**Marci Alboher**

Welcome friends, I'm Marci. And for those of you who don't know me, I lead our narrative and community work here at CoGenerate, where we are championing the idea of older and younger joining forces to bridge divides, and Cocreate a better future. We use the word cogeneration here to describe the power of older and younger joining forces to make positive change in the world. I am so thrilled today to be able to interview Kasley Killam. She is a friend and she's also an alum of our Encore Public Voices Fellow ship. Well, welcome Kasley. And we're gonna hear be here to talk about the book behind Kasley, The Art and Science of Connection. She is a powerful leader on the idea of social connection and what she calls social health, which you will also be understanding by the end of this webinar. And we're really grateful that she's taken the time to talk with us today. If you haven't yet run into Kelly's book, you have probably run into her ideas. She has been everywhere on every media you can imagine. And actually, I think she's gotten a little viral for a quiz that she created for the New York Times on your friendship style. I am an evergreen, you all will get a link to the New York Times quiz after this. And you can figure out what your friendship style is, and then how to think about social health for your own friendship style. So anyway, I tore through this book, and I underline things on nearly every page, there is a lot to dig into. So let's join and get ready for a juicy conversation. Thank you so much. Marci, I'm thrilled to be talking to you. I think we are a case in point of intergenerational friendship and mentorship and collaboration. So happy to share the virtual stage again. Yes, we're going to walk the walk and talk the talk. So I just want to encourage all of you who are listening live, to join in by putting questions into the chat. Our colleague Duncan is going to be scanning those and feeding those to us. So we will make sure to incorporate your questions. I'm also going to be scanning the chat. So if you see me looking over to the left, I'm looking at all of you to try to see who's there with us. And feel free to introduce yourself in the chat. Tell us where you're coming from and and put those questions in either the chat or the q&a section. So I want to start with casually why this topic? How did you come to it?

**Kasley Killam**

That's a great place to start. Honestly, Marci, this topic has been something that I've been exploring for as long as I can remember informally at first, I remember being a little kid on the playground at school growing up in Vancouver, Canada, watching the my friends and other peers playing and interacting and trying to figure out the social dynamics and trying to understand how people get along and how we can get along better. And that theme has continued for for many years back in I think it was around 2011 I started coming across some of the data on social connection and how we can deepen our relationships and their importance for our well being. And reading some of those books and some of those research papers led me to start doing research at the University of Pennsylvania and the Positive Psychology Center. To then come across work at the Stanford Center for compassion and altruism, research and education. and get involved with their work. And it kind of cascaded from there that one of the first initiatives that I did was developing an app and a campaign that was designed to take insights from the research and make them useful and actionable and fun for people in their everyday lives to actually deepen their relationships. And it was doing research for that project that I came across this term social health, and looked around and thought, Why have I never heard of this? Why is this not something we talk about? Like we talk about physical and mental health. And it's, you know, been a long journey since then. So very excited to be here now.

**Marci Alboher**

So we introduced this social health language, which may be new for some people, and I care about language, we at CoGenerate, we made up a word cogenerate. Because we care about language. Why? Why social health? Like why does that language matter? We know we've heard a lot of language, social isolation, social connection. Tell me why you like social health and have decided to go big on that. Yeah,

