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So Loss, what have we learned about making sacred space for you?

Reflecting on new roles and rituals for grief and loss

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Brought to you by: InWithForward, REACH Edmonton, RECOVER Edmonton



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Executive Summary

Soloss strengthens community care for grief and loss. Our purpose is to build collective capacity to be with and bear witness to loss, opening-up space for connection and healing, two cornerstones of wellbeing. We do that through the support of new informal roles & relationships, healing rituals & creative practices, and alternative narratives about grief & loss.

Soloss is the product of a rigorous Research & Development process, including four rounds of critical design ethnography with 60 people living on and off the streets and three rounds of prototyping with 200+ community members.

While people living on and off the streets are often labeled “vulnerable,” our research underscores that we are all vulnerable. Impermanence is an inherent part of life. Grief and loss is a shared feature of the human experience. The problem is when grief and loss becomes a source of profound disconnection, thwarting our wellbeing. Indeed it’s the accumulation of unacknowledged losses big and small -- the loss of parents, partners, children, friends, land, language, culture, income, home, and identity -- that can leave us feeling unmoored, ashamed, and worthless. When there is no outlet for our pain, it can weigh us down physically, emotionally, and spiritually -- fueling relationship breakdown, instability, and a search for pain relief, which, in turn, can contribute to homelessness and addiction, the signs of which we are increasingly confronted with in our public spaces and media.



What do we mean by...

New informal roles & relationships?

Losstenders: everyday folks with a creative practice who are learning how to hold space for fellow community members’ grief & loss

Sharers: community members wading through grief & loss

Circle of Support: healing practitioners & community leaders supporting Losstenders’ learning & growth

Non-institutional relationships: freely given relationships* predicated on shared experience & desire, rather than organizational expectations or criteria



Healing rituals and creative practices?

- Prayer & ceremony
- Dance & movement
- Poetry, storytelling & music
- Painting & mark making

Alternative narratives about grief & loss?

- There is no one way to grieve
- We recognize loss is felt individually and collectively
- Loss can be an opening for post-traumatic growth
- It’s ok to not be ok
- We can learn to live with and without loss by weaving it into our symbols & stories

*We first encountered this phrase thanks to a joint reading group with Dr. Tim Barlott and his book *Edge Entanglements with Mental Health Allyship, Research, and Practice: A Postqualitative Cartography*



Policymakers often talk of getting to the ‘root causes’ of houselessness and addiction, however the bulk of funded interventions service basic needs like sheltering, feeding, and looking after people’s bodies. Comparatively few interventions look after people’s spirits and souls. A 2021 audit of social services in Edmonton found that grief and loss supports were the least available type of social support.¹ Even fewer interventions take a non-clinical approach, drawing on the wisdom of fellow citizens and their wealth of cultural, creative, and somatic practices.

This is the gap Soloss has set out to fill. Over the past three years, we -- a team of social designers & researchers from InWithForward in partnership with REACH Edmonton, the City of Edmonton’s RECOVER Urban Wellbeing Team, and 100+ community members -- have co-created a model of informal grief & loss support.



Soloss has been designed to:

- (1) attend to some of the root causes of houslessness, addiction, social isolation and loneliness;**
- (2) meet people’s existential needs; and**
- (3) strengthen bridging social capital.**

Bridging social capital “describes connections that link people across a cleave that typically divides society.”² In 2021, we tested Soloss in Edmonton’s Balwin and Belvedere neighbourhoods, working with supported housing providers, treatment programs, and local residents. In 2022, we tested Soloss as a response to burnout amongst frontline workers, working with the Bissell Centre, Boyle Street Community Services, and everyday Edmontonians. In 2023, we tested Soloss within encampments, working with the City of Edmonton, encampment residents, and neighbours.



1 See <https://globalnews.ca/news/7755294/edmonton-police-service-social-services-impact-audit/>

2 <https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/what-is-bridging-social-capital/>

Across all three prototypes...

100

people have engaged as Sharers

25

everyday Edmontonians have taken on the role of Losstender, with another...

21

healing practitioners & community leaders have served as a Sounding Board or Circle of Support member

90

raising their hand for these roles.

Our latest round of evaluation tells us that engaging with Soloss -- as a Losstender, Sharer, Circle of Support, or Community Member -- contributes to wellbeing.

90%

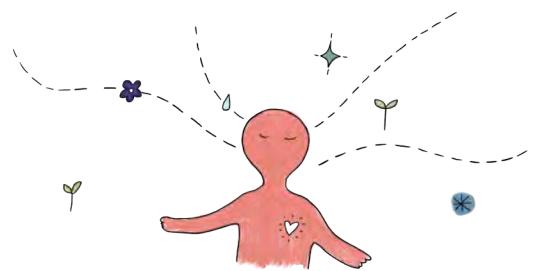
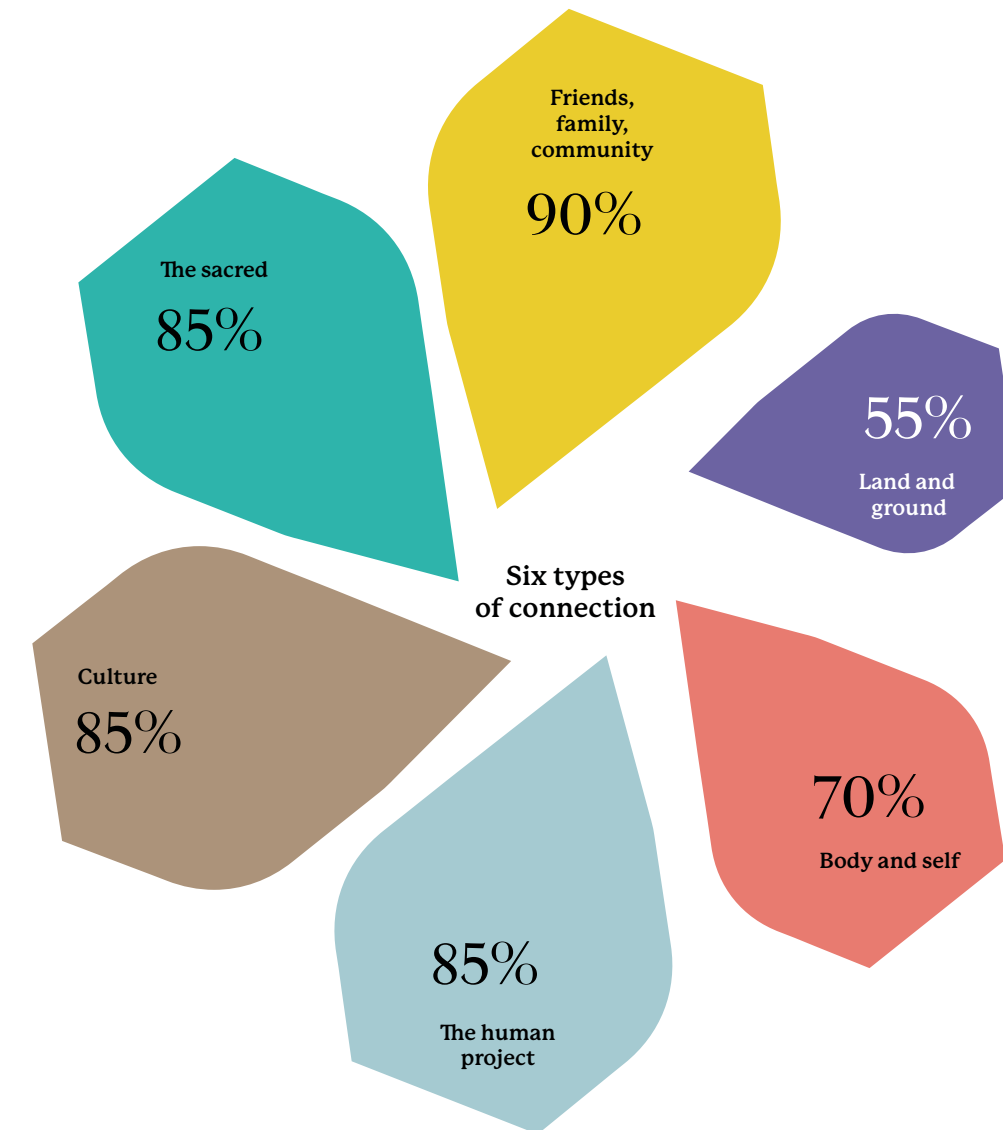
evaluation respondents say they experienced greater connection to friends, family and community

85%

to the sacred, culture, and human project

70%

to body and self



At the heart of prototyping is learning. Through repeat inquiry cycles, we've been asking questions like:

▶ **What contexts and conditions enable Soloss to operate and grow ethically with purpose?**

▶ **How do we unlock latent resources in our community? What makes new roles, routines and narratives attractive and desirable?**

▶ **How does our theory of change play out, in practice, for whom? In other words, what is the relationship between the interactions we design and the outcomes that are emerging?**

What the data says makes Soloss attractive to Edmontonians is the value it places on non-institutional relationships. When people are able to show up as their full selves rather than having to conform to the mandates and uniform expectations of formal roles, they often experience greater respect, connection, and purpose.

How might organizations with an interest in reducing houselessness and improving community wellbeing invest in both body and soul interventions; formal and informal community resources; programmatic and networked approaches? We believe both sides of the continuum are needed, and that

addressing deep existential needs can help us attend to root causes. We hope our three year learning journey offers insight into how.

Over the pages that follow, we invite you to dig more deeply into the context that led to Soloss; the design features of Soloss; how we've prototyped Soloss; our evaluation results; and key takeaways for organizations seeking fresh solutions to the visible and invisible social disconnection in our communities.

But, first, let's start this learning exchange in a good way.

Starting in a good way

Reports are usually cut and dry affairs designed to efficiently convey information. How we take in information is influenced by the roles we play, the values we subscribe to, and the time pressures we face. With the volume of information we encounter each day, we often need to quickly consume what's put in front of us without the space to pause, reflect, and respond.

The information we want to share is grounded in a relational ethos. Let's converse with each other not as professionals or experts, but as fellow humans, each carrying our own experiences of grief and loss.

After all, social challenges don't just exist out there, but inside all of us. And so, we want to acknowledge that you may be feeling the weight of people struggling. We want to acknowledge your longing for good in your community. We want to acknowledge the deep need for respect, belonging, agency, meaning, and purpose that we all share.

It is in that spirit that we invite you to take a brief moment to clear your mind and connect with your heart. We hope you will encounter this document with the same humility, curiosity, care, and creativity with which we have approached co-creating Soloss.

You might...

Light a candle

Watch the flickering flame
Casting warmth and energy

Take a deep breath

Feel your breath entering and exiting your body
Letting go of whatever you need to

Open a window

Take in the fresh air
Engaging with all of your senses

The Dual Challenges We Face

It is increasingly hard to turn a blind eye to individual and collective pain.

We see tents sprouting up in empty lots, people in the throes of profound addiction, and the numbers of overdose deaths exponentially climbing.

75%

of cities across Canada have reported significant growth in the size and number of encampments.³

Last year, Alberta RCMP responded to more than twice as many overdoses as in 2022.⁴ Behind every number is a loss. The loss of a loved one and relationship; the loss of a home and belonging(s).

Less visible, but no less disconcerting, is the gnawing sense of isolation and displacement that more and more of us feel. So many of us are grappling with the question: where do I belong? Forty percent of Canadians say they feel lonely some or all of the time. Data from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health shows anxiety and depression all on the rise.

Yes, the pandemic exacerbated insecurity and loneliness, but social disconnection has long been on the incline, entwined with this century's rapid economic and technological growth.

“Our core fundamental being as a human species is a social one. We are deeply connected to each other because we need each other in order to survive. And so when we disrupt that process of connection, where we take that off the table for us, we start to deteriorate.”

- Dr. Jacques Lee⁵

This sense that we are increasingly unmoored, that there are walls separating us, isn't just confined to our heads. It has real material impacts on our health. Disconnection is as bad for us as smoking. Emergency room physicians like Dr. Jacques Lee of Mount Sinai Hospital say they are now treating 'disconnection' as a vital statistic equivalent to temperature and blood pressure.

³ See [Infrastructure Canada, 2022](#)

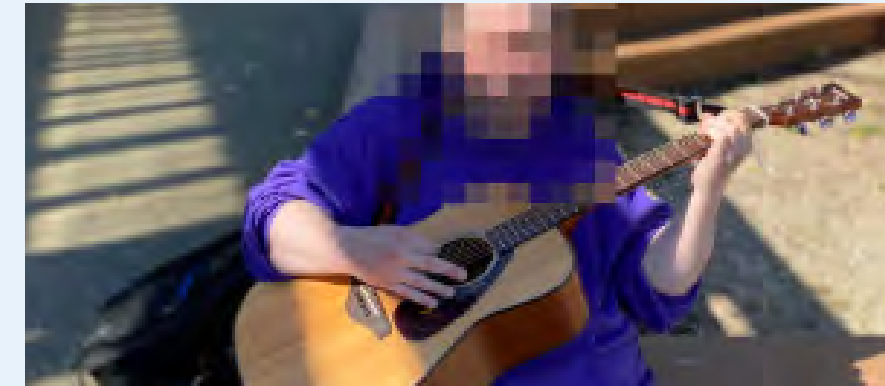
⁴ See [RCMP](#)

⁵ [Global News, 2022](#)

Community Member Spotlight

“It's like they're trying to make people afraid of us.”

- R, Soloss Community Member



What happens when the way social challenges are publicly talked about bears little resemblance to the day-to-day experiences of many people living those challenges?

For people like R, who has lived on and off the streets for many years, encampments are not inherently “unsafe” or “bad.” They can offer people a much needed sense of space, control, and solidarity. The reverse is also true. Same goes for shelters and houses. They are not inherently safe or good. If we were to gaze inside of shelters, houses and encampments, we'd find beautiful examples of people feeling safe and cared for and ugly examples of people being harmed and hurt.

When we adopt a black-and-white framing of a social issue, we risk landing on simple solutions that can, in the long-term, perpetuate the underlying problem. Community members like R worry that labeling all encampments as dangerous eyesores heightens mistrust of people who are unhoused and reinforces social alienation. Instead, we might ask: what makes for a *good* encampment, shelter, or home? And how can we honour our shared human need for places not just to live, but to belong?

Despite the ever visceral realities of social disconnection, our health, policing, housing, and social care systems are more attuned to looking after our bodies than our spirits. Built to address our basic needs for security, shelter, food and income, our social systems have tended to prioritize what they can see and count -- like mortality and morbidity, crime, houselessness, units of housing, and benefit take-up rates.

This orientation towards what is visible and material also shows up in so much public discourse, which draws divisions between “vulnerable persons” and the “rest of us.” We regularly hear about the volume of social disorder, the number of used needles found, the pounds of trash at encampments, the uptick in calls to emergency services, and more.

We don't often hear about the quality of human connection we are all craving, our shared desire for belonging, or the emotional & spiritual pain so many of us endure.

It is tempting to look at houselessness, addiction, encampments, and overdoses as social challenges experienced by people on the margins and removed from the mainstream. And yet, increasingly the mainstream experience is one of isolation and loneliness. That means bringing people from the margins into this mainstream won't address the underlying experience of disconnection that, perhaps ironically, connects people who are housed and unhoused. It's time for a fresh approach.



In Summary

Since the pandemic, houselessness and addiction are on the rise and more visible than ever before.

1.

Loneliness, isolation, and disconnection in the general population are also on the rise.

2.

The challenges facing people on the margins and in the mainstream cannot be divorced from each other.

They are symptomatic of living within social systems designed to look after our bodies, not our spirits.

3.

Framing social challenges solely in bodily or material terms risks staying in the realm of band-aid solutions.

Zeroing in on metrics like the number of unhoused bodies, the number of beds, and the amount of trash tells us little about people's experience of respect, belonging, agency, etc.

2

Getting to the root of the problem

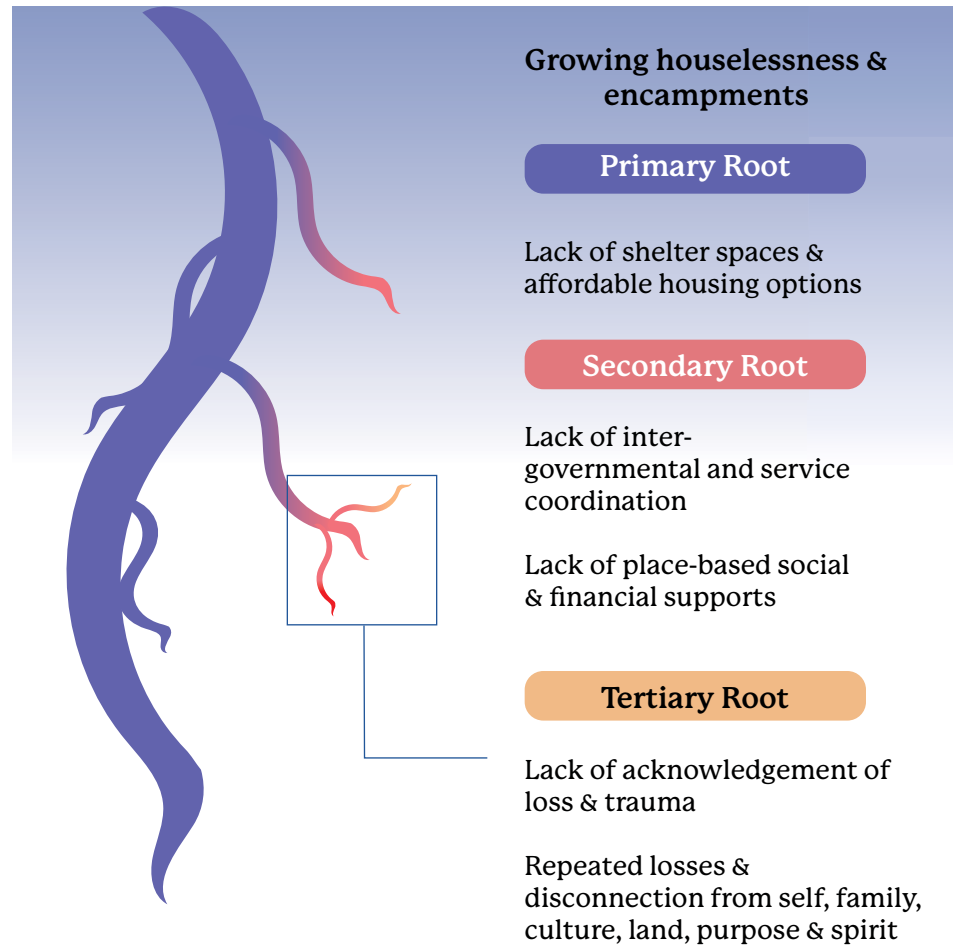


How might we find solutions that attend to deeper wounds?

