**Connection.**

**Angus**: Hi I am Angus Fowler and you are listening to the purple orange podcast, where we cover issues and stories that matter to the disability community. This time, we are focusing on men and social connection.

Everyone needs to feel connected, but a lot of men - disability or not - just aren’t connected enough. A study by Beyond Blue and The Movember Foundation, found that a quarter of men reported having no one outside of their immediate family that they can rely on. A lack of social connection is almost doubled in men who live with disability.

It’s well documented that social isolation can have impacts on both your mental and physical health. But how can men who are feeling disconnected, build connection?

Producer April Dwyer sat down with three men, at different stages and ages of life to discuss their experiences of creating connection.

**April**: The first man I met with was Yanni, an Aboriginal man in his early 20s. We met at his university, where he is studying to become a social worker.

**Yanni**: I’m a Yankuntjatjarra man and also Greek and I live in Adelaide which is the Kaurna region. This is where I’ve grown up.

**April**: Yanni thinks about connection and belonging a lot because of his family history. His father was part of the stolen generation - taken away from his parents and his home and adopted in Adelaide.

**Yanni**: I’m not really connecting to my culture as much as I wish I was. I’ve only really grown up in Adelaide and that’s very far from the lands of which I belong to, and where my family belongs to, which is, you know, out in the middle of the desert. I’m so, just, grown up in this city. Very different to the cultural way of life of which I wish to live.

**April**: He was already culturally disconnected. Then on top of that, in high school, his hip was injured. The misdiagnosis of that injury resulted in permanent physical disability.

**Yanni**: It prevented me from playing football. And I had to stop volleyball. I had to stop skating and all of this stuff. Because I can’t do all of the things I was passionate about, I’ve felt that social isolation.

**April**: Not being able to play sport anymore and losing that connection to his friends was hard on Yanni’s mental health. But he eventually found his way out of the darkness with the support of his Aboriginal Education Worker.

Now Yanni is forging his new path as a social worker. His goal is to help Aboriginal children overcome barriers. It’s a future he feels excited about. And although he no longer plays sports, he has found a new passion.

**Yanni**: And, you know, that’s why I took up rap music. I rap about issues that affect aboriginal people a lot. It makes me feel connected in the sense that when I talk about what affects Aboriginal people I am exposing the truth to the wider society as well. I’m exposing stuff that’s been hidden for many years. And that’s where my, you know, that’s where I feel connected.

**April**: From Yanni, I learned that you can create connections by working on your own strengths and interests. And who knows? It may lead you down an exciting career path or you may find a new hobby that allows you to connect to your culture in a new way.

Next I spoke with Terry, who acquired disability much later in life than Yanni. But, like Yanni, it still had a major impact on his social connections.

After a long and successful career in the Army, Terry and his wife, Moira, settled in country South Australia where he enjoyed maintaining the house, doing yardwork and working on his cars.

Then in 2015, Terry was caught in a bushfire. He had burns to 75% of his body. Because his injuries were so severe, they had to move to the city to be closer to the burns unit and other services he now needs.

Terry says he was never all that social. But since moving away from his friends in the country, he’s realised how important social connection is.

**Terry**: I used to play competition table tennis twice a week. So I used to get together with the other blokes and go and jump in each other’s cars and go to play the comp. I can’t play table tennis anymore so I don’t meet those friends. I’m a bit of a loner but table tennis did force me into socialising a bit. I miss that a lot. I’m very much on my own down here.

**April**: He’s not completely on his own. Visiting Terry and Moira in their home, I could see that their relationship is strong and full of love.

**Terry**: Yes, without my wife things would be a lot different. She’s stuck by me, of course, all these years. We’ve been married nearly 42 years this December. Without her company and love, I don’t know where I’d be at the moment.

**April**: Terry is searching for ways to connect with others and make new friends. He regularly goes out for walks and visits cafes. He’s also researching inclusive technology, like voice activation, that could help him embrace digital forms of communication like social media and email, where he can connect with people and start conversations about his interests.

**Terry**: Online, is a very exciting sort of option. I’m eager to explore the internet. I’m getting a little bit more confident now using it. I just like to communicate to people and I’m reasonably opinionated so if someone wants to talk about politics, that’s fine, religion, that sort of thing.

**April**: Terry is a perfect example of why building strong relationships with loved ones is so important. And his ability to problem solve and get on with life showed me that when physical access to social connection is a barrier, there are tools and technology that can help.

The last man I spoke with was Ben. He also uses social media to find connection. But as a 19 year old who has grown up in the digital age, it’s second nature to him.

**Ben**: Social media Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, YouTube. To get new friends. It's a simple thing. And very effective.

**April**: Ben lives with intellectual disability and the internet has helped him to overcome some social barriers that he’s faced in the past. But it’s important to him that he has IRL (in real life) friends as well.

**Ben**: I do stuff like men’s night. Men's night is when you go out. You grab a place, you stay there for a couple of nights. Sometimes we go to the movies. Sometimes we have an adventure. Sometimes a treasure hunt.

**April**: Ben uses his NDIS funding to support his social connection because he knows that being connected to his friends improves his quality of life, especially his mental health.

**Ben**: I can let all my worries and emotions to them. It's just this, it’s just one word - communication.

**April**: He told me that social connection hasn’t always been easy for him and sometimes, when he was younger, he felt left out. These earlier life experiences have motivated him to make sure everyone around him feels included and accepted.

**Ben**: People need a way for everybody to get involved. There's one thing that people must do. People must include their friends.

**April**: Ben showed me that there are many different ways that we can connect with each other, online and in real life. He knows that social connection is a health issue and invests a lot of time into staying connected. We need to connect with people for our own benefit but Ben also reminded me of the importance for everyone to reach out and help others to stay socially connected.

Yanni, Terry and Ben, all have very different lived experience. They’re all at different stages of their lives. But they do have something in common. They know the importance of connection and are actively creating it in their lives.

**Angus**: Do you want to connect more? Reach out to an old friend or make a new one. Jump online and start a conversation or find a new hobby that connects you to your culture. And if you already have a fulfilling social life, try and connect with someone who doesn’t. Everyone deserves to create meaningful connections with others and to enjoy the benefits of social inclusion.

If you want to connect with other people in the disability community, Purple Orange supports three peer networks. There is the JFY peer support network for young people living with disability, Our Voice SA for people living with intellectual disability, and Disability Elders of All Ages for people living with physical and sensory disability.

To find out more you can call us on (08) 8373 8388. You can also connect with us via our website at [www.purpleorange.org.au](http://www.purpleorange.org.au), on Facebook and Twitter at JFA Purple Orange and on Instagram @A\_Moment\_Of\_Me.

You can also find other peer networks in your area on the Peer Connect website at www.peerconnect.org.au.