**Kasley Killam**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, social isolation and loneliness are big topics. Nowadays, for good reason. There was a Gallup poll that came out just at the end of last year that found that one in four people worldwide are lonely. So this is a big problem that we need to be paying attention to. It's something that I focused on for many years. But loneliness is just one sign of poor social health. It's not the only sign just like obesity is one sign of poor physical health, right? There are other aspects. And so for people who aren't necessarily lonely, there are still ways that you can strengthen your social health. But there are other reasons why I think this language is really powerful. One is that the data suggests that most people actually underestimate, excuse me, the importance of our relationships for longevity. So people don't most people just don't even realize that connection isn't just about, you know, being in a good mood or having fun or feeling happy, it actually influences your risk for mortality and your risk for diseases like depression, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, dementia, and so on. So it's much more tied to our health and longevity than than the language of connection necessarily conveys. Another reason is that there's value in shifting from reactive to proactive, right, right now, a lot of the efforts which are very important and valuable to address loneliness, they're focused downstream and for good reason. But there's value in also broadening the lens and thinking about how we can prevent that in the first place, how we can invest in social health proactively and preventatively. And then the last reason that I think this language is so powerful is that what I hear from a lot of the organizations that I work with, is that talking about loneliness with everyday people can actually be very off putting, and doesn't always resonate. Sometimes it can be empowering, but sometimes not. And so there's value in saying, let's frame this in a positive, empowering way. Let's frame it around social health, something that doesn't necessarily carry stigma, and something that is relevant to all of us. Yeah, I mean, we've been in the asset framing business for a long time here at cogenerate. First around a positive language for people in the second half of life, like the Encore language. So I'm all all in on kind of asset framing rather than deficit framing. Exactly. But you know, you've already touched on kind of some of the age issues that come up. And because we focus on intergenerational issues here, that we've been very interested in the research that shows that the two loneliest groups are older people and young adults. So can you kind of unpack that for us? Why is that? Yeah, it's interesting. I've seen this in the data. So many times that it seems very clear, it's a U shaped curve with actually the loneliest generation being youth and Gen Z today, and then followed Second, by by older adults. If you think about those life stages, they're particularly challenging in different ways, right? When you're young, when you're a teenager growing up, or young adult, you're figuring out who you are, you're figuring out who your friends are, what kind of person you want to be, how you relate to others in the social world and circumstances that you're in. And now throw in technology and social media, which could be a much longer conversation. But certainly we can all recognize that that's influencing the ways people are connecting or not right, or feeling actually disconnected and worse in some ways. So there are a lot of challenges for youth. And then at the other end of the age spectrum, if you think about aging, you know, maybe you retire and suddenly you lose that day to day interaction that you've had with coworkers. And then as you get older and friends and family become sick, some pass away, right? There's a lot of loss happening where you actually your social network is decreasing in size. And then there's just the fact that the way our culture in general views aging, we kind of think of older adults as a burden rather than as an asset. And sort of, there's this stereotype of sort of older people out to pasture kind of alone and not contributing to society, which, of course, cogenerate does so much to combat that. And it's so important that we do, but that confers the sense of kind of isolation in and of itself, like, what role do I have in society still today? So I think for those reasons, and many others in our culture, we can see that for youth and then for older adults there, especially challenges for staying socially healthy.

**Marci Alboher**

Yeah. So I was taken in your book by you opened one chapter with a story about your grandmother in law, Nancy, and reminded me quite a lot of my own mother, who is probably listening or will listen at a future date. Who, who are these kind of stereotype stereotype defying older people who are not isolated, but rather really deeply connected with enormous social networks? And so first of all, tell me a little bit about Nancy and what, from her? Because I kind of want to hear I would like to understand, like, what can we learn from the elders in our life? Who are who are modeling a different, something different than what that stereotype leads us to believe?

**Kasley Killam**

Yeah, absolutely. So Nancy was actually at my house just last week, for Fourth of July stay in here for a few days. And every hour, her phone was ringing, it's crazy. She gets more phone calls in a day than I do in a week. And, and of course, in the book, I talk a lot about how it's quality over quantity, right. And we each depending on our social health styles have different preferences for the amount of communication we like. But it's very clear that Nancy is an example of someone who's very engaged and who has centered her life around connection. She's one of the most socially healthy people I know, despite many challenges when she was younger, she was a parent to five kids moved around every couple of years. So it was very hard to stay connected to friends in any given place. She later had a husband who left her and then a second husband who passed away tragically and unexpectedly and both of those were, of course, devastating experiences that she had to find a way through and a path forward. And other challenges, you know, health scares, things like that. And so, Nancy is an example of someone who has experienced the highs of lows and lows of life. And yet now in her late 80s, is someone who's truly thriving precisely because she has invested she has, she has prioritized her social health. So there's a couple of ways that she does this. One is that she nurtures really close one on one relationships. And I talk in the book about how important those individual ties are with our friends, with our family, with those individual people who we really care about. She has very close connections. But the second thing she does is she belongs to groups and really prioritizes community. So she's very active in her local church, she maintains different friend groups, for example, she has this group of women who meet every single month in person or during the pandemic, they were meeting virtually, they've done that for almost 30 years. She has other groups that she's part of like Bible study group, and volunteer communities and things like this, where she's very embedded in groups that give her a sense of of belonging in different ways. And then another thing that Nancy does is she makes friends across ages, right, she is not just socializing with people her own age, she has beautiful intergenerational friendships. And and also, of course, close ties with all of her grandkids, including my husband, and me and many others and her many great grandkids at this point as well. So she's also an example of being socially healthy through intergenerational connection. And that's, that's very inspiring to all of us. Right, no matter what your age is, these kinds of principles apply.