While there's plenty of talk about addressing the root causes of social problems like homelessness and loneliness, rarely are social policies & services able to go far down enough - to what plant scientists call the root cap.

That's what five years of lived experience research, along with a scan of social science literature, tells us. Seventy-five ethnographic stories with people living on and off Edmonton's streets plus hundreds of conversations with community members surfaced what people want most: connection, respect, security, agency & purpose. This is at the heart of what people say it means to be and live well.

Housing and money are significant stressors weighing people down. To use the root analogy, the lack of affordable housing and adequate income support are primary roots. But, addressing people's need for shelter and income does not, on its own, stop chronic eviction cycles, heal addiction, create social networks, or attenuate people's need for relationship, respect, agency & purpose. That's because there are deeper roots to excavate.



Beneath the lack of affordable housing and adequate income are some pretty entrenched narratives about who is deserving of help and what help they need, which in turn, fractures social solidarity and weakens community inclusion. Across nearly all lived experience stories what was feeding root growth were layers of loss and disconnection from self, family, community, culture, land, purpose, and spirit. When losses piled up, without acknowledgement or care, they fueled persistent cycles of instability, stigma, and exclusion.

The same is true for isolation and loneliness. Yes, the lack of affordable and culturally specific mental health care contributes to the problem, but it is not the deepest root. The roots of isolation and loneliness and the roots of chronic homelessness & addiction intertwine: fraying social support, growing fragmentation, and disconnection from sources of belonging, meaning, agency, and perspective.



For the last eighty years, the West has subscribed to an idea that our existential needs for belonging, meaning, agency, and perspective are secondary to our primary needs for shelter, food, income, and safety. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is often cited as evidence for prioritizing basic needs in our social policies and services. But, this is a misreading of Abraham Maslow's work, which was deeply influenced by the time he spent with the Niitsitapi people on the traditional territory of the Siksika Nation.

What would it look like if we grappled with how much this misreading of Maslow has shaped dominant logics, policies, and services?

Wholeness, not separation, is a cornerstone of Maslow's theory. In his groundbreaking 1943 paper, *A theory of human motivation*, he writes, "The integrated wholeness of the organism must be one of the foundation stones."

He goes on to argue that, "Man is a perpetuating wanting animal. No need or drive can be treated as if it were isolated or discrete; every drive is related to the state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other drives."⁶ In other words, the need or drive for respect and belonging is enmeshed with the need or drive for food and shelter. When we aren't able to hold basic and existential needs concurrently, we risk meeting one need in ways that thwart another need. We house people, but separate them from their communities or impose restrictions that prevent them from feeling a sense of belonging, agency, and control. In doing so, we inadvertently spawn more loss.

⁶ <https://www.livrosgratis.com.br/ler-livro-online-88633/a-theory-of-human-motivation>

Community Member Spotlight

“Don’t judge a book by its cover. Look inside. A lot of people can seem hardcore, but once you get to know ‘em... I get them to open them up and see the real person.”

- Renee, Story Sharer (2019)



For Renee, sleeping outside, even in the blustery winter months, draws on all of the survival skills she learned growing-up as a Dene woman in the Northwest territories. It meets her needs for self-sufficiency, connection, and control better than indoor shelters. “I don’t like the shelters. When I stayed downtown, I got sick all of the time. You had to wake up at like 6am and then you just wait.”

Her last housing placement broke down because the housing provider’s restrictions on guests didn’t meet a concurrent need of hers: to care for family and community. The many layers of loss she’s experienced -- loss of kids, partners, friends, culture, land -- mean she’s especially loathe to put herself in situations where she risks losing relationships, let alone her independence and integrity. Neither the losses she’s experienced, or the needs those losses drive, have been recognized. Instead, she is labeled a vulnerable person contravening local laws: a “deviant” who must be brought back into line.

In Summary

Although there is expressed desire to get to the root causes of social challenges like chronic houselessness and loneliness, interventions often stay at the level of basic needs rather than going deep enough to get to the roots .

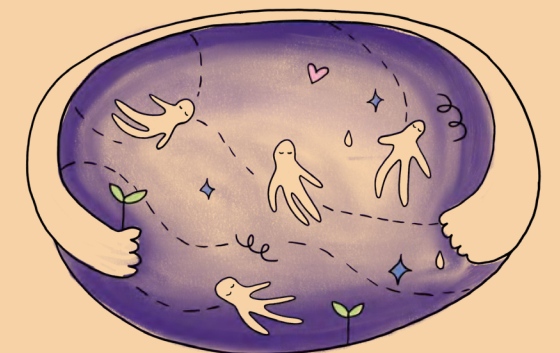
1.

The deep roots of chronic houselessness & addiction and loneliness & isolation are entwined.

It’s a fraying of the social fabric and the unraveling of self, friends, community, culture, land, purpose, and spirit.

2.

Social policy and services that attend to bodily needs for shelter and sustenance are critical but can inadvertently contribute to a deeper sense of loss if they don’t also tend to existential needs for belonging, agency, and purpose.



3

Recognizing grief and loss

The experience of repeated losses, including loss of belonging & acceptance, agency & control, and meaning & purpose stokes pain and stands in the way of healing. Moving towards wellbeing requires that we make room for this grief and loss, and enable people to feel valued, worthy, and a little more whole.

The 'glossing over' of loss is called disenfranchised grief. Researcher Kenneth Doka explains that, "Disenfranchised grief...results when a person experiences a significant loss and the resultant grief is not openly acknowledged, socially validated or publicly mourned. In short, although the individual is experiencing a grief reaction, there is no social recognition that the person has a right to grieve or a claim for social sympathy or support." When we don't have space to mourn, moments to grieve what was, or opportunities to heal, we can carry the pain, the hurt, the heaviness, the anger, and the fear with us. It can depress our wellbeing, adding weight upon weight. How, then, might we enable grief & loss to be a source of (re) connection and healing?

Literature and examples from Indigenous, Eastern, and Western healing practices offer two starting points for reconnection: relationships and ritual. Healing is rooted in authentic relationships: in being witnessed, seen, heard, and held by self and others. And healing is facilitated by ritual: ways of marking moments, naming what is, honouring losses, and feeling connected to something bigger. In addition, research into grief and loss shows that while people are often exposed to medication or talk-

based therapies as an intervention, grief is experienced in the mind, body, heart, and spirit. Creative expression, music and movement can also help unlock alternative ways of being with grief and getting unstuck. There is no single pathway to healing: it's an emergent process, rather than a fixed destination.

"Disenfranchised grief.. results when a person experiences a significant loss and the resultant grief is not openly acknowledged, socially validated or publicly mourned. In short, although the individual is experiencing a grief reaction, there is no social recognition that the person has a right to grieve or a claim for social sympathy or support."

- Kenneth Doka

Disenfranchised Grief

Domino effects of disenfranchised grief				Contributing factor
Social Isolation and Dislocation	Addiction and Eviction	Exclusion and Inequity	Stigma and Shame	Gap in Intercultural Mental Health Supports
When loss isn't recognized, and there are few if any outlets for proactively grieving, we're left feeling lonely, isolated and both socially & emotionally dislocated. Psychosocial dislocation is a contributing factor in depression, burnout and addiction.	Forced to bear the pain of unacknowledged grief on their own, many retreat inward, seeking to numb the pain. Pain, trauma, substance misuse, and houselessness too often go together.	So much disenfranchised grief is the product of colonialism, racism, prejudice and discrimination. Repeated injustices, and erasure of language, culture, family and identity compound to create a profound sense of outsidership and further marginalization.	Seeking help for grief & loss can carry its own weight and baggage, especially in communities where talk-based, clinical mental health care is culturally misaligned. Dominant models of mental health care are rooted in Eurocentric ideas of psychiatry and mental illness.	Grief is a universal human experience, but there is no one way to grieve. Dominant culture treats grief as if it's all in our heads. We're told to grin & bear it, and if we can't, to seek professional help. Typical therapeutic help is clinical and talk-based. There are few art or movement based options for adults, rooted in diverse cultural practices, and focused on the intersection of the mind, body, and spirit.
What the literature says				
"Health studies have found that being disconnected from social networks of culture—what social psychologist Bruce Alexander calls psychosocial dislocation -- makes humans vulnerable to addictive behavior." Cite	"Our review found evidence of a positive relationship between complicated grief and substance misuse." Cite "...While it is understood that grief and trauma are key causes of houselessness amongst young people, grief is rarely explored as an embodied practice, or as a key factor which continues to underpin trajectories of houselessness after initial exits from home." Cite	"Grief ... has always had an equity problem, and 2020 has only amplified the issue, as Black deaths have come in back-to-back blows, from the coronavirus, police brutality, and the natural deaths of those we look up to most. Each new death, each new example of an old injustice, renews our grief, sending little shock waves of sorrow..." Cite	"Culture, broadly defined as a body of commonly held world-views, belief systems, values and behaviours, influences many aspects of mental illness and mental health. It has an impact on how clients seek help and communicate, how symptoms get manifested, coping mechanisms and what the roles of family and community supports are. However, a history of racial discrimination, social exclusion, and poverty can combine with mistrust and fear to deter members of racialized groups and Aboriginal communities from accessing services and getting culturally appropriate care." Cite	"All these salient characteristics of contemporary Western society, and others—such as the decline of kinship and religion, the nuclearization and high mobility of the family, a diminished sense of community, and the disengagement of the elderly—have important implications for recovery from bereavement and grief. Although there are a variety of different cultural and religious prescriptions for mourning... social institutions today tend to be more uniform in the views they embody. These macroinstitutions—the law, the work place, funeral homes, and the medical care system—place explicit constraints on individuals' bereavement behaviors." Cite



In Summary

Repeat loss inflames pain and stands in the way of healing & wellbeing.

1.

Loss that is not recognized or meaningfully addressed is called disenfranchised grief.

Disenfranchised grief is part of the deep roots of addiction & eviction cycles, loneliness & isolation, exclusion & stigma.

2.

Indigenous, Eastern, and Western spiritual traditions point to relationships and ritual as key antidotes to disenfranchised grief, and important routes to reconnection.



4

Co-designing Soloss

In 2020, social researchers & designers from InWithForward, staff of REACH Edmonton, and team members from the City of Edmonton's RECOVER Urban Wellbeing team began a community co-design process to develop a response to disenfranchised grief and foster reconnection.

We used a wellbeing framework developed by InWithForward and RECOVER as a brainstorming tool, imagining how we might pull different combinations of levers to facilitate healing & strengthen wellbeing.

The inner circle of the wellbeing framework defines wellbeing as connection to six interlocking elements, and healing as reconnection to those elements. We are well when we are connected to body and self; friends, family, and community; land; culture; the sacred; and a sense of meaning & purpose. The second layer of the framework offers examples of what these points of connection can look and feel like. The third rotating layer of the framework sets out six levers of change: (1) knowledge & meanings; (2) frames & narratives; (3) laws & incentives; (4) roles & resources; (5) interactions & environments; and (6) routines & repertoires.



During idea brainstorming, we find a helpful technique is to playfully flip the dominant expressions of each lever. Based on our research, we focused on a few key flips:



Frames & Narratives

How might we flip the narrative of grief & loss as a private event to grief & loss as a shared experience?



Roles & Resources

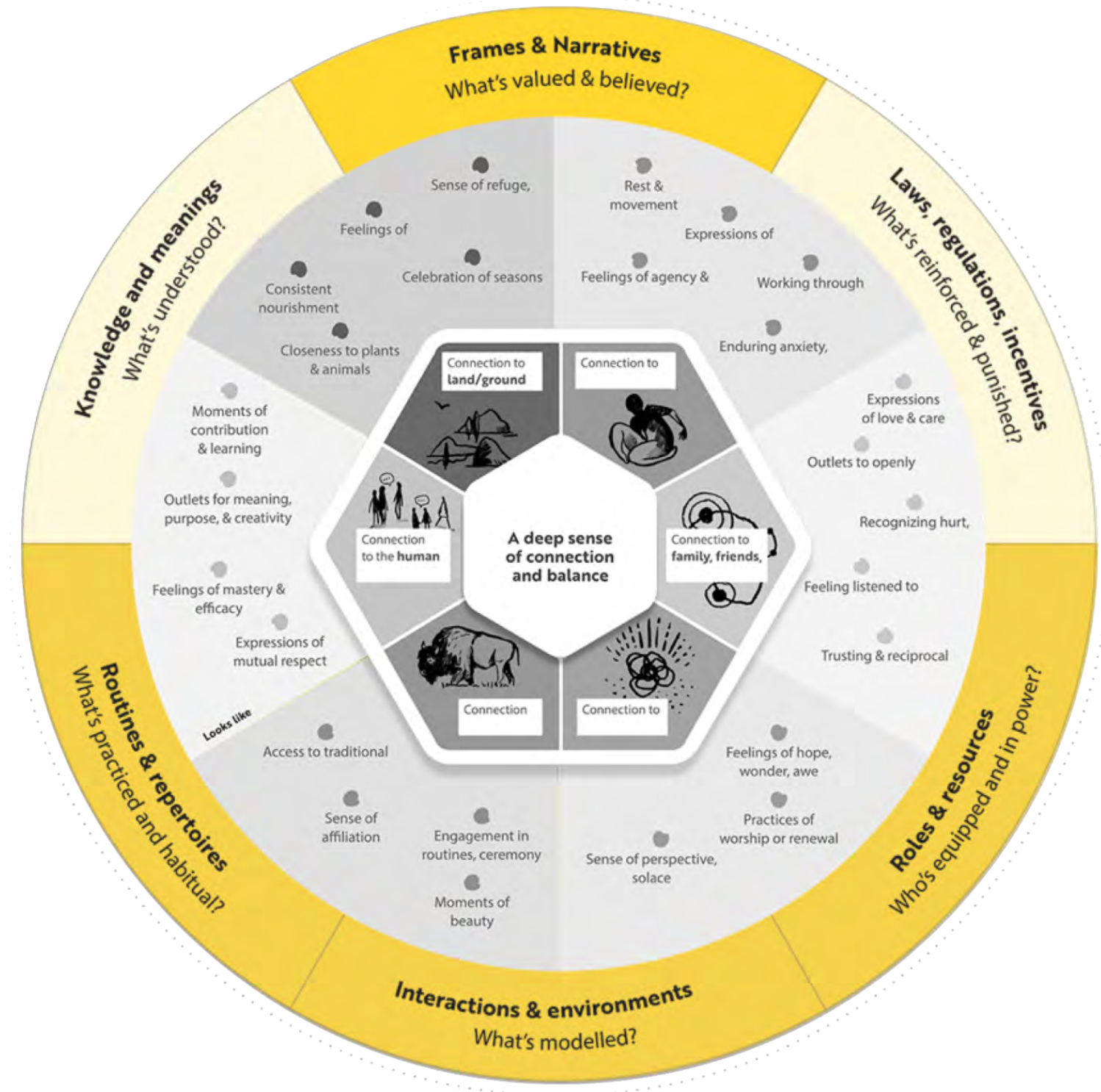
How might we flip what we consider a resource? What would it look like to treat everyday community members as an untapped resource and value non-institutional roles as much as formal ones?



**Routines & Repertoires
Interactions & Environments**

How might we flip from clinical to ancestral best practices? What could it look like to draw on cultural & ancestral knowledge and embrace art, music, movement, and nature as healing modalities? What if healing unfolded in the places & spaces people live rather than clinical settings?

As we began generating concepts, introducing a new role took front and centre. Through a role, we could introduce new routines, interactions, and alternative grief & loss narratives. We envisioned this role steeped in relationality and freed from some of the structures that characterize many professional and peer roles. Both professional and peer roles play critical functions in social service delivery. And, our research indicated that there was a gap in informal community support oriented around the whole person versus formal services oriented around a particular agenda like housing or addiction recovery.



Community Member Spotlight

"You want to do your job well, that's why you're there!"



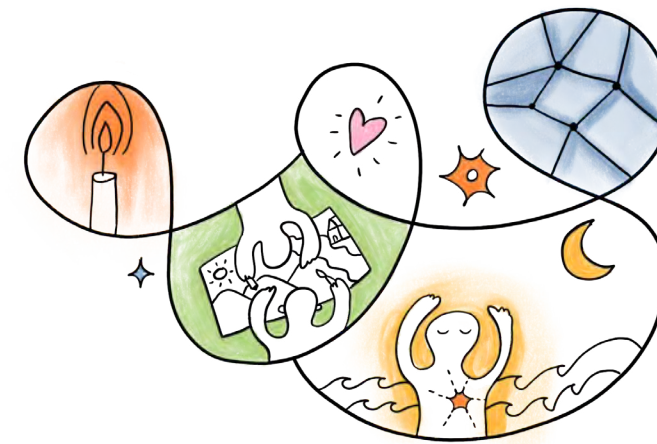
Rochelle, now a Soloss team member, has more than eight years of experience working with people experiencing poverty and homelessness.

As a supervisor for a busy downtown drop-in centre, she kept trying different approaches to build a sense of community and cultivate a restorative culture. And, she found there were limits to what could be tried given institutional mandates and priorities.

"If your role is to help someone with housing, you need to be steering the conversation towards questions like, 'Do you have any income?' and 'Where are you sleeping these days?' That's different than if your role is that of a friend where you might ask, 'How are your parents?' and 'What should we do for your birthday?'"

To help us flesh out a new informal role, we looked to international examples: everything from community reconciliation circles in Rwanda to post-divorce family camps in the United States. Over several months, we wrote scenarios, drew storyboards, and performed imaginative vignettes. That led us to three distinct directions for the role: a mourning midwife, a garden guide, and an alchemist.

