ANTIDOTE

The response to brittle connection is **Connected Flourishing**: belonging, purpose, agency, contribution, resilience, and community.

FRAMEWORK PROGRESSION

Brittle Connections → Disconnection & Fragmentation → Intentional Relationship Building → Connected Flourishing → Collective Wellbeing → Cultural Renewal

BOOK DEFINITION

Brittle Connections describes the growing gap between being connected and truly belonging in a hyperconnected world.

Part II · The Connected Flourishing Framework

Where Part I diagnoses brittleness, the Connected Flourishing Framework maps the developmental conditions that build durable connection. It rests on **three pillars**—and when these weaken, risk rises across every life stage.

THREE PILLARS OF FLOURISHING

- **Grounded Identity** — a coherent, stable sense of self (Erikson, 1950; Marcia, 1966).
- **Healthy Connection** — reciprocal, deep relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Siegel, 2020).
- **Meaningful Belonging** — communities of shared purpose (Putnam, 2000; Pekel et al., 2018).

WHAT THIS FRAMEWORK IS — AND IS NOT SAYING

Not saying: "Technology causes mental illness."

Saying: "When developmental environments prioritize speed, visibility, and performance over stable relational depth, people experience increasingly brittle forms of connection that weaken identity formation, belonging, and resilience." — Dr. T. Hardy-Sellers

THE EMPIRICAL SIGNAL

1 in 2 U.S. adults report loneliness (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023)	40% of teens report persistent hopelessness (CDC, 2023)	+61% increase in adolescent anxiety, 2016–2023	34% social trust rate, down from 58% in 1960 (Putnam, 2000)
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BRITTLE CONNECTION ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

Each developmental stage carries core needs, modern risks, and a characteristic form of brittle connection. This is where the two frameworks lock together: the "brittle connection" at each stage is a life-course expression of the Part I definition.

LIFE STAGE	CORE NEEDS	MODERN RISKS	BRITTLE CONNECTION	THEORY BASE
Early Childhood <i>Attachment & safety</i>	Emotional attunement; secure relationships; co-regulation; trust & safety	Caregiver distraction; fragmented attention; weakened attunement	<i>Presence without relational depth—physical availability without emotional engagement</i>	Bowlby (1969); Ainsworth et al. (1978); Siegel (2020)
Childhood <i>Competence & socialization</i>	Encouragement; peer connection; moral formation; contribution; relational consistency	Performance orientation; transactional peer culture; conditional acceptance; weakening community ties	<i>Conditional acceptance—achievement-based worth; unstable social belonging</i>	Erikson (1950); Bronfenbrenner (1979); Pekel et al. (2018); Durlak et al. (2011)
Adolescence <i>Identity & meaning</i>	Belonging & agency; purpose beyond performance; healthy autonomy; digital identity navigation	Algorithmic validation; identity performance; parasocial attachment; social comparison	<i>Hyper-connection with emotional isolation—visibility substituting for belonging</i>	Erikson (1950); Marcia (1966); Haidt (2024)
Adulthood <i>Contribution & integration</i>	Community participation; vocation & meaning; generativity; intergenerational ties; stability & place	Loneliness epidemic; civic fragmentation; low social trust; loss of community bonds	<i>Networked isolation—acquaintance-rich, community-poor; low social trust</i>	Erikson (1950); Putnam (2000); Office of the Surgeon General (2023)

PROTECTIVE RESPONSES & SECTORS FOR ACTION

Protective responses span the full developmental arc: relational-health practices, secure-attachment programs, caregiver-wellbeing support, SEL curricula (CASEL; Durlak et al., 2011), character development, developmental relationships (Pekel et al., 2018), digital-wellbeing education, purpose and civic engagement, community infrastructure, intergenerational programming, and place attachment.

Sectors for action include early childhood, schools, communities, families, policy, technology, civic organizations, and the workforce—each a leverage point where brittle conditions can be redesigned toward connected flourishing.

THEORY BASE AT A GLANCE

- **Attachment theory** (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Siegel, 2020): secure bonds as the biological substrate of relational

capacity and identity development.

- **Ecological & psychosocial development** (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1950): nested systems and life-course stages shaping developmental outcomes.
- **Identity formation** (Marcia, 1966; Haidt, 2024): identity-status theory and the digital rewiring of adolescence.
- **Social capital & developmental relationships** (Putnam, 2000; Pekel et al., 2018): community infrastructure and relationships as protective factors.
- **SEL research** (CASEL; Durlak et al., 2011): meta-analytic evidence base of 213 programs and 270,034 students.

The Brittle Connections and Connected Flourishing frameworks are the original concept of Dr. T. Hardy-Sellers, Groundswell Communities (2025). Cite as: Hardy-Sellers, T. (2025). Brittle connections and the connected flourishing framework. Groundswell Communities.

References

The Brittle Connections and Connected Flourishing frameworks are the original work of Dr. T. Hardy-Sellers (Groundswell Communities, 2025). The references below are the established scholarly sources the frameworks draw upon and build from; they are not the source of the frameworks themselves. Formatted in APA (7th edition). Book, journal, and government-report sources were verified against publishers and primary outlets. Population statistics attributed in the framework to the CDC and Cigna are listed under their originating organizations; where a specific Cigna report could not be independently confirmed, the widely cited “1 in 2 adults” loneliness figure is anchored to the U.S. Surgeon General’s 2023 advisory, which compiles it.

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