Yeah.

**Marci Alboher**

Yeah. So as you as you as I read, and as I heard you, I kept thinking about my own mom and the way she does so many of the things that you have described, and particularly the deep cross-generational relationships, I joke that I have, like, shared my mother with a lot of younger people who claim her who want them and want her as their mother figure, grandmother figure. And those people have all joined my life as extended family. So I think you're onto that. But I know we both worry that we put too much on the individual like not everyone is like Nancy or my mother. And I think what I love about your approach in the book is you are talking about things we could each do individually but I'm really interested in the structural things that can happen like, what can community leaders do? What can entrepreneurs do? What can leaders in workplaces be doing? What can educators be doing? It just seems like there are so many kind of levers of society where that you cover in the book and I'd love to, for you to give people a little sense of, if we don't put it on all on the individual, what would it look like to have a society that was designed more about social health?

**Kasley Killam**

Absolutely, yeah, I couldn't have said it better. And this is something I kind of I walked that line in the book, because the first goal is for it to be an empowering toolkit for you, no matter your life, circumstances, no matter your age, no matter if you're an introvert or an extrovert, you can live a more socially healthy life in ways that feel meaningful to you. But and the reason I did a master's in public health focused on loneliness and solutions for loneliness, was precisely what you're talking about, which is, we need to create the conditions in our society for social health to be easier, right? There's a reason that one in four people around the world are feeling lonely right now. And it's not just their fault for the actions they're taking. It's also that we've created a society where it's challenging to be socially healthy right now. And so a lot of my work in in past years over the past five plus years, has been focused on how do we actually create those conditions. So social health labs is the nonprofit I launched in 2020. And we did a whole thought leadership series examining, how do we create the conditions for social health, in education, in technology, in healthcare, in different sectors, so that we can start to change the conditions we're living in. And here again, though, I would note that it's still empowering for us as individuals, right? Whatever work that you do, if you are an architect, you can think about how you're designing buildings or neighborhoods in ways that are conducive to connection. And there's a lot of research on that. And I highlight the example of an architect in the book who's doing exactly that. If you are a teacher, there are curricula that you can adopt in your schools and ways that you can structure the classroom and structure your courses to support teaching kids from a young age, the value of connection and the skills that we need to be socially healthy. If you're in a government position, right? There are so many initiatives going on right now. For example, the US Surgeon General has been a huge advocate of this topic. And more recently, the World Health Organization launched a commission on social connection, again, recognizing that this is a really important health issue. So there are many initiatives going on in policy and legislation as well, right. And so those are a few examples. And there are many more that including some that I highlight in the book, and including some in my work through social health ads. The bottom line is that social health needs to be a priority alongside physical and mental health. And it hasn't been for too long. And we're suffering as a result. And so bringing this lens and this language to whatever work we're doing, can help start to move the needle. And from my vantage point, there are so many reasons to be optimistic, because there's so much innovation going on in absolutely every sector, so many inspiring entrepreneurs, community builders, and so on, who are starting to create the conditions for better social health for all of us.

**Marci Alboher**

I was particularly taken by this effort you talk about in Paris called Super neighbors, and especially the fact that it was really led by a group of retirees who had more time on their hands and in a place that is kind of notorious for people being a little unfriendly. And can you just give us like a flavor for what super neighbors is and how it could be replicated in other places?