We visualized each concept as a Netflix reality series with each 'episode' describing how it might play out for people from prior ethnographic research. Using these illustrated mock-ups, we tested the attractiveness of each concept with community members, encampment residents, shelter users, healing practitioners, and social service professionals. Soloss emerged from conversations with more than 40 stakeholders.



Soloss is community care for grief and loss. Its purpose is to nurture grassroots capacity to be with and bear witness to loss, making room for reciprocity, reconciliation, and renewal.

See next spread for a more in-depth timeline →

INSPIRATION PHASE

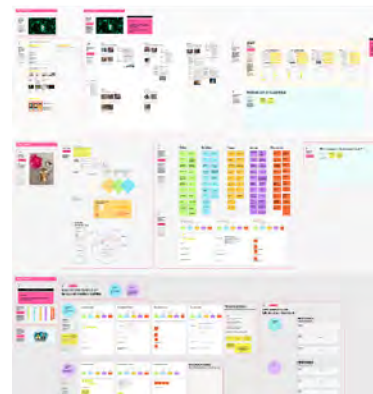
MAY 2020

During the inspiration phase, we brought together team members from three organizations (Reach, Recover, and InWithForward) and multiple disciplines (design, social work, social psychology, cultural studies). We surfaced key theories, concepts and examples to help us imagine future practice.

Sarah Schulman
Feeling: Enthusiastic

Inundated with theories, concepts, examples that feel fresh. Not the same old reading on the problem space!

International research



THINGS WE MADE

Team Mural

Working remotely across three timezones pushed us to find new ways to recreate the spirit of being in the same room discussing ideas together. We developed a whiteboard on the site Mural to chart out every week's progress and ideas.

METHODS WE USED



International Inspiration Treasure Hunt

We set a challenge for each other each week to go on a divergent journey and seek out local & international examples of how to build social capital and facilitate healing.

(PEOPLE WE INVOLVED)

JUN 2020

Jane Slessor
Feeling: Uncertain

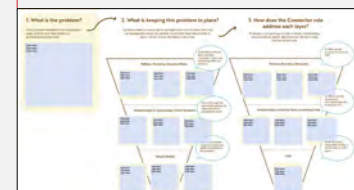
It's not really a natural process for me, but I felt we've got to step outside of our comfort zones to learn.

Script-writing our ideas

Three scene scripts

We each wrote a script for each of our ideas that covers three core scenes:

- How the new role meets people with lived experience of houselessness
- How the new role reaches out and involves everyday community members
- How people who are housed and unhoused are brought together to build relationship



Idea Generation

We created an idea canvas that pushed us to consider what enables root causes to persist. This stretched our own thinking to generate ideas that work at an individual and community level.

- Jane Slessor (Reach)
- Nor'Ali McDaniel (RECOVER)

joined our team!

Jaime Calayo
Feeling: Enthusiastic

Coming up with concepts was easy, maybe even natural, with the help of the strong framework and design criteria established by the divergent and ethnographic research.

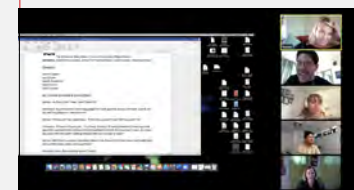
Connecting the puzzle pieces was supported by the framework.

Idea synthesis



Visualization of ideas spread

This diagram mapped our ideas against the six types of connections in the Wellbeing Framework and illustrated each idea's focus areas. The overlaps then informed how we combined ideas.



Script read-through

After writing our scripts, we got familiar with the content by inviting each other to step into the characters' shoes and read the dialogue aloud.



Design Principle Bingo

We designed our own version of Bingo as a means of analyzing each other's ideas, determining how closely they align with our design principles and values.

INTERACTIONS PHASE

JUL 2020

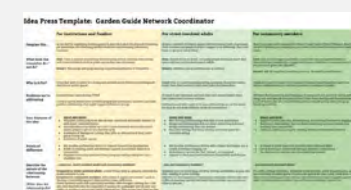
During the interaction phase, we co-designed and tested three versions of a new informal role, based on our ethnographic research and examples from the Inspiration phase. Our goal was to build on early ideas, flesh out scenarios, and identify potential champions for prototyping and implementation.

Start of community outreach



Development of four-track prototyping plan

This flowchart illustrates how we reached out to community to learn what was attractive and resonant to different Edmontonians. Our goal was also to identify untapped community resources!



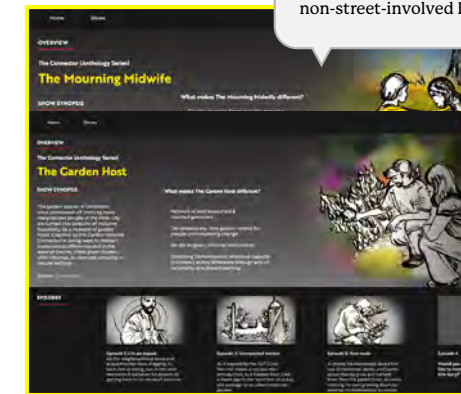
Storytelling ideas up and down

We created a template to document how our messaging for each idea would shift based on who we're speaking to. Going into this level of detail helped us to differentiate between each idea.

Community conversations

Natalie Napier
Feeling: Enthusiastic

Prototyping typically involves recruiting people to work closely with us to imagine and create in iterative rounds of testing. However, as street involved people's access to internet is dicey at best and totally dependent on services like libraries, or the stray signals of open businesses, going virtual didn't seem like a realistic proposition during COVID-19. Our first phase of prototyping will engage non-street-involved Edmontonians.



Possible roles presented as Netflix series

To better illustrate each possible role, we engaged in storytelling. We took inspiration from Netflix and shared our ideas as if they were already underway and captured by a Netflix documentary series.



Co-design modeling

Before starting our community conversations & co-design sessions, we invited some close contacts to stand-in as test participants so that we could rehearse and learn how to best facilitate a session.

Jill Koziey
Feeling: Energized

This is phenomenal work. Thank you so much for reaching out. I had been thinking more about community service when you're message arrived ...

- Bobby-Jo Halton
- Robin McClung
- Karen Bruno
- Gina Vliet
- Jill Koziey
- Skye Perry
- Chelsea Boos
- Alaina Thursby

Nor'Ali McDaniel
Feeling: Uncomfortable

It was quite awkward doing cold calls to get people to join our co-design sessions. I tried not to rely on my personal and professional contacts, but to reach out to others who may not have a traditional connection to this work. During the co-design sessions, we often tell the participants that we're not precious about our ideas, but a part of me is! It's hard to balance that feeling as we did put a lot of work into these ideas.

Digital co-design sessions



"Write Your Own Episode" Co-Design Canvas

For our co-design sessions, we invited community members to share their expertise with us by writing their own episode. This way, we enabled participants to fill in gaps they heard and generate alternative story lines and endings.

- Marissa Nakoochee
- Sebastian Barrera
- Rylan Kafara
- Christie Pace
- Richard Thornley
- Paul Czerwonka
- Shawn Ottenbreit
- Dan Zimmerman
- Jonothan Muckle
- Lisa Ward

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Soloss In A Nutshell

Non-institutional roles & relationships

Soloss connects Edmontonians with experience of grief and loss (called Losstenders) with community members in the throes of grief and loss (called Sharers) to learn from each other.

+

Expression & embodiment rituals

Soloss draws on art, body, and breathwork practices to explore healing of the mind, body, and spirit.

+

Local Activations

Soloss organizes local events and ceremonies that bring communities together to honor loss and enable healing.

=

Personal and Cultural Change

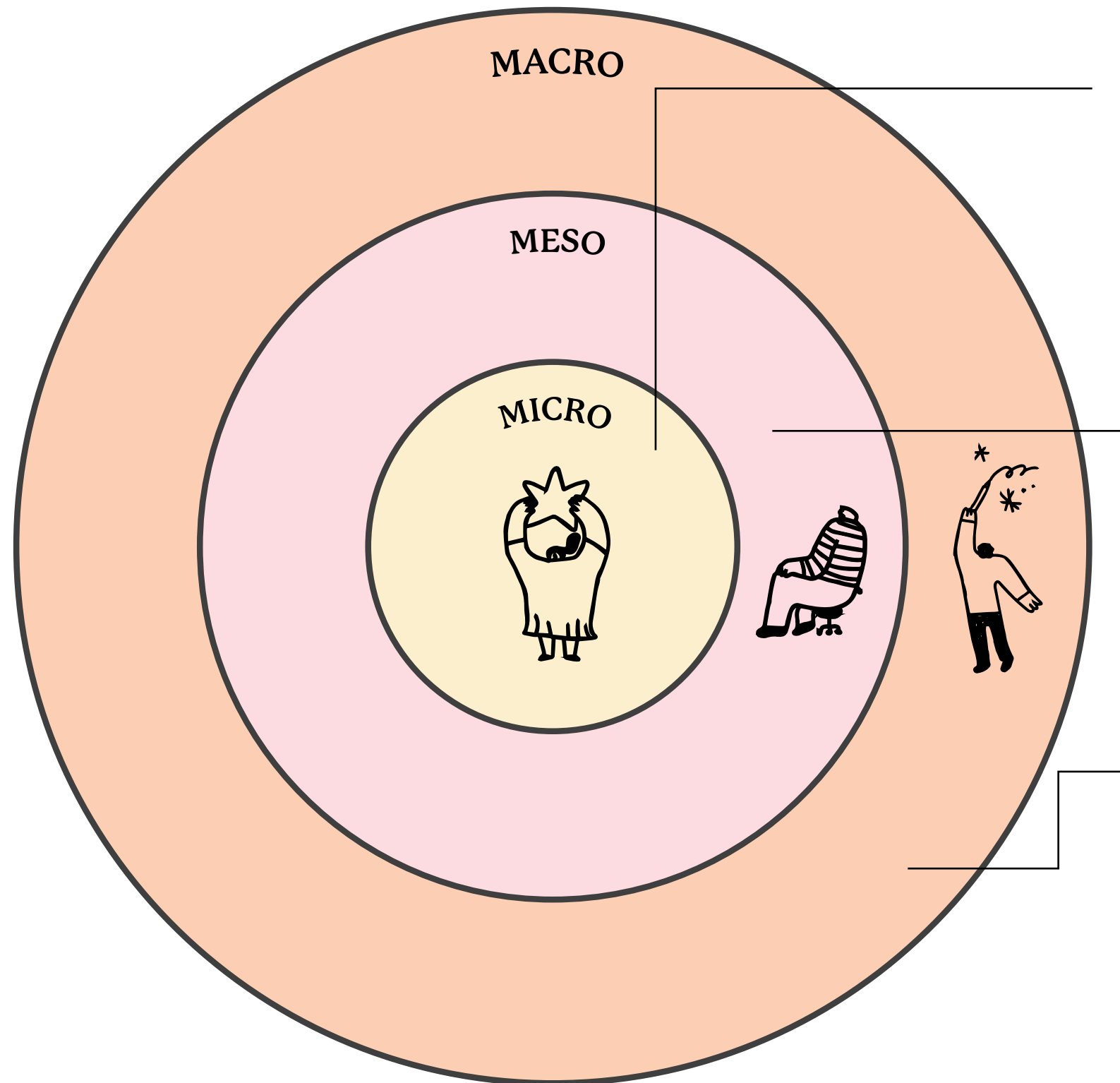
Soloss seeks change at an individual and community level, including greater sense of respect, connection, and purpose, as a result of shifting the public narrative of grief and loss.

Core Assumptions

Behind Soloss is a set of assumptions about why non-institutional roles & relationships, expression & embodiment rituals, and local activations can yield personal and cultural change.

We call this set of assumptions a theory of change. A theory of change is made-up of interactions or activities, determinants or influencing factors, and desired outcomes at different levels.

Theories of change can be tested and iterated throughout the design, prototyping, and implementation process. They offer a robust frame for evaluation.



We mark moments of loss with symbols and rituals...

...in order to shift how people make sense of loss and find outlets for healing

...so we can strengthen sense of perspective, purpose and healing

We recruit and connect peers (Losstenders & Sharers) for brief encounters...

...in order to facilitate bridging relationships between people across lines of difference

...so we can increase a sense of respect, solidarity and support

We curate public exhibitions and neighbourhood events...

...in order to challenge social norms & confront the stigma/shame that stand in way of connectedness

...so we can increase interpersonal trust and community belonging

Core Beliefs

About Grief and Loss

Beliefs Soloss moves away from

- 1 There is one way to grieve.
- 2 We all go through the same stages of grief.
- 3 We must 'work through' our grief and 'let go' of loss to return to 'normal.'
- 4 Loss is either a source of trauma or resilience. It's one or the other.
- 5 We need to help people who are grieving feel better, and find the bright side.

Beliefs Soloss embraces

- 1 Grieving is a cyclical and unpredictable process that plays out differently for every human, and is influenced by racism, sexism, ableism, and all forms of oppression. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.
- 2 We can learn to live with and without loss by weaving it into our symbols and stories
- 3 Loss can be an opening for post-traumatic growth.
- 4 We recognize loss is felt individually and collectively.
- 5 It's ok to not be ok. We don't have to confront grief head-on to heal.

About Care and Support

Beliefs Soloss moves away from

- 1 Vulnerability is a liability to manage.
- 2 Care ought to be left to professionals.
- 3 Professional-client relationships must be structured and consistent to be effective.

Beliefs Soloss embraces

- 1 Vulnerability is part of being human, and enables authentic connection.
- 2 Every human has the capacity to care for each other.
- 3 Relationships that are freely given and rooted in mutual respect can be meaningful at any length or duration.

Core Features

Soloss has been designed around seven core features, each of which come from the convergence of co-design feedback with the established and emerging evidence base.

1. Offers informal, non-institutional roles

Soloss recruits and supports community members with lived experiences of loss to step into a valued role called the Losstender. Losstenders hold space for their fellow community members (who we call Sharers) to grieve and explore healing rituals. Losstenders are supported to develop their own relational approach; they are not trained to implement a set program or curriculum.

Literature Base:

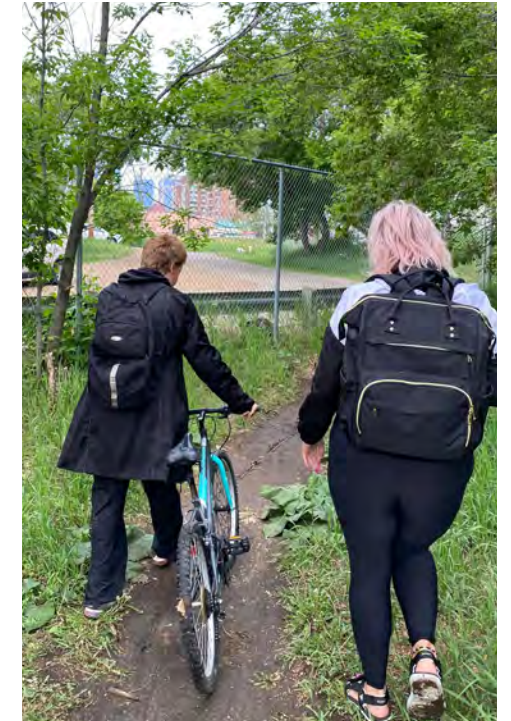
Losstending draws on a deep evidence base for non-clinical grief support, including the work of Dr. Alan Wolfelt who studies the effectiveness of companioning: the role of being present, observing, and bearing witness to someone's loss. Core to companioning is walking alongside others with curiosity, not expertise; honouring the spirit; respecting disorder; and being with, rather than seeking to fix, pain. [Citation](#)

2. Brokers bridging social networks

Soloss works across lines of difference, bringing people together across race, religious, nationality, class, disability, gender & sexuality lines to explore commonalities and differences in grief and loss experiences.

Literature Base:

Soloss connects people across social and cultural groupings, and in doing so, works to nurture bridging social capital, drawing on the seminal research of Robert Putnam. "Bridging social capital is essentially the result of networking outside normal social groupings. There is an opportunity to build bridging social capital any time someone interacts with strangers.... Because bridging social capital traverses social boundaries it tends to increase tolerance and acceptances of different people, values, and beliefs through contact with diverse others." [Citation](#)



3. Works flexibly, removing barriers to access

Soloss is free, unfolds at participants' own paces and in environments of their choosing. There is not a laborious sign-up process with eligibility criteria or other requirements.

Literature Base:

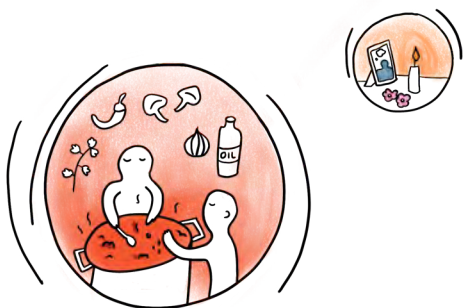
Soloss has been designed to address many of the documented barriers to mental health care in Canada. In 2018, prior to the pandemic, 2.3 million Canadians reported unmet mental health care needs. Barriers included costs, not knowing where to get help, excessive wait times, culture and language gaps, concerns about stigma, inequities due to geography and culture. These numbers have only risen over the last five years. [Citation](#)

4. Powered by mutual desire over preset structures

Interactions between Losstenders and Sharers are determined by their joint needs and desires. There is no required commitment, or length of relationship. Mutual interest versus obligation powers relationships.

Literature Base:

Soloss emphasizes the quality of relationships over the length of relationships. Length is not a predictor of effectiveness. Indeed, there is a significant evidence base on both the efficacy of brief interventions on a range of mental health & substance use outcomes. At the heart of brief interventions is honest, non-judgemental conversation. [Citation](#)



Soloss has been designed around seven core features, each of which come from the convergence of co-design feedback with the established and emerging evidence base.

5. Recognizes multiple kinds of loss and forms of expression

Soloss addresses loss & grief, in all of its shapes, sizes and forms, and offers many ways to process and sense make -- from art to music to breathwork to storytelling.

Literature Base:

Soloss contributes to an emerging evidence base on the efficacy of using visual arts, music, dance, and body-based somatic practices for healing from grief, trauma, and depression. For example, Bessel van der Kolk's groundbreaking work *The Body Keeps the Score* describes how our body stores stress and pain, and why we must rethink traditional psychiatric interventions.

