



Healthy & Resilient You

Is It Time to Build a Bigger Tent?

Why Narrow Circles Can Hold Us Back



Have you ever looked around—especially lately—and wondered how the world got so unsettled so quickly? Between rising prices, nonstop alarming headlines, rapidly changing technology, and even renewed chatter about extraterrestrials, it's easy to feel like the world has stopped making sense.

When life feels incoherent, it's natural to pull closer to people who think and feel the same way we do. Smaller circles can feel comforting and easier to navigate.

But over time, staying too tightly grouped can limit new ideas and make it harder to adapt to change. Strong communities tend to work differently. They make room for different experiences, perspectives, and ways of thinking—and those broader support systems are often what help individuals and communities get through difficult times.

Small Circles Can't Weather the Storm

Anyone who's gone camping knows it can be hard enough to pitch a tent on a calm afternoon. Now imagine trying to do it during a windstorm with only one or two people helping. If the poles are too close together, the foundation isn't secure, or there aren't enough hands to keep tension across the canvas, the whole structure becomes unstable.

Communities work in a similar way. When our circles become too narrow, we lose access to new ideas, different strengths, and outside perspectives that help us maintain stability when life changes quickly.

Bigger tents tend to be more resilient. They make room for more people, more experiences, and more ways of thinking. And when challenges arise, those broader support systems can help keep individuals and communities grounded instead of pulling apart under pressure.

What Big Tents Are Not

One common misconception about “big tent” communities is that everyone agrees all the time. In reality, the strongest communities more often include people with different opinions, experiences, and priorities.

The goal isn't perfect agreement. It's learning how to handle disagreement without immediately shutting one another out. That starts with recognizing that even people who see the world differently often share some common hopes, concerns, and values.

In today's fast-moving media environment, it can sometimes feel like everyone is deeply divided. But recent studies, including research from The Perception Gap, suggest that many Americans dramatically

overestimate how extreme people on the “other side” are. Mostly because loud voices and extreme opinions often get the most attention online, while quieter areas of agreement are easier to miss.

So, even when we disagree, there’s often more shared ground than we expect. Remembering that can make it easier to widen your circle to include different perspectives and new connections.

Blueprint for a Bigger Tent: Assembly Encouraged

Building a bigger tent doesn’t mean agreeing with everyone or becoming close overnight. It’s about staying open enough to listen, learn, and [look for common ground](#). Here are a few small ways to practice that in everyday life:

 **Start with what you both want:** You don’t have to agree on everything to find common ground. Sometimes it helps to begin with one shared goal, concern, or value—whether that’s road improvements, more affordable gas, or safer neighborhoods. Starting from a place of connection can make difficult conversations feel more productive and less personal.

 **Listen to understand, not rebut:** When a conversation starts to feel tense, pause before jumping in to defend your point. Instead, try asking yourself where the other person is coming from in that moment. If you’re unsure, a simple “Tell me more about that” can go a long way. You may still disagree, but respectful listening helps keep the conversation productive.

 **Read one thing you’d normally skip:** Every so often, try reading an article or perspective you wouldn’t normally choose. The goal here is to practice understanding how other people see the world. Staying curious can help us become more thoughtful, flexible, and open in our everyday interactions.



Try the listening circle technique: Group conversations can become tense when opinions differ. Start by giving each person a little uninterrupted space to share their thoughts. Using a timer can help keep things fair and give everyone an equal chance to feel heard. That makes everyone more likely to stay calm, remain open, and work through disagreements together.



Name the emotion before escalating: When things get tense, pause and try to share what you’re feeling. Sometimes saying something simple like “You know, I’m not angry. I’m just worried.” Or: “I think I’m more scared than certain about this” can completely change the tone of a discussion and help others better understand and respond from common ground.

PRO TIP



Consider cultural celebrations as practice:

Observances like Pride Month, Black History Month, or heritage celebrations may not feel personal to you. But many are rooted in the universal need to feel seen, respected, and included. They offer opportunities to listen with curiosity and better [understand experiences outside our own](#). One simple place to start might be asking someone: “What’s one small way you want to be seen that people usually miss?” Then listen.

Building a bigger tent doesn’t mean agreeing on everything. It’s about staying open long enough to find common ground. In uncertain times, that strong foundation is often what helps individuals and communities get through difficult times — together.



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