**Kasley Killam**

Yeah, this is one of my favorite stories in the book as well. I spent a weekend with this group in this one neighborhood in Paris who banded together and said, we are going to change the social norm in our, you know, stereotypically kind of cold, unfriendly Parisian neighborhood. And it started with a man named Patrick, who had this idea to set up a table the length of the road, and invite 1000 people to share a meal together. And his neighbors when he first told them this, they laughed at him. They said, You're crazy. But they were like, there's something there we should, you know, get to know our neighbors better. That kind of seems like a good idea. So he convinced them to do it. And several months later, they indeed set up a table the length of the road and over 1000 people showed up to share a meal together. And they've continued that tradition every year sense. But that was really just the beginning of their work. There are so many incredible initiatives that they now run to connect people in their community and it's completely transformed so many people's lives. I mean, the conversations that I had with people there — first of all, in just a few hours of being there, I made more friends than I had in months of I had actually lived there previously. And I couldn't believe how many people were just friendly and opening up and inviting me into their homes and exchanging contact info with me. Because what this group super neighbors had done was really start to change the cultural norms through all of these small actions, and then to actually partner with the city of Paris to expand these initiatives further to create community gathering spaces where they could host events and revamp, different areas that had been neglected and things like this. So there, there's this interplay between what they as individuals and as a group are doing, and then now bringing in the city and partnering together to, to create a socially healthy neighborhood that I think is a beautiful model for for all of us.

**Marci Alboher**

I love that. And also, we talk a lot about how neighborhoods are age segregated. And you know, in that example, this was everybody, from people with young kids to, you know, teenagers to people in their 20s driven a lot by retirees who had more time on their hands to do a lot of the heavy lifting of organizing. So we think a lot about neighborhoods that have become kind of de facto like age segregated places. And this seems to defy that too. I want to kind of I feel like one kind of thing that's on all of our minds lately is how technology is showing up and you hinted at it at the beginning. We all think a lot about what technology is doing to our social health, everything from the controversies around social media and addiction and what it's doing to teens. Last week's New York Times had a story about AI robots as companions for homebound elders, just give me your sense of like, I know you you dance a line here on technology? I'd like to hear about it. Yeah, I do.

**Kasley Killam**

One of the more fascinating things that I researched for the book was AI companions. And I spend some time on that in one of the later chapters exploring, first of all, the fact that hundreds of millions of people around the world are using AI for friendship, for intimacy, to meet their emotional and social needs. They're using AI chatbots, as friends as romantic partners will be heard in real life. It Yeah. And it's no longer a movie. I mean, that is the reality we're living in. I think it's easy to read articles and not realize this is extremely widespread. And I really grappled in the book with what does that mean? First of all, what does that say about our world that people feel like they need to turn to AI to meet their social needs? But also, what do we want that role? What do we want AI? What kind of role should that play in our social health moving forward? And I think that's really going to be a key question in the coming decade, right, as we're designing and using these tools, and integrating them more and more. But going back to just social media, which we're all for sure, using pretty much at this point. That too, you know, we really need to think about it as a tool. And again, in the book, I grapple with the fact that there's the steps that we as individuals can take to use it in socially healthy ways. And I outlined some ways to do that. But also, the people designing these tools need to recognize that we can also design them in better ways that are more socially healthy and helpful. And so I mean, we could have many hours long conversation just about this topic. But I think it's really interesting. And I think the bottom line is that technology is influencing your social health one way or the other. And so how can you use it in ways that are helpful? And how can we design it going forward in ways that are going to be beneficial for our social health rather than harmful, which unfortunately, in a lot of cases, they are right now.

Alright,

**Marci Alboher**

Alright, so we are nearing the end of our time together. This has been flying by we have so many questions from the audience. So I'm going to give you a few that I want you to address pretty quickly. One I love which is how can we overcome the barriers to men socializing? And I want to hear your answer. And I want to share something on that because I think a lot about that too.

**Kasley Killam**

Go first. Marci, I'd be so curious.

**Marci Alboher**

My husband is a great example of this. My husband recently went through prostate cancer and a big part of his recovery was a support group that he became a part of, and men are notorious for not wanting to get involved in those kinds of activities, particularly around something like a health issue like prostate cancer. It has changed his life. He has made so many friends. He he's a guy who was like reluctant to even do therapy until he was in his 50s. So this was transformative. And I think a real interesting eye opener for me on what groups can mean to men and their social health. And I think it is totally helped him in his recovery process. What have you seen with men?