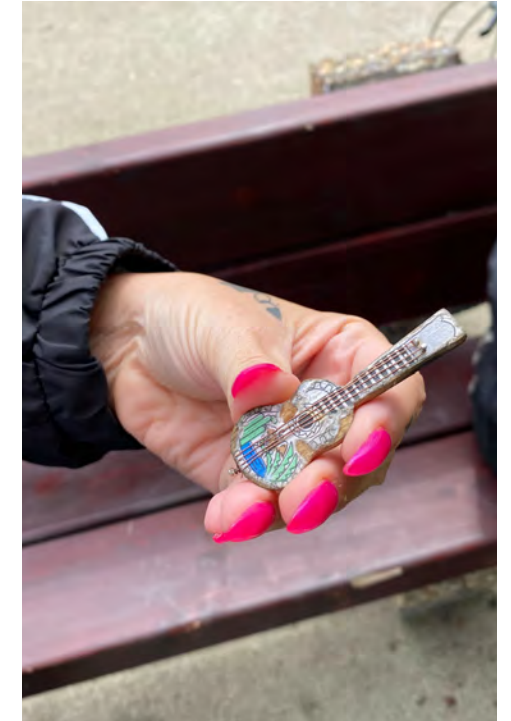
"If the memory of trauma is encoded in the viscera, in heartbreaking and gut-wrenching emotions, in autoimmune disorders and skeletal/muscular problems, and if mind/brain/visceral communication is the royal road to emotion regulation, this demands a radical shift in our therapeutic assumptions." [Citation](#)

6. Goes beyond talk, creating healing artifacts and rituals

Soloss leaves community members with something they can see, touch, or listen to, as a way to both mark loss and foster renewal.

Literature Base:

Soloss builds on the research base documenting the benefits of grief rituals on emotional health and wellbeing, including sense of control, validation, integration, channeling of feelings, and social support. Kenneth Doka, who coined the term disenfranchised grief, notes that grief rituals can mark a transition in a person's grief journey, affirm a continuing bond with what has been lost, and promote symbolic reconciliation. [Citation](#)



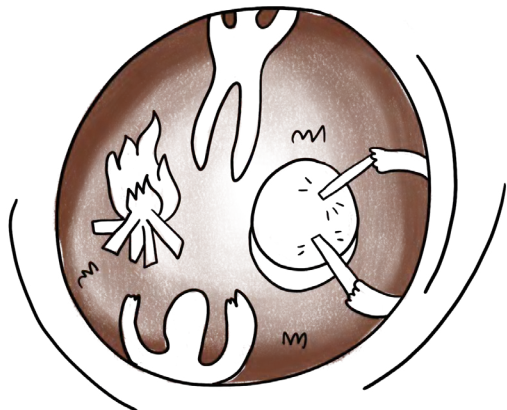
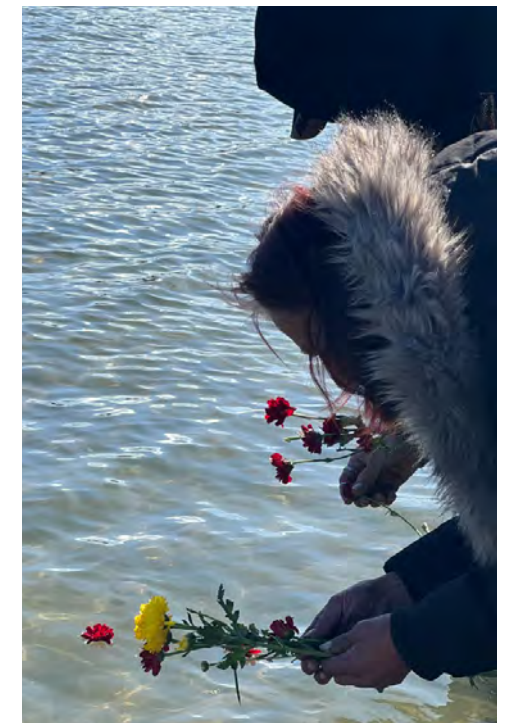
7. Embraces culture and narrative

Soloss hosts exhibitions, pop-up events, and ceremonies to normalize the language of grief and loss, and start to tell more inclusive stories.

Literature Base:

Soloss adopts a community psychology approach, rooted in local cultural & spiritual healing practices focused on the collective, not just the individual. As Drs. Chante' D. DeLoach and Sujata Regina Swaroop explains...

"The historic disconnect between systems of mental health - as traditionally defined within a western context - and the experiences of marginalized and indigenous peoples around the world necessitates greater consideration of local methods of healing with greater accessibility, cultural credibility, and sustainability. In social contexts in which the experience of collective and intergenerational traumas are commonplace, culture and community are integral; the dialectic of oppression and liberation remain imperative to pathways to individual and collective health and healing." [Citation](#)



Core Audiences

Soloss has been designed with and for all individuals experiencing grief and loss, and places particular emphasis on people subsisting in the margins, whose grief & loss goes repeatedly unrecognized.

In this way, Soloss offers both universal and targeted support. Working at both levels requires developing & testing a range of outreach strategies including social media, word of mouth, door knocking, pop-up community events, and going to places and spaces that attract BIPOC community members, individuals experiencing long-term unemployment, houselessness, leaving foster care, and in addiction recovery.



	Estimated size of segment in Edmonton	Offer
Community members experiencing social isolation and stress	200,000 (19.6%) of Edmontonians reported feeling extremely or quite stressed. 1.8 million (42%) of Albertans say isolation is their top mental health concern. Citation	Soloss offers free, flexible 1:1 support to anyone experiencing loss and grief. There are no eligibility criteria and no assessments prior to sign-up.
Indigenous and racialized community members experiencing the effects of grief and loss	325,000 Edmontonians (36.4%) identify as visible minorities. 50,280 Edmontonians (5.39%) identify as Indigenous.	Soloss provides culturally attuned support, drawing on non-Western models of wellbeing beyond clinical talk-based therapies.
Community members in transition experiencing grief and loss: post addiction recovery, leaving foster care; precariously housed	2,169 young people, aged 18-24, from across Alberta are in the process of leaving care (March 2021). 2,519 Edmontonians experienced houselessness in 2022; nearly 2/3 identify as Indigenous.	Soloss fosters relationship building, helping to grow natural support networks, amplify coping strategies, and establish healing rituals.
Community members facing barriers to traditional work, with their own histories of grief and loss	20,900 Albertans aged 25-54 are long-term unemployed, up 46.2% so far in 2024.	Through its losstending role, Soloss provides capacity building, 1:1 coaching, paid employment, recommendations and career exploration for artists and other individuals who experience barriers to typical full-time or part-time employment.
Social sector workers experiencing loss	~8000 Edmontonians work frontline roles in social work & community services in Edmonton, while 1,780 are managers of social and community services.	- Soloss recognizes loss, grief and workplace trauma aren't problems to solve in six sessions, but rather experiences to acknowledge and process as part of the community.

In Summary

Soloss comes out of a rigorous co-design process with designers, social scientists, healing practitioners, community members, and encampment residents.

1.

Soloss intentionally pulls four levers of cultural change to facilitate healing & strengthen wellbeing.

These change levers include new roles, routines, environments, and narratives.

2.

At the heart of Soloss is a non-institutional role called the Losstender who, in relationship with community members called Sharers, co-creates art, music, movement, and sacred rituals to mark loss.

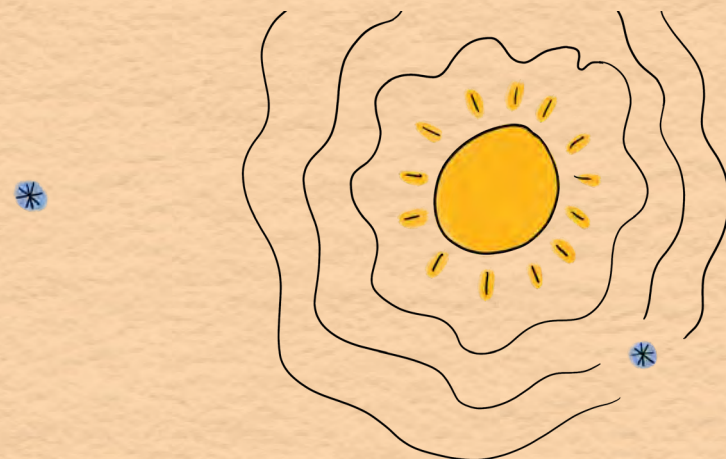
3.

We call our assumptions about why we expect a new role and the use of creative rituals to contribute to individual and cultural change a theory of change.

Theories of change can be tested, tweaked, and evolve over time.

4.

Soloss has been designed around seven core features and is for anyone experiencing grief and loss, with a particular focus on people living in the margins.



6

Prototyping Soloss

Prototypes versus pilots

Co-designing ideas on paper can help solutions take shape by identifying what excites people and what turns them off. But, it tells us little about how an idea will actually unfold in context.

Out of our co-design sessions we knew informal roles & rituals resonated, but that heavy imagery & language (e.g mourning) was less appealing. We did not yet know how to actualize different roles & rituals -- for instance, what kinds of outreach, hiring, onboarding, and debriefing practices might best realize Soloss' core beliefs and envisioned functions. That's the goal of experience prototyping. Experience prototyping is a method for bringing a concept to life so we can build and learn what frontend and backend interactions work, for whom, under what conditions. Whereas frontend interactions include all the roles, products, processes and structures participants interface with, backend interactions include the technologies, systems, and resource flows that enable ideas to run. Through an experience prototype, participants simultaneously experience and shape the form & function of an idea.



“Prototypes are representations of a design ... They are created to inform both design process and design decisions. They range from sketches and different kinds of models at various levels - ‘looks like,’ ‘behaves like,’ and ‘works like’ - to explore and communicate propositions about the design and its context...By the term, ‘Experience Prototype’ we mean to emphasize the experiential aspect of whatever representations are needed to successfully live or convey an experience with a new space or system”

- Buchaneau and Suri, Experience Prototyping, 2000 ¹²

Experience prototyping takes ideas out of workshop formats and into real-life environments. That's similar to a pilot. Unlike pilots, experience prototypes are set-up for quick cycles of making, testing, and tweaking. Rather than seek to validate an idea, prototypes are intended to unlock continuous inquiry, ingenuity, and interest. Because prototypes solicit ongoing feedback to propel the next iteration, participants tend to have a very different stake in the idea and its outcomes. Indeed, they often feel a high level of ownership over the results. Here's a summary of some of the distinctions between experience prototypes and pilots.

¹² [See Experience Prototyping](#)

	Experience Prototype	Pilot
Definition	<i>An early representation of an idea in which specific elements are brought to life, in context, tested & iterated to learn what works, for whom, under what conditions</i>	A preliminary study of an already designed solution conducted to evaluate effectiveness and viability
Intention	Designed to generate alternatives, build collective ownership, and learn	Designed to validate & prove value
Starting point	<i>A concept</i>	A fleshed out solution
Sequence	<i>Loops: Co-design early concepts > Mock-up concepts on paper > Get feedback & iterate concept > Develop & run higher fidelity versions > Get feedback & iterate ></i>	Linear: Design pilot > Run pilot > Evaluate pilot
What can be tested	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Attractiveness & desire -Frontend and backend interactions -Governance and evaluation -Context & conditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Effectiveness - Efficiencies - Viability
Evaluative methodology	<i>Developmental evaluation along the way; Realist and Most Significant Change evaluation towards the end</i>	Summative evaluation at end

Adopting a Prototyping Mindset

More action learning than service delivery, experience prototyping calls for good doses of curiosity, humility, and creativity. Successful prototypes are emergent, yielding rich learning and alternative practices instead of preset targets and fixed deliverables.



A delivery mindset



How many people participate?



How many participants are satisfied with the intervention?



How many activities occur over the duration of funding?



How to replicate or scale up the intervention?



An action learning mindset



How do different people react to the prototype? What does that reveal about how to communicate, and what the motivational hooks might be?



Which parts of the prototype hold resonance and which parts fall flat, for whom? What does that reveal about preferences and desires?



What makes a 'good' interaction and 'good' outcome? What interactions fulfill versus impede purpose & values?



If not the prototype in this form, what might be another form? What other opportunities does this open up? What are other models of growth? How do we spread the underlying values?

For Soloss, this looks like

Testing Soloss with a wide range of user groups across contexts, trying out different offers, value propositions, language, imagery, and brands.

Testing multiple ways to frame, hire, onboard, support Losstenders; recruit and match Sharers; document and debrief; use technology, etc.

Testing a theory of change (what interactions lead to what outcomes), and enabling Losstenders & Sharers to design their own encounters & rituals.

Testing a range of ways to measure change and make future decisions as a collective.

Since 2021, we've prototyped Soloss in three distinct contexts:

In each context, we've started by testing: (1) people's appetite to engage; (2) the kinds of institutional relationships & conditions necessary for buy-in; (3) communications & languaging; (4) frontend interactions like role design & onboarding, (5) backend interactions like documentation & resource tracking, (6) metrics & models of spread.

Context

Conditions

No 1

Within the Balwin and Belvedere neighbourhoods of Edmonton, including with supported housing providers.



Tested desire of everyday folks in the Balwin and Belvedere neighbourhoods to engage



Tested relationship with small businesses, community associations and housing providers



No 2

Within innercity frontline services, including with workers from Bissell, Mustard Seed, and Boyle Street Community Services in Edmonton.



Tested desire of innercity frontline services to engage



Tested relationships with social service providers

Highlight Learning:
Even with high-level organizational support, opportunities like Soloss easily get lost in the day-to-day fray. Soloss works better adjacent to, rather than embedded within, organizations.

No 3

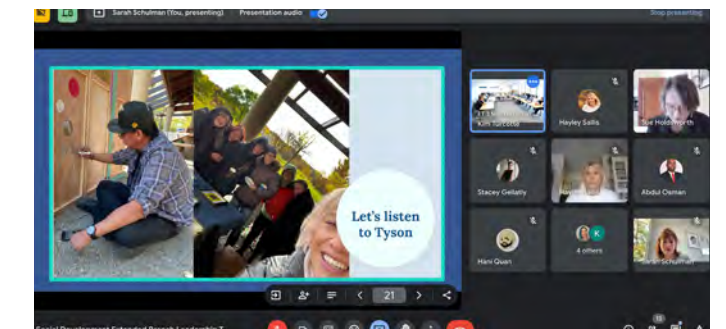
Within encampments across Edmonton, including with residents and nearby neighbors.



Tested desire of encampment residents to engage

Highlight Learning:
Before launching our third prototype, we asked: do campers want us there? So we visited encampments and engaged in open conversation. Residents wanted more access to ceremony, and taught us ways to approach camps with care and respect. We brought this learning into onboarding.

Tested relationship with city government



Continued....

No 1

Within the Balwin and Belvedere neighbourhoods of Edmonton, including with supported housing providers

Communications

includes value propositions, language, imagery

Front-end interactions

includes role design, outreach, recruitment, onboarding, space design, ritual design, debriefing

Back-end interactions

includes scheduling, documenting, tracking, resource flows

Metrics and modes of spread

includes evaluation frameworks, tools, decision-making processes, and governance structures

Tested

- Look and feel of Soloss as a dialogue with loss, steeped in creative expression

Highlight Learning:

Conversational language differentiated Soloss from professional services, as did the saturated colors & imagery which signaled that beauty is valued.

Tested

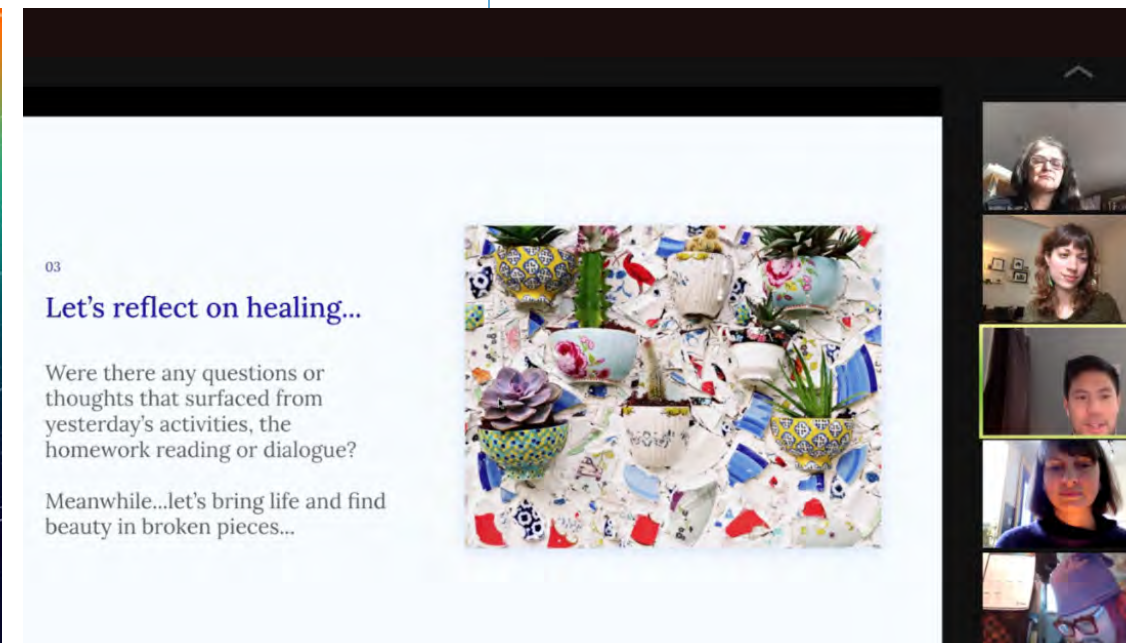
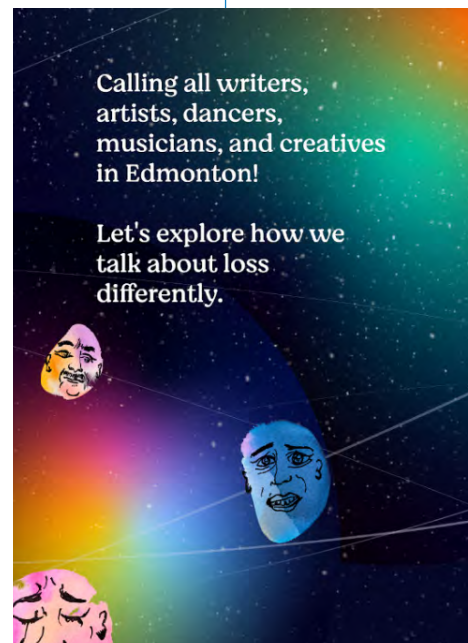
- Losstender, Sharer, and Sounding Board roles
- Atraditional hiring process: no resumes or credentials required
- Online cohort onboarding integrated with somatic & art practices
- Physical material kits to support creative expression

Tested

- Google calendars, digital documentation and physical notebooks
- Losstender honorariums tied to hours with Sharers

Tested

- Reflective post-prototype interviews
- Workshops to identify the essence of Soloss



Continued....

No 2

Within innercity frontline services, including with workers from Bissell, Mustard Seed, and Boyle Street Community Services in Edmonton.

Communications

includes value propositions, language, imagery

Front-end interactions

includes role design, outreach, recruitment, onboarding, space design, ritual design, debriefing

Back-end interactions

includes scheduling, documenting, tracking, resource flows

Metrics and modes of spread

includes evaluation frameworks, tools, decision-making processes, and governance structures

Tested

- New visuals & language around compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and Soloss as alternative to employee assistance programs

Tested

- Appeal of healing modalities like tattooing, jewelry making, and more.
- Onsite Losstender tasting sessions to expose staff to the possibilities
- Introducing rituals within staff meetings

Tested

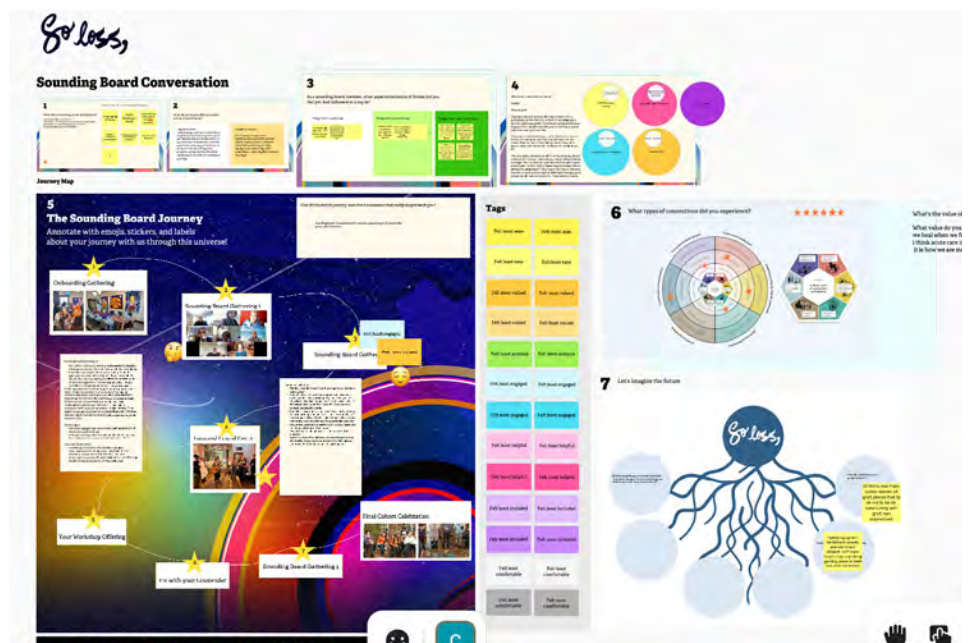
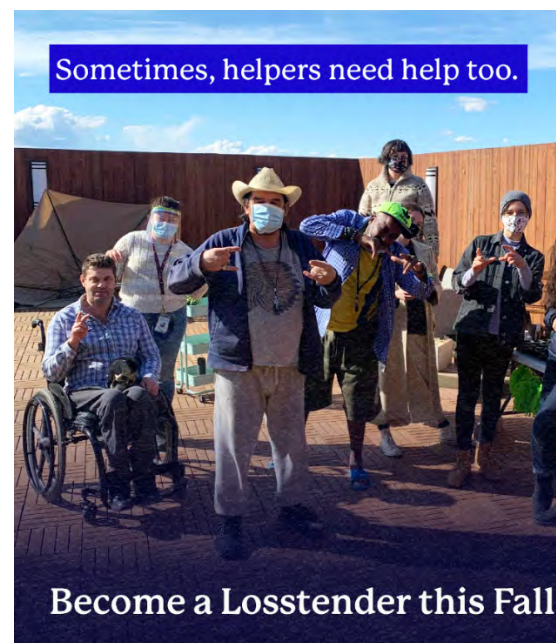
- Jane App as a backend platform & scheduler
- Digital note-taking

Highlight Learning:

As much as we wanted to find a streamlined backend system for scheduling and documenting interactions, the app created too much of a clinical vibe with 'case notes' and took away the relationality that is at the heart of Soloss.

Tested

- Pre and post prototype postcards
- In-depth interviews facilitated by team members
- Group decision-making on timing and flow of cohort



Continued...

No 3

Within encampments across Edmonton, including with residents and nearby neighbors

Communications

includes value propositions, language, imagery

Front-end interactions

includes role design, outreach, recruitment, onboarding, space design, ritual design, debriefing

Back-end interactions

includes scheduling, documenting, tracking, resource flows

Metrics and modes of spread

includes evaluation frameworks, tools, decision-making processes, and governance structures

Tested

- Reframed brand and website around Soloss as a community-led network with more relational imagery
- Developed more modular components of the brand, enabling community members to make their own touchpoints that still felt coherent

Tested

- Circle of Support role instead of Sounding Board
- Video applications to break down writing barriers
- Alumni engagement in hiring
- 3 days of experiential onboarding including on traditional lands

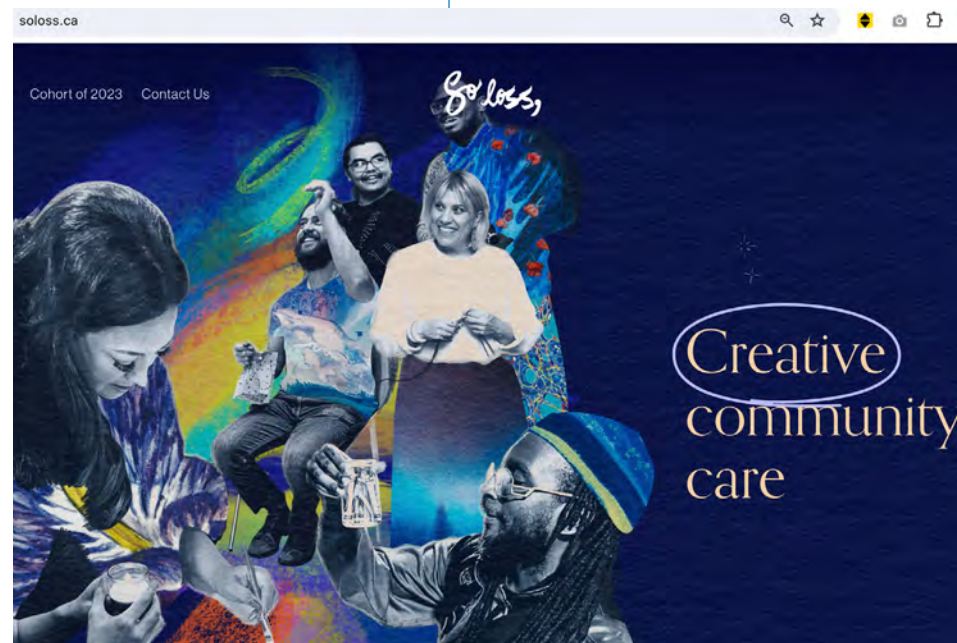
Tested

- Building a physical pop-up structure to host healing rituals in public spaces
- Design of ritual kits to encourage co-creation of healing rituals
- Weekly debriefs open to community

- Impromptu versus scheduled interactions
- Vlog style documentation
- Losstender honorariums tied to learning, not interactions with Sharers

Tested

- Prompt book to capture significant moments, outcomes and determinants
- In-depth interviews facilitated by peers
- More networked decision-making



Highlight Learning:

Balancing the inherent emergence of freely given relationships with weekly debriefs, open to anybody in the community, created a mutualistic space and led to the design of many new rituals.

Highlight Learning:

Soloss is predicated on freely given relationships. Adding money into the mix can quickly contort the relational basis. At the same time, we wanted to move away from exploitative 'free labor' and broaden who could be a Losstender. Providing an honorarium to Losstenders to participate in onboarding and regular reflection, rather than as payment for relationships, seemed to strike a decent balance.

Highlight Learning:

Distributing decision-making takes time and very intentional process design. Rather than replicate hierarchical management, we set out to foster desire and capacity for Soloss alumni & community members to self-organize through a series of workshops, events, and an online communications platform. Going forward, we see opportunities for rotating leadership roles.

Forever Prototyping

While prototyping is often framed as part of early stage research & development -- a vehicle for arriving at an innovative and scalable model -- we've come to see prototyping as an ongoing practice critical to sustaining innovation.

That's because the mindset and methodology is very much intertwined with impact. So much of what makes a social intervention effective is people feeling they have agency and can make a meaningful contribution.

Prototyping moves away from perfunctory consultation and embeds continuous feedback into the operating model, drawing on design skills to quickly tweak component parts. New materials, tools, process flows, and systems can be created as needed, fostering agility and adaptability as contexts change. And contexts always change in the social space! Seeing prototyping as a core function can help us recognize that social design approaches are required not only to generate fresh ideas, but to keep the essence of those ideas alive over time. We don't just need prototyping so we can learn how to deliver new practice, we need prototyping so that we recognize learning as delivery.



In Summary

Experience prototyping is a method for bringing to life ideas, at a small-scale, to simultaneously build and test component parts.

1.

Prototypes and pilots have distinct goals and orientations.

Where prototyping focuses on learning, pilots focus on validation.

2.

Soloss has been prototyped three times in three contexts to test conditions, communication messages, frontend interactions, backend interactions, metrics & models of spread.

3.

Prototyping isn't simply a means to arriving at an innovative model, it is key to sustaining innovation over time. Learning is a deliverable!

7

More on Evaluation

How do we know a prototype works? Metrics are one of the components we make, test, and tweak in an experience prototype. Rather than come into a prototype with defined targets, we enter a prototype with a set of hunches about how the designed components (e.g. communications, frontend interactions, and backend interactions) can unlock value and move us towards meaningful outcomes. Because our goal isn't to validate or rationalize new models, but to open-up learning and novel practice, we can ask more open-ended, exploratory questions, like:

- ▶ **What kind of value emerges for participants?**
- ▶ **How does the theory of change play out, for whom? What is a meaningful outcome?**
- ▶ **What are we learning about the prototyping context, and the ways in which values and purposes come to life (or don't)?**
- ▶ **What conditions are required to grow and spread in a good way? What future opportunities & resources are emerging?**

We do not often ask questions about effectiveness or efficiency. That's because both concepts tend to be defined from a system point of view. An intervention is effective when it meets predetermined objectives and efficient when it saves resources. But, we don't look at whose objectives they are (i.e. government objectives or participant objectives) or who the efficiency serves. Instead, we hold curiosity about the different kinds of value a prototype can generate, for whom. Value can come in many forms -- financial value, social-emotional value, relational value, environmental value, etc.

To understand what value a prototype creates and unpack our questions, we blend evaluative approaches. We draw on developmental evaluation to document the messy experience of prototyping, and the ways in which values and purposes play out in real time. We apply realistic evaluation to ask prototype participants to identify what outcomes emerged for them, and the factors they think shaped those outcomes. And we use Most Significant Change (MSC) methods to understand what participants' think constitutes a meaningful moment and outcome, and what helps or hinders more meaningful moments and outcomes.

Terminology Sidebar

Developmental evaluation = an evaluative approach when working in complexity & emergence to capture decisions, reasoning, actions, and results.

Realist evaluation = an evaluative method that looks at how a theory of change (a set of assumptions about the relationship between interactions and outcomes) unfolds, and the factors that shape outcomes (determinants).

Most significant change = an evaluative method that enables participants to define what meaningful moments and outcomes are from their perspective, and the conditions required.

What has this mixed methods evaluative approach looked like in practice?

As part of our third prototype for Soloss, situated in encampments, we developed and tested a range of evaluative tools with Losstenders, Sharers, Circle of Support members, and engaged community members.

Developmental evaluation tools

Actions & learning tracker

As part of our third prototype for Soloss, situated in encampments, we developed and tested a range of evaluative tools with Losstenders, Sharers, Circle of Support members, and engaged community members.

Date	Participant	Location	How was it?	What was the conversation that was most useful?	What was most difficult for you?	Any learning?
July 15	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 16	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 17	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 18	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 19	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 20	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 21	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 22	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 23	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 24	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 25	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 26	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 27	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 28	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 29	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 30	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...
July 31	John	Encampment	Good	...	...	...

We developed a simple spreadsheet to log all the encampment residents, neighbors, and community members we encountered over the prototype, our interactions with them, the rituals we tried, and what we'd try differently next time.

We tested a range of practices for capturing our emergent insights including using structured questions, conducting peer interviews, and data dump sessions. Along the way, we tried to make it a habit to record team debriefs and vlog about the challenges we were facing, the questions bubbling up, and the results we were seeing.

Vlogs & recorded meetings



Realist Evaluation Tool

Reflective Booklet

People ranked what prototype components they perceived made the biggest difference to their experience.



We created a reflective booklet with a series of card decks, stickers, and visual worksheets to elicit Losstender and Sharer perspectives on the moments and outcomes they've experienced, and what they attribute those moments and outcomes to. This reflective booklet could be used solo, or as part of a reflective interview.

Reflective interviews were conducted by both Soloss team members and fellow Losstenders as we tested a peer-to-peer interview style. Data from the worksheets was inputted into a database to allow us to aggregate and find patterns.



People used the wellbeing wheel to indicate where they've experienced a change in their level of connectedness, if at all, and what helped or hindered those connections.



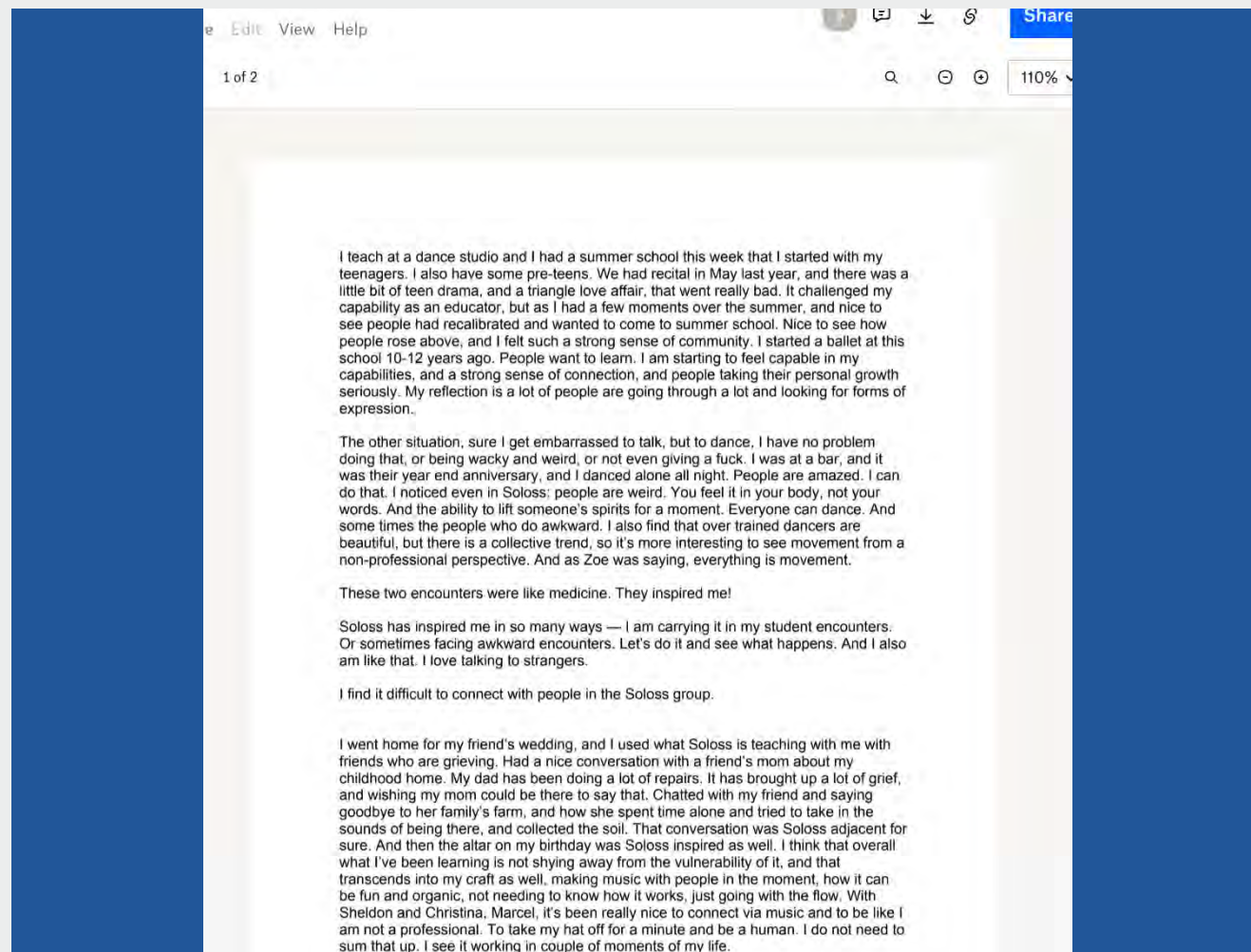
People used a deck of cards with different possible outcomes, along with blank cards to write on, and categorized them by whether they've seen no change, some change, or lots of change.

Most significant change tool

Story transcripts

Below is a text edit document transcribing stories that Losstenders shared during a debrief.

During debrief sessions and on our communications platform, we asked Losstenders to share stories about moments in the prototype that mattered to them, and why they mattered. The meaning that Losstenders derive from stories sheds light on what they find valuable and the kinds of outcomes that animate them.