**Kasley Killam**

Yeah, thank you so much for sharing that. I love that example. And I've unfortunately seen a lot of data suggesting that he's not alone with with what he experienced before. You know, so many men, particularly, I think the the kind of average use case described as someone in their around 35. Not yet married, working professional. Men are really struggling to maintain friendships, to make new friendships, more so than women. And so this is something that we really need to pay attention to going forward. But there's also a lot of kind of limiting self beliefs that inhibit people from making those friendships, men and women, right? Research has shown that when we feel isolated or disconnected, we actually go through this downward spiral where we get more nervous or anxious about social situations, or we might not open up in ways because we fear that it's not going to be received well, and things like that, when in fact, the research also shows that when we do make that effort, when we do reach out to people, they often appreciate it more than we assume. And people actually like us more than we assume they're really beautiful studies showing that when you pair people together to have a conversation, and then ask them how much they liked each other. They consistently and significantly underestimate how much the other person liked them. So data like that can be really empowering and help each of us recognize whether you're, you know, no matter what your situation is that chances are people do want to connect more than more than you might think.

**Marci Alboher**

All right, I'm gonna give you a little wrap up because I wanted you to give us like a try this at home tip. But there are still some really good questions in the chat. So I think I can wrap these two together. One really good question was what are strategies that introverts can use to stay socially healthy, particularly in their later years, but I think that's true almost at any age. And so if you can also think about this as a try this at home that maybe all of us could use, you know, regardless of our social health style, that would be really helpful. Yeah,

**Kasley Killam**

Yeah, absolutely. So I'm an introvert. So I totally get it. And I would also say, for any introvert of any age, it's important to balance it. And I talk a lot about the book in the book that, you know, we each have different needs and preferences and desires around connection. And so it's okay, give yourself permission to take time alone, to recharge your batteries, and spend time with yourself. But whether you're an introvert or extrovert, there's one thing that's been on my mind recently, which is the power of in person connection, and how meaningful that is. And actually, just yesterday, in my newsletter, I shared this study that came out showing that in person time with friends helped older adults improve their physical and mental health, whereas calls and texts with their friends did not. So there's certainly some data suggesting that there's unique benefits to in person connection. So one thing that every single person listening can go do today is to make a plan to spend time in person with someone you care about in the next two weeks, and schedule that make it happen today. And then future you will be thankful. And hopefully you'll think about this and think about how that interaction when it does happen, how that's influencing your social health.

**Marci Alboher**

Great, we could go on, we do have a lot of other questions, and I'm willing Castley a few artists stay on another five minutes or so to take a few more questions. But sure, it's gonna pass it to Duncan, who wants to say a few things to wrap us and then we'll stay a little extra for those who still want to listen to a few questions. Awesome.

**Duncan Magidson**

That works for me. I'm Duncan. Marci introduced me briefly at the beginning, but I've been running things behind the scenes. And I just want to say thank you again to Kasley for joining us in this dynamic conversation. Don't take this as a goodbye. We're gonna stick around for a few minutes. But for anyone who has to go, I want to do a few things. First, I'm just gonna launch a quick poll question here asking if after this conversation, you're inspired to include more older and younger people in your life. The second and probably most important thing is I'm going to add a link to the chat here on how you can order the book, The Art and Science of connection that you've been seeing behind Castlereagh for this whole conversation. Please order that and order copies for your friends and family. And I also wanted to mention that on July 24, we will be hosting another webinar also on the topic of loneliness and social isolation, featuring our CO CEO Eunice Lin Nichols in conversation with Jillian Racoosin the CEO, The Foundation for Social Connection. And I'm going to add a link to that in the chat as well. Both of those links are going to be in our follow up email as well as the recording. And I just wanted to do a do a quick tease for everyone that later this month, we're going to be opening invitations to join a new community of practice on cogenerational solutions to social isolation and loneliness. So if that sounds like it might be for you, please stay tuned for details. And I hope you'll join us. So I will pass it back to Marci and Kasley to keep going with this great conversation. Thanks,

**Marci Alboher**

Thanks, Duncan. Okay, here are a few of the intriguing questions that that we received. So one, I think this is a really important one. And I've even felt this myself. Why do people feel embarrassed to talk about loneliness? I mean, it is obviously something we all deal with that at times of our lives, but what what does it do to us? And how do we overcome that? Yeah,