In Summary

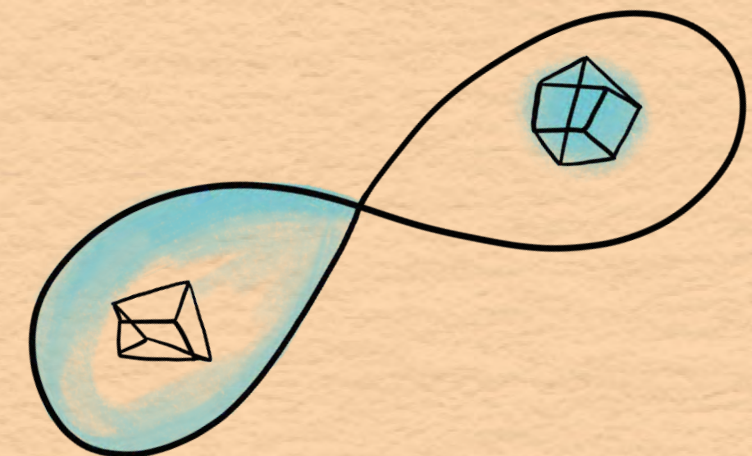
Metrics are part of what experience prototypes make & test.

1.

Evaluation focuses on capturing learning and exploring value creation for prototype participants.

2.

To understand what generates value, we blend developmental, realist, and most significant change evaluative methods. We also make use of observational, interview, and story-based data.





Learnings from our third prototype

What learning has emerged from our third round of prototyping Soloss in encampments?

We can group our questions & answers into three broad buckets: we've learned about (1) the value Soloss unlocks and the ways in which our theory of change plays out; (2) how Soloss works in an encampment context; and (3) the necessary conditions for growing Soloss ethically and with purpose.

A.

Learning about the value Soloss unlocks and its theory of change

Questions we asked:

What are meaningful interactions for participants, and what kind of outcomes do they lead to, for whom?

B.

Learning about the encampment context & how to pursue Soloss' purpose

Questions we asked:

What are we learning about tending to grief and loss in encampments?

What are we learning about the untapped resource of Edmontonians who have a desire to be involved, and how to build bridging social capital?

C.

Learning about the conditions required for good growth

Questions we asked:

What are we learning about how cities might relate and engage with people in encampments and advance community-led solutions?

What are we learning about how to grow Soloss in values-aligned ways moving forward?

Answers in Brief

A.

Learning about the value SoLoss unlocks and its theory of change

Questions we asked:

What are meaningful interactions for participants, and what kind of outcomes do they lead to, for whom?

We found that engaging with SoLoss, whether as a Losstender, Sharer, Circle of Support or Community Member, contributed to wellbeing by both deepening and widening connection to community, the sacred, culture, and a sense of meaning

and purpose. Meaningful interactions included cohort onboarding, the use of sacred ceremonies, and community debriefs.



B.

Learning about the encampment context & how to pursue SoLoss' purpose

Questions we asked:

What are we learning about tending to grief and loss in encampments?

What are we learning about the untapped resource of Edmontonians who have a desire to be involved, and how to build bridging social capital?

While cities often default to police & social services as the solution to social challenges, this prototype surfaced how much resource exists in our communities, if it is recognized and nurtured. Mechanisms like 311 are good at tallying complaints, but they are not good at cultivating grassroots desire to engage differently.

To broker bridging social relationships and tend to grief & and loss in respectful ways, we identified a few critical factors:

(1) prioritizing human-to-human interactions without preset agendas;

(2) valuing the contributions of people typically seen only as recipients of care;

(3) creating collective spaces where tending to our own losses opens up opportunity for others;

(4) showing up in quirky and artistic ways;

(5) bringing healing ceremony, ritual, and art to where people are and on their schedule instead of only having it available at fixed buildings and times; and

(6) connecting people to resources when they ask for help in their own time, not jumping to these topics before someone brings it up on their own.

C.

Learning about the conditions required for good growth

Questions we asked:

What are we learning about how cities might relate and engage with people in encampments and advance community-led solutions?

What are we learning about how to grow Soloss in values-aligned ways moving forward?

We've seen that an institutional culture of learning, deep listening, relationship building and repair is necessary to engage with community members & encampment residents with integrity. And that these same ingredients are critical to embed in Soloss as it grows.

This third prototype led us to recognize that for Soloss to grow in values-aligned ways it must operate more as a self-organizing network and less as a fixed program. Preset processes, structures, and targets risk stripping Soloss of the freely given ethos that seems to be its core differentiator and 'secret sauce.'



Learnings In Detail

Soloss Theory Of Change

(On Paper)

To recap: a theory of change is a set of assumptions about why interactions or activities lead to desired outcomes.

The factors that link interactions with outcomes are called determinants, or enabling factors. Here's the Soloss theory of change on paper, and how that theory of change played out according to some of our quantitative and qualitative evaluative data.

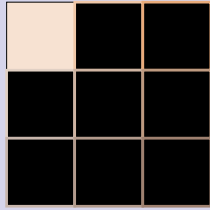
Interactions

Determinants

Outcomes

<p>We recruit and connect people (Losstenders and Sharers) for brief encounters...</p>	<p>...in order to facilitate 'bridging' relationships between people across lines of difference...</p>	<p>...to move towards a greater sense of respect, solidarity, and support.</p>
<p>We mark moments of loss with symbols and rituals...</p>	<p>...in order to shift how people make sense of grief and loss, and find paths for healing...</p>	<p>...to move towards an increased sense of perspective, purpose and healing strategies.</p>
<p>We curate public exhibitions and neighbourhood events...</p>	<p>...in order to shift social norms and confront some of the stigma and shame which can stand in the way of connectedness...</p>	<p>...to move towards greater interpersonal trust and community belonging.</p>

A. Learning about the value Soloss unlocks and its theory of change



Soloss Theory Of Change

(In Practice)

Interactions

We recruit and connect people (Losstenders and Sharers) for brief encounters...

37

applications for roles in 2023

9

Losstenders onboarded including 4 Indigenous Losstenders

50

campers with whom we built relationships

8

Circle of Support members engaged

75

75 interactions in encampments

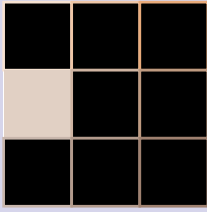
Example stories

A somatic healing practitioner and Circle of Support member describes the ‘matchmaking’ process (where we meet community members to find the fit with Soloss) as “very non-extractive.” As a former child & youth care worker all too familiar with hierarchy, she remarked “it didn’t feel like there was a power difference, there was just dialogue, and a sense of reciprocity.” We worked to embed an ethos of mutuality through all interactions - even brief encounters.



One Losstender talked about the effect of brief encounters. Seemingly small moments can instill a sense of care and value. “I had a lot of brief encounters. And I remember one person who I ended up driving to from the south side to downtown. And I gave him a stone and he was so grateful. He was just like, gave me the biggest hug and he was like I’ll keep this forever and he was so scared he was going to lose it and then he was like, “should I give it back to you to hold on to for me?” and then we just talked about how it was okay if he lost it.”

A. Learning about the value Soloss unlocks and its theory of change

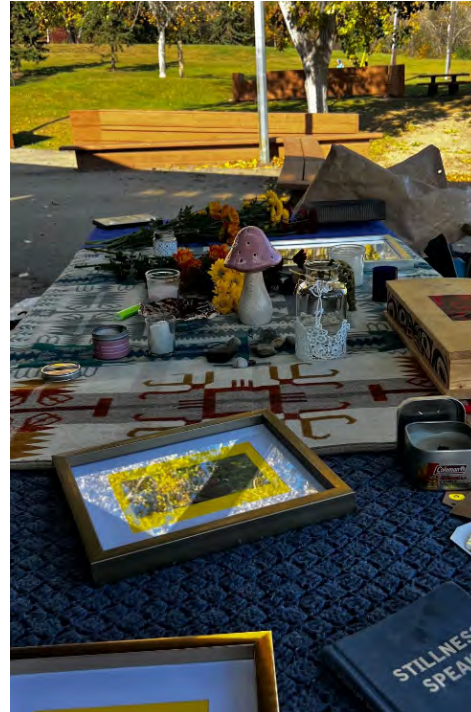


Interactions

We mark moments of loss with symbols and rituals...

28

distinct ways we marked moments of loss & grief from burning sage, exchanging rocks, cleansing camps, co-writing poems, lighting candles, making ribbon skirts, giving sweetgrass, printing photos, playing music, etc.

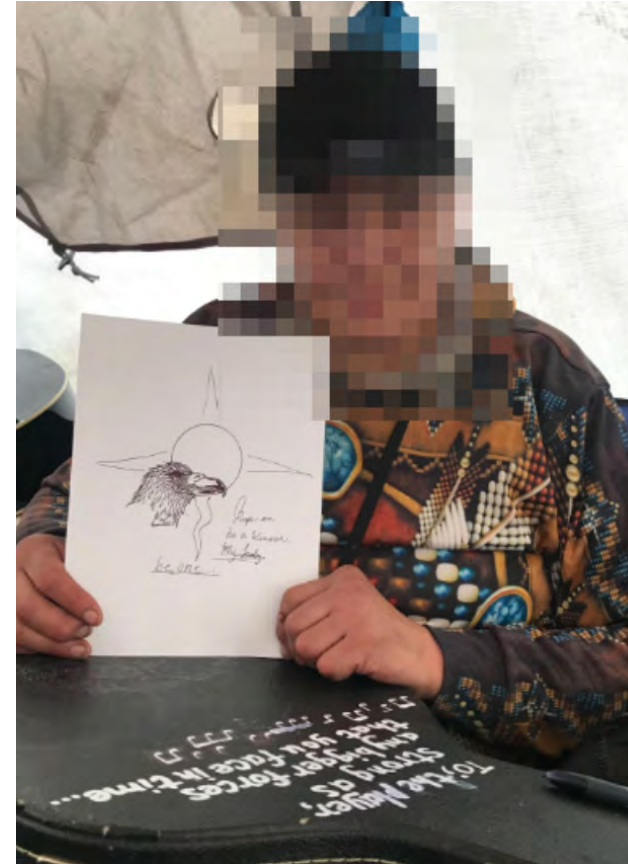
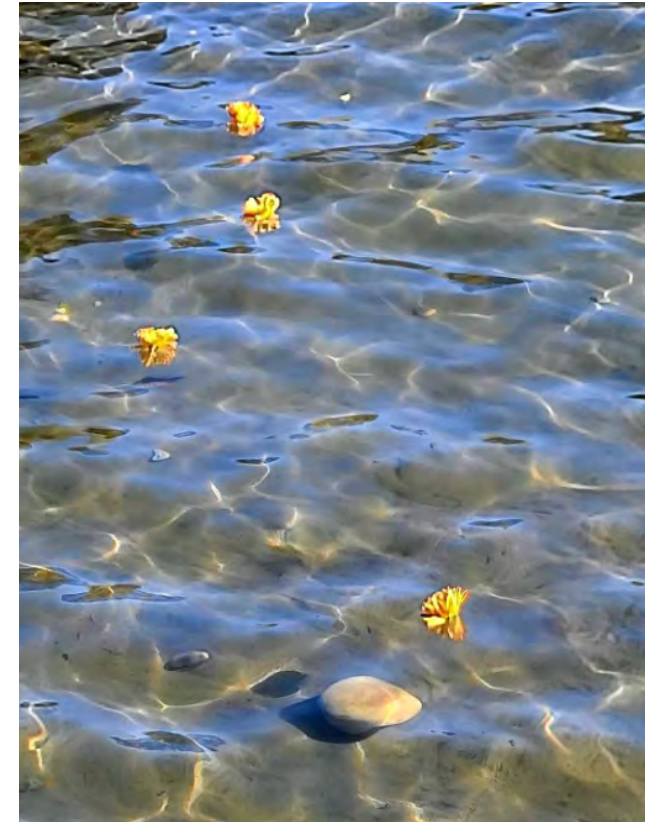


Moments of loss we marked included the passing of parents, siblings, children, partners, friends, roommates, and pets; evictions & displacements; miscarriages; loss of health; loss of familial relationships, and more.

Example stories

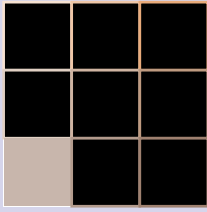
During her first interaction with campers at Dawson Park, a Losstender connected with a gentleman whose wife passed away. After smudging together, he shared his sadness with not being able to take part in her memorial service.

Together, they put the remnants of the sage in a wooden box and released the box in the river.



Two Sharers and two Losstenders spent an afternoon reminiscing about the loss of a dear friend. The Sharers offered beautiful stories: how they met as children on the same reserve, their love of dancing at pow-wows, their affinity for playing chess, and more. A few weeks later, we learned the friend was actually still alive, and had a joyous celebration, jamming with guitars & ukuleles for hours.

Very sadly, in the month that followed, the friend did pass away. To mark this beautiful friendship, one of the Losstenders, Kate, wrote a song in the friend's honor. The Sharers now know the words and share the song with everyone they meet -- it is a treasured moment.



Interactions

We curate public exhibitions and neighbourhood events...

3

pop-ups in and around encampments at Dawson Park, 50th Street, and McCauley.

2

visits to Horse Healing with Circle of Support member Patrick Buffalo in Maskwacis



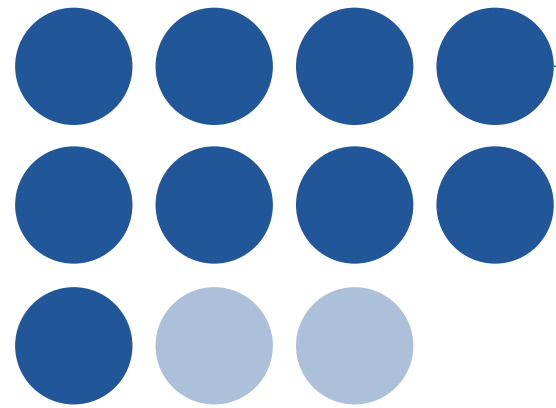
Example stories

During one of our pop-up events, we encountered a man who had recently lost his wife and his wife's mom and sister. He was feeling quite alone.

After asking about what we were doing, he picked up a guitar, regaling us with some of his and his wife's favorite tunes. Too often, we don't talk about grief publicly. We are expected to cope privately. The pop-up created an opportunity to acknowledge this man's experiences and channel his feelings into song.

11

open debriefs in Dawson Park



In 9 of these, unhoused people joined along with housed people from the neighbourhood plus outreach workers who stopped to engage.



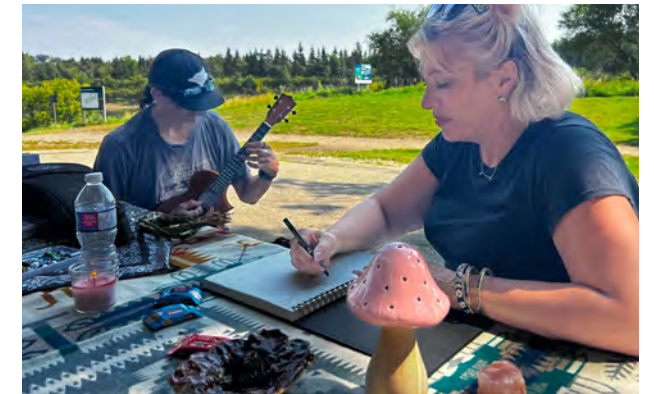
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network events

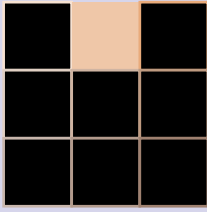


4

workshops with network members



A. Learning about the value Soloss unlocks and its theory of change



Determinants

More bridging relationships between people across difference

92%

of evaluation respondents said Soloss brought to life the value of “bridging differences.”

More than half of the reported meaningful relationships formed during the prototype were between people living in different circumstances.

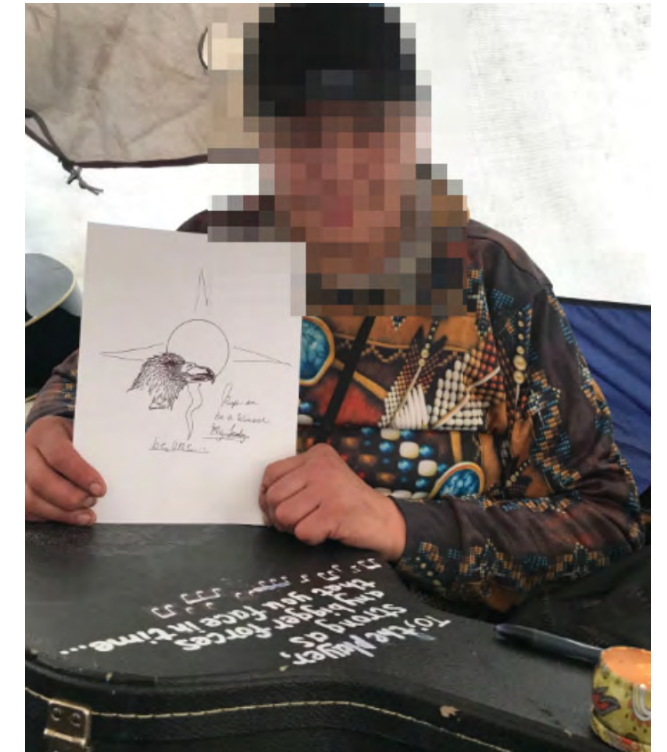
The remaining relationships were a combination of support relationships (e.g. between Circle of Support and Losstenders) and peers.



Example stories

One Losstender, Cass, shared the positive impact of exposure to both her own Indigenous culture and the culture of others.

She noted, “I feel like there’s a lot of intersection between the cultures. I think that it’s good to see people like you, but it’s also good to bridge differences that way. And understanding they’re not so different from me.”

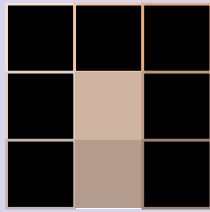


Another Losstender, Tyson, similarly commented on the value of learning from each Losstenders’ culture and practices.

“Jeannie was dancing. Kate had songs & music. Jill felt like a writer. Robert is a writer, social worker, and cultural leader. Everybody did their own ritual in their own way. And it was all inclusive and had diversity.”



A. Learning about the value Soloss unlocks and its theory of change



Determinants

More outlets for healing and opportunities to make sense of loss

~90%

of evaluation respondents said they experienced some or lots of change for the better over Soloss

including 70% who described gaining outlets for healing and feeling a sense of release.

Example stories

A community member with experience of being precariously housed, Puppy Rose, joined many of our open debrief sessions to share her art-making practices. At our last debrief, we made lanterns and released them into the river as a symbolic letting go gesture. Puppy Rose wrote her three sons' names on the lantern - sons who had passed away and who she's been mourning for a long time.

[hard to do], but I just remembered what my sister told me. She said. 'Just let it go once you're good and ready' and I said, 'Okay I will.'"

Later she shared how meaningful that was, and that she had never been able to let go of that loss and grief until now. "By letting go of my 3 candles, I felt a lot better... I'm so happy I did that... It was

Determinants

More social acceptance of grief and loss and commitment to confront the stigma and shame that stand in the way of vulnerability & connectedness

~70%

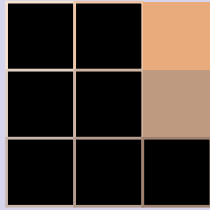
of evaluation respondents said their relationship to grief and loss improved over Soloss



Example stories

About half of this cohort's Losstenders came into the role following the death of a family member or partner, and expressed a desire to continue their own healing journeys. As one Losstender, Robert, put it: "When I started this role, I knew that there's no way I'm going to engage in grief and loss without addressing my own grief and loss.

Maybe a few years after my brother died I was talking to somebody about him and they said, 'Well yeah, that happened but when are you gonna get over it?' That's my brother. I'm never gonna get over it. I don't want to get over it. I want to hold on to stories and carry him through the rest of my life. The way he's helped me and carried me often."



Outcomes

Greater sense of purpose & perspective

~80%

of evaluation respondents reported a greater sense of purpose over Soloss.

Folks who experienced the most change had a learning orientation, expressed desire for growth, and often didn't feel seen or valued in other settings.

~85%

of respondents reported greater connection to the human project (a sense of agency, meaning, possibility), the sacred, and to culture over their time with Soloss.

Example stories

Tyson, one of this cohort's Losstenders came to Edmonton, unhoused, from Saddle Lake Cree Nation. He's now a single dad, in recovery, and working frontline for an inner city agency. Soloss enabled him to expand his identity and cultural practices -- as a fellow community member and Indigenous leader. Prior to Soloss, Tyson had never led a prayer or smudge before. During Soloss, he took an active role in ceremony, both sharing his know-how and actively learning about culture.



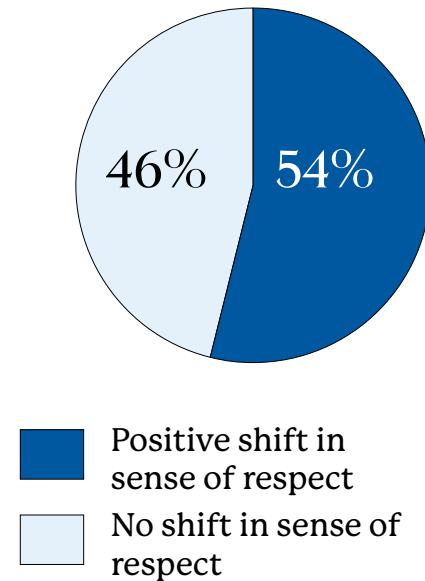
Outcomes

Greater sense of respect, solidarity and support

54% of evaluation respondents reported a positive shift in respect; 46% reported no shift.

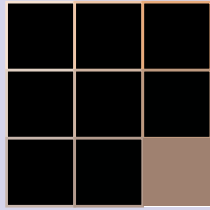
0% reported a negative shift. No shift can mean that respondents came into Soloss with a high sense of respect, which remained constant over time.

Reporting of shift in sense of respect after being a part of Soloss



Jill, a Losstender, comes into Soloss with formal training as a social worker. She's also a resident of the McCauley neighbourhood, and wanted to learn how to engage as a neighbour and fellow human, not a professional. She highlights the impact Soloss has had on her perceptions of others: "The change for me was how you see the community...When you're professional, you have a certain sort of built in safety. So I didn't know how to understand that as a resident and I felt like I got to know houseless people as individuals. It's really destigmatized for me, the houseless community even though I intellectually understood that, I really feel that in my heart, so that's been a big shift for me and lots of change for the better."

A. Learning about the value Soloss unlocks and its theory of change



Outcomes

Greater sense of trust and belonging to community

~92%

of evaluation respondents reported greater connection to friends, family & community over Soloss.

Sense of belonging was in the top four shifts evaluation participants reported.

Example stories

An unhoused community member shared how much of a sense of belonging he experienced when he met a cohort member's cat at her home. Meeting someone's cat is a small thing, but also typically wouldn't happen in professional settings where there are strict boundaries between 'workers' and 'clients.' The informality and organic nature of the roles within Soloss opens-up opportunities to share parts of our lives with another, and creates the conditions for belonging & trust.



A. Learning about the value Soloss unlocks and its theory of change

B. Learning about the encampment context & how to pursue Soloss' purpose

As we started this third prototype and put out a call for Losstenders, we were struck by how many housed Edmontonians expressed a desire to be involved and in genuine relationship with unhoused community members. While cities and institutions have come to rely on trained workers to address social challenges, a sizable segment of everyday residents can and want to be part of the solution - not as volunteers for a charity, but as fellow neighbours. We see real opportunity for cities like Edmonton to invest in growing local leadership capacity and community care.

During the three-month prototype, Losstenders offered a lot of community care. They encountered more than 50 people carrying or experiencing deep loss. Through visual materials and hand-written invitations, we tried to validate people's grief and communicate our willingness to come alongside them in any way that might be soul quenching -- be it ceremony, prayer, dance, drawing, singing, sharing food, etc.

During Losstender onboarding, we placed renewed focus on ritual design, and spent time practicing how to attend to loss in creative, embodied, and spiritual ways. We also explored the role of physical space in opening-up deep conversational space.



What did we learn about tending to grief & loss in encampments?

How might we create space for collective healing & enable more moments of connection, creativity, and ceremony in encampments?

How might we champion people's own paths towards healing and finding meaningful support?

1.

What we tried

We brought on board artists or creatives as Losstenders, and were explicit that the role was not one of 'outreach workers.' People responded with curiosity and surprise when they learned we were not workers, and were often open to being in relationship.

What we learned

Showing up in quirky, artistic, and surprising ways often elicited curiosity from the people we met and a willingness to engage and reciprocate.



Example story

Losstenders found introducing themselves as creative practitioners, not workers, often shifted the dynamic.

“People opened up quickly and let their guard down with me. I was surprised by how welcoming they were. One guy I met didn't know why I was there. He asked, ‘Are you a volunteer? Are you a community worker?’ I would say, ‘No, I'm just an artist.’ Every time I say that there would be a smile and a change in energy. We didn't come with an agenda, instead just to be, and to share, and connect. People were like, ‘Oh your energy is different. You're not like the other ones that come here. You don't seem scared.’ We could just be real with people. When they asked if I deal with depression, I said ‘Yep.’”

What did we learn about tending to grief & loss in encampments?

How might we create space for collective healing & enable more moments of connection, creativity, and ceremony in encampments?

How might we champion people's own paths towards healing and finding meaningful support?

2.

What we tried

When visiting encampments, we tried to show up in ways that felt beautifully human. That looked like a) sitting down and shared food together, b) introducing ourselves as artists or fellow Edmontonians, c) spending as much time as we/they wanted, d) sharing about our personal lives as well as listening to theirs, e) being goofy and laughing, f) dancing, bringing art supplies, and sharing “fake champaign” in fancy glasses.

What we learned

Prioritizing human-to-human interactions without preset agendas or expectations forged space for deep conversation, connection, conviviality, and healing.



Example story

After an event, we brought leftover sparkling apple juice so with us to encampments along with some fancy wine glasses! It brought such a feeling of surprise, cheer, and delight!

The unexpected nature of the offer unlocked many moments of connection. One encampment resident noted, “[When you first came to our camp], I thought what kind of people are these? Are they drunk or what? [laughs] But you know, that’s the best thing that could ever happen, because it brought a lot of life back in.”

What did we learn about tending to grief & loss in encampments?

How might we create space for collective healing & enable more moments of connection, creativity, and ceremony in encampments?

How might we champion people's own paths towards healing and finding meaningful support?

3.

What we tried

During our time with campers & Losstenders, we held ceremonies of letting go, we played the favourite songs and ate the favourite foods of loved ones who had passed away, we wrote notes on ribbons, we read poems, and we prayed. Each Losstender offered something from their personal repertoire- be it dance, prayer, teachings, tarot cards, breathwork, etc.

What we learned

Bringing ceremony, medicines, candles, art, and rituals to where people are (and having them available anytime they're needed) led to people in encampments making repeat use of these healing offerings, letting us know their needs, and coming to us when grief struck. This was in contrast to ceremony or support services being offered only off-site at fixed locations and times.



Example story

We met several campers who had recently had a friend pass away in their camp, but no way to honour them. They wished they had access to sweetgrass so they could cleanse their home and feel better in that space. One of our Losstenders knew of a place to gather sweetgrass on his reserve, so a small group of us drove several hours to go pick medicines there on the weekend. The following week, we went to visit our new friends and gave them a braid of sweetgrass.

What did we learn about tending to grief & loss in encampments?

How might we create space for collective healing & enable more moments of connection, creativity, and ceremony in encampments?

How might we champion people's own paths towards healing and finding meaningful support?

4.

What we tried

We held weekly cohort debriefs at Dawson Park. This was initially intended to be a time to support Losstenders, but our regular presence piqued the interest of many passersby - including unhoused and housed folks who stopped to ask what we were doing, often sharing their own experiences of loss and joining us to make art or engage in ceremony. Having the debrief as a space to process our own personal losses transformed into a space where everyone was welcomed to join and process their grief collectively with us. Instead of being a "program that helps marginalized people with loss" we lived out a community where we all shared moments of loss - and by including ourselves, this made it a human and welcoming space for others.



What we learned

Recognizing that we too experience grief and loss, and tending to our personal losses in a public & collective way encouraged others to take part.

People living in encampments could tend to their own grief as part of a collective. They weren't singled out as the ones needing help or intervention.

Example story

On our first debrief day, a young unhoused woman came by the picnic tables with the kitten she was caring for. Two weeks later we saw her again, and she began to share some of the heavy experiences weighing her down. While she was speaking, a Losstender asked if she wanted to join us in making some art. She agreed and, as she sat down with us and began to draw, her demeanor changed. When she finally had to head out, she left with many pieces of art as gifts. Losstenders had been painting expressions of care & stories from her life. We exchanged hugs and she left saying she felt much better.

What did we learn about tending to grief & loss in encampments?

How might we create space for collective healing & enable more moments of connection, creativity, and ceremony in encampments?

How might we champion people's own paths towards healing and finding meaningful support?

5.

What we tried

Alongside our weekly debriefs, we made regular treks to encampments across the city. The combination of consistent gatherings & spontaneous meet-ups made space for intentional and emergent moments of care. We also commissioned and animated a portable circus-tent structure to create literal space for conversation, movement, and expression. The space proved to be a spectacle, attracting attention, inviting creative contribution, and bringing colour & beauty. It drew many people to come and engage, make art or have a quiet moment, or build relationships with the Losstenders.



What we learned

Losstenders' orientation of being open to whatever emerges enabled them to be responsive to the needs and desires of each person they were in relationship with.

Soloss' valuing of cultural & spiritual outlets for healing facilitated honest and deeply personal conversation, and allowed us to offer moments of acknowledgement that fit the Sharer's spirituality and culture.

Appreciating the relationship between physical and emotional space was key in designing spaces where a different kind of conversation could take place, where grief and loss could be expressed and welcomed, rather than shied away from.

Example story

At one encampment, we joined in an impromptu prayer circle with a group. They told us, "You have no idea how much this is appreciated." Campers told us, "You bring a bright light, you brighten my day, and leave us feeling better."

You can experience one of the stories of a group we met [here](#)

What did we learn about tending to grief & loss in encampments?

How might we create space for collective healing & enable more moments of connection, creativity, and ceremony in encampments?

How might we champion people's own paths towards healing and finding meaningful support?

6.

What we tried

We were intentional about not having an agenda when we went to visit people in camps. We didn't want people to feel like they had to change or be anything in order for us to be in a relationship. If people spoke to us about housing or needing a ride to an appointment, we were happy to help - just like one friend would help another - but it wasn't an expectation or something we pushed. Our priority was on being human together and tending to the existential needs we all share - for respect, acknowledgment, and connection.



What we learned

We can foster trust by attending to what people say matters to them, rather than what we think ought to be the priority in their life right now.

Rather than center our interactions on referring people to services, we connected them to resources when they asked for it. Requests for help came up naturally, when the time was right for the person, and varied relationship to relationship.

Example story

There was one unhoused gentleman who first watched us from afar. By the second week, he joined our debrief circle as an observer. By the third week, he fully contributed and shared. We developed a relationship with him as a person, not pressing for details about his housing situation. Several weeks later, when he did mention he hoped to get on AISH, we asked if it would be ok to connect him with Street Outreach and he agreed to be brokered. In our evaluative interview, he shared that, "Soloss made me want to get a job, or look at the kinds of things I would like to do as a person." For him, the most important part of Soloss is the sense of fellowship & camaraderie.

What did we learn about the untapped resource of Edmontonians who have a desire to be involved, and how to build bridging social capital?

How might we unlock latent resources in our communities and build networks of ground-up care?

How might we foster bridging social capital and build more mutual relationships between folks across different circumstances outside of the traditional

1.

What we tried

Nine Losstenders formed relationships with 50+ unhoused folks in 6+ different neighbourhoods. During our matchmaking process, more than 40 Edmontonians applied to be Losstender in a two week period -- an indicator of the number of everyday folks wanting to contribute to encampments, often without an outlet to do so.

What we learned

Allowing flexibility in how people live out their role, including what artistic/creative modalities they bring, what their schedule is, what conversations they have with people in encampments, etc. was key for residents to feel able to show up as themselves and build authentic relationships with their unhoused neighbours.

Example story

Another Losstender recounted her journey of wanting but not knowing how to engage with houslessness in her neighbourhood. Soloss opened the doors for her to build meaningful relationships with her unhoused neighbours.

“Living in Riverdale and being a neighbour, I always wanted to connect with my [unhoused] neighbours. Before I didn’t feel I had the courage, and wasn’t sure my presence would be wanted. You know, ‘Oh here I am a white girl.’ I don’t want to be a white saviour. [Soloss] has given me the courage to continue these relationships. I built relationships that I want to keep up. I keep them close to my heart and they’re my friends.”

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2.

What we tried

Initially we weren't sure which areas of Edmonton to focus on. As the summer progressed, many Losstenders sought out encampments in their home neighbourhoods enabling relationships to form citywide.

What we learned

Letting Losstenders connect with others in their own home areas contributed to a deep sense of connectedness to one's own life and neighbourhood.

Example story

One Losstender shared that on their way to the grocery store, they ran into several people from camps that they had met before! Running into people in their own neighbourhood made it feel like an authentic neighbour-to-neighbour connection.

What did we learn about the untapped resource of Edmontonians who have a desire to be involved, and how to build bridging social capital?

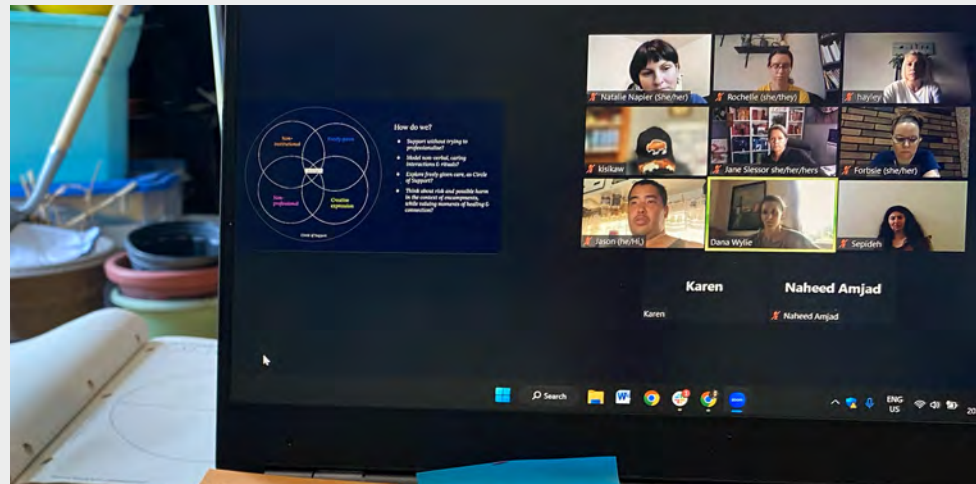
How might we unlock latent resources in our communities and build networks of ground-up care?

How might we foster bridging social capital and build more mutual relationships between folks across different circumstances outside of the traditional

3.

What we tried

Each Losstender was paired with a Circle of Support member, someone with expertise in healing, cultural supports, or a well-developed therapeutic practice. All weekly debriefs started with an opening ritual designed to open-up reflective space rather than with a set of tasks, goals, objectives, or updates. Without being prompted, Losstenders shared the losses they experienced in their lives, and offered care to each other, using words, music, prayer and dance.



What we learned

Key factors that led to Losstenders' feeling supported included:

- a) Having concentric circles of support, or "support for the support," so that Losstenders receive care even as they are extending it to others.
- b) Using ritual & art as ways to care and tend to those providing care.
- c) Ensuring debrief spaces are open, mutual, and people can be vulnerable rather than being managed or evaluated.

Example story

One Losstender underscores the impact of having support and a place where she could be herself: "In the weekly debriefs, I felt like we were taken care of, which we needed to be able to care for others. That allowed me time to reflect on these occurrences and stories and wisdom coming to me and process it, so you don't get too weighed down by it all."

What did we learn about the untapped resource of Edmontonians who have a desire to be involved, and how to build bridging social capital?