**Kasley Killam**

Yeah, that's a great question. I think, first of all, it's a survival instinct that we need to belong, and we need to connect, and we need to have social connection in our lives. And so when we feel lonely, when we feel that absence, it's almost like our survival instincts kick in. And there's really interesting research showing us for example, if you compare the brain activity of people who've been alone for an extended period of time, to people who haven't eaten for an extended period of time, the same brain regions are activated. In other words, being alone and being hungry, activate the same parts of our brain. So there's truly a cue in our bodies to say, hey, you need connection, just like you need food. So one answer to that, to that great question is that it's just a survival instinct. And we understand that. And then I think, also from a young age, we're kind of a culture to feel shameful of that. Like, if you're on the playground, and you don't have a friend or you're bullied or excluded from something. There's such sadness and shame, and it triggers these physiological pathways that are truly harmful. And in fact, some of the more alarming data that I came across when writing the book, were studies showing that just one really negative social interaction being bullied or excluded or things like this, at a young age, can actually have cascading effects across a person's lifespan. So we really need to collectively put effort into helping youth be socially healthy and kind and compassionate from a young age. So yeah, hopefully that answers your your question, Marci. But I also think there's no reason really, cognitively that we should feel shame around loneliness. It is like hunger, right? You don't feel ashamed if you're hungry, you just know that you need food. And we need to shift to start thinking about loneliness in that same way. It's something something we all experience, and is actually very helpful information from our body.

**Marci Alboher**

Yeah, I mean, this actually relates to the question of intergenerational friendship to me that you and I talk about a lot. And I know you have many cross-generational friendships in your life, as do I. And I think there is something about a loneliness you might feel around your peers sometimes, because there's certain comparisons we do with peers of like, you know, who's at what place and who's dealing with what, like a life stage issue that can make you feel like you're not keeping up or your somehow, but when you're dealing with an intergenerational friendship, somehow those things go away, because you're not in the same life stage. And so I think that's one of the reasons why I think it's so powerful to collect these friends of different life stages. Yeah.

**Kasley Killam**

In terms from competitive to supportive, yeah, really? Yeah. Interesting.

**Marci Alboher**

This was a really good one. How do we know when a person who is like, out overtly outgoing is actually maybe in denial about being isolated by being constantly busy? And like, I guess that's for the people we might care about in our midst?

**Kasley Killam**

That's a really great question. So the question is, how do we know?

**Marci Alboher**

Yeah, or what can we I think it's how do we know what can we do? Right?

**Kasley Killam**

So interesting. Yeah, I mean, that's very relatable, right? To, you know, feeling busy and constantly being on the go and almost using that as a crutch, to not go deeper with friends or family or to not prioritize the connection that we each need in our lives. So I think that's very relatable. Hopefully, conversations like this can help people realize when they might be in that situation, and actually need to spend time investing in their social health more. But also, I think the language of social health here can really help, right? If you feel like there's someone in your life who's in that situation, and you have a conversation about how social health is as important as physical and mental health, and frame it in that way, perhaps that's a way to help people recognize that they really need to, to stop being so busy and be present and to prioritize connection differently. And I don't even know if we defined it at the start of this conversation, Marci, but when we're talking about social health, what I mean is really the dimension of your overall health and well being that comes from connection. So just at a basic level, if you think about physical health as being about your body, and mental health has been about your mind, social health is about your relationships and your sense of community.

**Marci Alboher**

Alright, Kasley, we do have to wrap up, but I want to acknowledge a few questions in the chat that we can deal with in a follow up email. One is the New York Times article, I think some people have been trying to connect it we know it's behind a paywall. We have a link that is not behind the paywall for the friendship quiz that we will include in the follow up email. And a few practitioners have asked about research some interesting research on both social health generally in particularly with older adults and and research related to intergenerational connection so casually and I will put our heads together and share a few key links in the follow up email which Duncan or is a does such a good job of getting out. So I think on this note, we're gonna have to say goodbye for now. But I do want to tell you that casually is still on tour. And if you go to Kathy's website, and you sign up for her new newsletter, which we'll put a link for, you can catch many events. We decided to go deep on intergenerational social connection today. But I assure you that every conversation with Kasley is different and important and interesting. So I'm just going to be continuing to champion her ideas which have totally influenced me and changed the way I live as well as the we're going to do here at cogenerate

**Kasley Killam**

Thank you so much. Marci, I always love collaborating with you and cogenerate and you have similarly had a big influence on me. So thank you and everyone thank you so much for for joining live or tuning in later and looking forward to connecting with you.

**Marci Alboher**

Take good care everyone. Go connect!