How might we unlock latent resources in our communities and build networks of ground-up care?

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4.

What we tried

As unhoused community members expressed interest in taking on meaningful roles within the Losstending cohort, we welcomed them into the fray, celebrating their contributions as Bannock Makers, Art Teachers, Cooks, Loss Letting-Goers, and more.

What we learned

Being oriented to valuing the contributions of folks who are typically seen as recipients of help allowed us to spontaneously develop new kinds of roles.

Seeing ourselves as a flexible prototype instead of a set-in-stone program afforded us the flexibility to pivot and embrace these new roles, even where they added organizational complexity!

Example story

A community member, Puppy Love, describes how joining weekly debriefs at Dawson Park motivated further healing & community engagement. "I felt excited sharing my bannock with you guys. It made me happy... I really want to do more and more... I did a lot of healing with you guys."

What did we learn about the untapped resource of Edmontonians who have a desire to be involved, and how to build bridging social capital?

How might we unlock latent resources in our communities and build networks of ground-up care?

How might we foster bridging social capital and build more mutual relationships between folks across different circumstances outside of the traditional

1.

What we tried

Nearly 100% of evaluation respondents said that what sets Soloss apart is prioritizing relationships and a culture of mutuality & learning. That is distinct from the usual focus on service delivery & performance.

“Friend” was the top word used by evaluation respondents to characterize the relationships people formed over Soloss, not worker, colleague, client, etc.

What we learned

Two key factors in building bridging social capital included

- a) prioritising mutuality and learning over hierarchy and performance.
- b) introducing relational ethics into the Losstender onboarding process, and navigating relational complexity through open discussions rather than with a rigid set of do's and don'ts.

Example story

One example of mutuality can be witnessed in the expressions of love and care exchanged between a Losstender and Sharer:

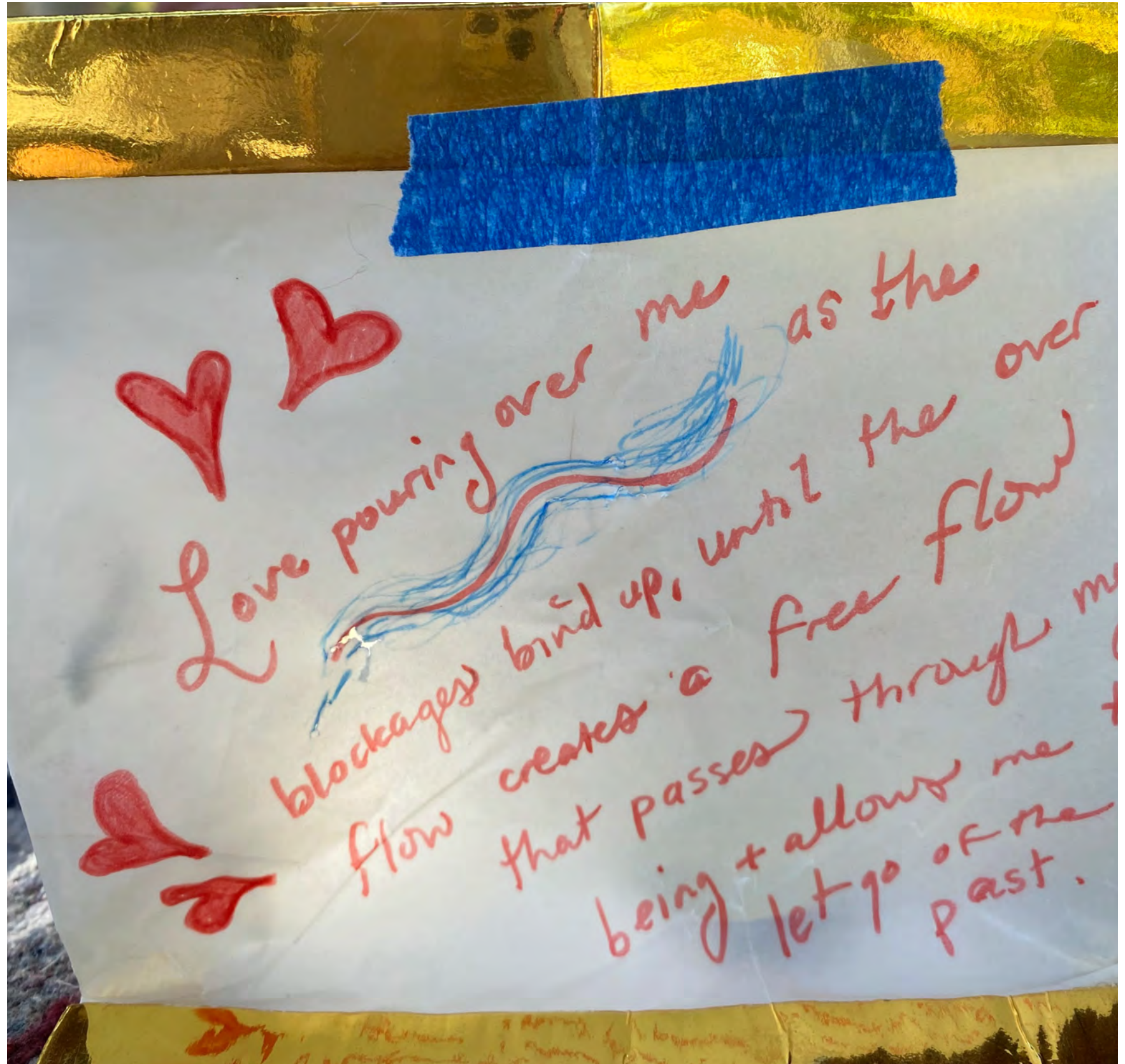
“I lost a lot of people down there and it's been a hard couple months. You helped me through it.” -Sharer.

*“We love you so much”
-Losstender*

C. Learning about the conditions required for good growth

Soloss came out of research that revealed a gap in informal care for grief and loss. And yet, maintaining the informal, community-led ethos becomes harder to do over time as pressure to scale-up and move away from the emergence of prototyping builds. We entered this third prototype curious about how to lay a different structural foundation for Soloss, one steeped in relationality versus managerialism, and how to help institutions value these kinds of grassroots solutions rather than fit them back into the boxes out of which they sprang. Working alongside the City of Edmonton, we tested some different ways for civil servants to viscerally experience the power of relationship and ritual. We sought to find creative ways to engage people's hearts and spirits within spaces very much oriented around rationality and logical decision-making.

At the same time, during this third round of prototyping, we experimented with ways that Soloss could evade some of the rationality and dominant logics of non-profit governance. Rather than grow Soloss through a typical non-profit structure, we have been holding open the question: how can Soloss organize itself in non-hierarchical and relational ways that align with our underlying decolonial worldview? Here's some of what we're learning.



What did we learn about how cities might engage with people in encampments, and advance community-led solutions?

Q1

How might the city work with community-led networks to increase civic engagement from folks on the margins and with lived experience?

What we tried

By bridging relationships between unhoused and housed people, people became invested in each other's lives. And in the context of those relationships, multiple Sharers expressed a desire to contribute to making the encampment situation better for everyone. One woman had ideas to share about housing. Several others wanted to come to the Soloss presentations to the city, to share their understanding and contributions. Because of the relationships between Sharers and Losstenders, and because of the partnership between Soloss and the city, folks living in encampments had a chance to come and speak with city branch leaders along with other Soloss members.

They also engaged in city meetings around Indigenous-led shelter spaces. In addition, Losstenders who have lived-experience themselves and are racialized participated in leadership meetings and city council meetings. This gave people who have felt never able to participate in our city, and had never been given a space to be listened to, or been asked to share, an opportunity to do so. Soloss created specific conditions of support and care that made this possible, including not controlling, mandating, or filtering what network members want to share from their hearts.

Lessons for the city

Here are some ways institutional actors can show up to strengthen civic engagement:

- Making space and time to be relational and welcoming when people on the margins have a desire to participate and share
- Expressing gratitude to people who have shared, extending care, and connecting person-to-person with them after the meeting (which helps to build trust, neutralize hierarchy, and convey value)
- Listening deeply to what people have to say and value their words by engaging further with them directly
- Prioritizing relationships within gatherings and meetings, and protecting the space from structural interruptions like time constraints
- Being open to coming up with creative ways of gathering together, outside of the norm

Example story

"I've lived here my whole life and have never walked into Churchill square," said one Losstender.

One of Soloss' early presentations to the encampment steering committee was canceled last-minute, and a city branch manager made it a priority to make sure that Soloss could share during a subsequent branch leadership team. This opened the doors for Losstenders to share openly about their experiences and be heard and taken seriously by city leaders. The branch manager also named and acknowledged that the previous meeting had been canceled, which helped Soloss members to feel warmly welcomed, valued, and heard. City staff also came up afterwards to express gratitude and appreciation, which meant a lot.

What did we learn about how cities might engage with people in encampments, and advance community-led solutions?

Q2

How might the city learn about the conditions that help or hinder a sense of agency, purpose, respect and wellbeing in encampments?

What we tried

The closure of the 50th street encampment in the summer of 2023 illustrates both the possibilities and missed opportunities for fostering a sense of agency, purpose and respect with encampment residents, especially those living in camps tagged as ‘moderate’ or ‘high-risk.’ The fixed risk matrix doesn’t allow for movement or change, and is predicated on a top-down response.

Soloss was open to testing an alternative: taking on a mediation role and learning how to collaborate with residents of the camp to self-organize to address concerns as well as address the fear & anxiety that comes from the threat of displacement & loss of home. Despite having resources & will to try an alternative approach, there didn’t seem to be the conditions - including authorities, permissions, & collaborative dynamic - available to do so.

Lessons for the city

Here are some ways institutional actors can learn about what enables versus threatens wellbeing in encampments:

- Spending unstructured time listening and learning from people in encampments in the places & spaces residents feel most comfortable
- Creating mechanisms for community feedback & dialogue other than 311 complaints
- Recognizing & building on the strengths and desires for contribution in neighbourhoods and camps
- Honing a collaborative ethos not only with other departments & service providers but directly with unhoused and housed community members

Example story

A 50th street resident shared with Soloss their desire to meet with the city to better understand the risk matrix, share innovative ideas about housing, and collaborate. Seeking direct connection to encampment decision-makers, they called 311 asking to be brokered to city staff. That hasn’t happened, yet, but points to the future opportunity space.

What did we learn about how cities might engage with people in encampments, and advance community-led solutions?

Q3

How might the city develop fresh ways of supporting community-led networks?

What we tried

The RECOVER Urban Wellbeing Team served as a helpful broker between Soloss and the city's encampment response, opening the door to prototype Soloss in this context. The adoption of a prototyping approach within the city's encampment response also paved the way for flexible learning over fixed service delivery.

Bringing that prototyping mentality into evaluation, reporting, and communications could be a helpful next step in harnessing the potential of community-led networks. One of the most significant results of a prototype can be reframing outcomes and metrics (rather than hitting prescribed targets) and new language & narratives (rather than fitting into the same key messages).

Lessons for the city

Here are some ways institutional actors can support community-led networks:

- Providing explicit space for trial & error
- Asking for evaluations that test theories of change and learning (which opens up space for innovation), rather than hitting prescribed outcomes and targets (which limit the flexibility of community-led solutions to respond to what emerges and what people on the margin's say matters to them)
- Taking on the role of observer & co-learner
- Recalibrating risk
- Problem solving alongside community-led networks in a responsive & creative manner
- Valuing and not editing down communications so that it retains the look, feel, and spirit of the community-led network versus corporate speak

Example story

RECOVER team members regularly showed up for debriefs in Dawson Park. Losstenders expressed appreciation for the team's presence, and the fact they were there to listen, learn, and contribute as equals -- not to steer, monitor, or restrain community-led activity.

What did we learn about how cities might engage with people in encampments, and advance community-led solutions?

Q4

How might the city strengthen its **understanding** of community-led, non-institutional care in encampments?

What we tried

We brought ritual and ceremony to the city administration by including time for prayer and an opening ritual in two update sessions with branch leadership teams & staff. Soloss members co-led each session, sharing their own healing practices, teachings, and experiences with Soloss.

Rather than a typical presentation, we found that opening up space for us all to show up as humans and be honest and real with each other, allowed for a depth of connection, relationships, shared humanity and vulnerability that can sometimes be rare in highly-structured professional work settings.

Lessons for the city

Here are some ways institutional actors can strengthen its understanding of community-led, non-institutional care:

- Spending time in context
- Meeting and building direct relationships with community members, not just with paid or professional staff
- Re-imagining stakeholder meetings as spaces for shared experience not only presentations & didactic updates
- Recognizing the limits of a fast-paced, productivity culture and taking time for breath, movement & ceremony

Example story

Bringing ritual into formal city spaces was embraced by so many staff. One staff member told us: “I have worked here for a very long time and I have never been in a meeting like this, and that’s a good thing.”

What did we learn about how to grow Soloss in values-aligned ways?

Q1

How might we grow the number of community members with **desire, energy, and initiative** to shape Soloss going forward?

What we tried

With University of Alberta professor Tim Barlott, we hosted a series of workshops for network members to reflect back and imagine how to spread the ethos of Soloss. We've continued to explore our individual & collective aspirations through network events, and by inviting the network to participate in certain key decisions regarding Soloss.

Lessons for the city

The following factors are important in growing the number of Soloss network members:

- Regular convenings with folks involved in all cohorts of Soloss
- Both structured & unstructured time together
- Rooting network engagement in desire rather than obligation (what do we want, rather than what we think we ought to do or we're told to do)
- Having resource to remunerate network members for their contribution

Example story

About 10 Losstenders and Sharers from our first two cohorts in 2020 and 2021 re-engaged with Soloss through the workshops, and expressed real desire to have a continued role.

Based on that desire, we invited past Losstenders and Sharers to be part of the recruitment and matchmaking process for this third cohort. A handful of Losstenders read applications, offered questions, and engaged in decision-making.

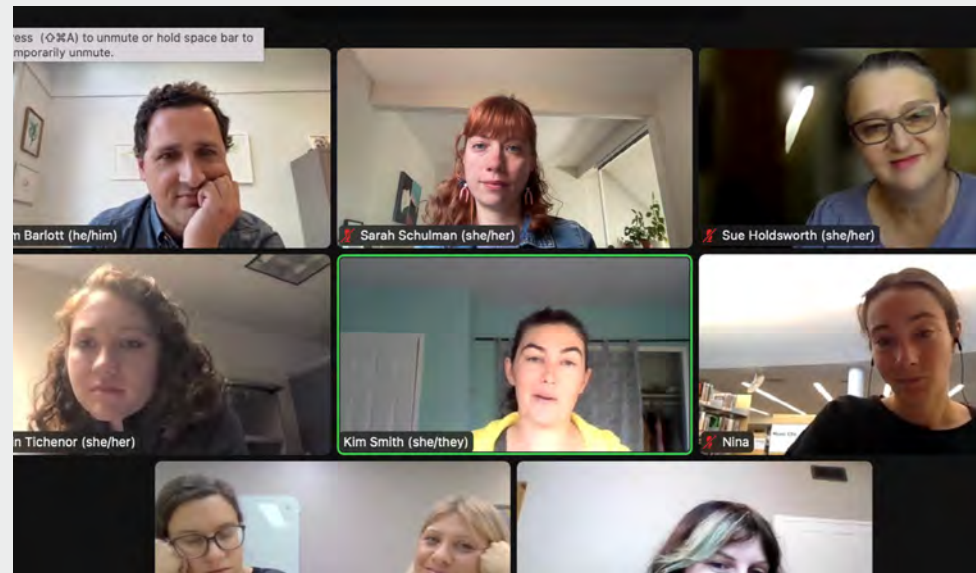
What did we learn about how to grow Soloss in values-aligned ways?

Q2

How might we broaden roles and opportunities for contribution to Soloss?

What we tried

We opened up our work and welcomed network members' & community members' engagement in everything within Soloss, including the co-facilitation of network events, our matchmaking process to find new Losstenders, giving presentations about Soloss, helping with our evaluation, and contributing to research.



Lessons for the city

Key factors in broadening opportunities for contribution include:

- Moving beyond Sharers, Losstenders, and Circle of Support as the primary roles
- Enabling community members to create their own roles
- Building Soloss' profile as a source of wisdom & insight so there are more opportunities for network members in community
- Practicing radical transparency with all parts of Soloss and opening up all elements to network engagement

Example story

Bringing Losstenders, sharers, unhoused friends, and community members to meetings with the city to share in ceremony and directly communicate their experience felt different for all involved. One Losstender, Tyson, shared how validating it felt to be leading ceremony in these kinds of spaces -- spaces he typically would not be invited into.

What did we learn about how to grow Soloss in values-aligned ways?

Q3

How might we move beyond successive time-bound cohorts to operate more as a continuous dynamic network?

What we tried

We established a network-wide communications platform on Slack, now with close to 50 members.

We are working towards a set of rotating (paid) leadership & facilitation roles and fundraising for a 'network' budget as distinct from cohorts.

We are encouraging and supporting network members to bring the Soloss spirit to their own communities.



Lessons for the city

Key factors in shifting to a dynamic network include:

- Curating and regularly animating shared communication spaces
- 1:1 reach outs and ongoing relationship building
- Seeking resources dedicated for the network and not just for running cohorts
- Rethinking governance as structure towards governance as process
- Creating principles for decision-making and letting go of some centralized control
- Recognizing as much as we embrace non-hierarchy, we still need clear leadership and that leadership takes time & resources
- Finding ways to support rotating leaders

Example story

Two Losstenders independently collaborated to design and put on a 'carnival of grief and loss' at a local cafe -- one example of many of the ripple effects network engagement can have.

In Summary

Soloss contributes to wellbeing by fostering connection to community, culture, the sacred, meaning and purpose.

1.

Moments of healing are possible within the context of trusting relationships; trust comes from shared vulnerability

2.

Ceremony, ritual, and creative expression open-up relational space not only in encampments, but within city institutions.

3.

Both housed and unhoused Edmontonians want to contribute in meaningful ways. Narratives that focus exclusively on safety prevent recognition of this informal resource base. Alongside investment in professional service providers, investing in informal roles can strengthen social connectedness.

4.

To sustain what makes Soloss meaningful, we need ways of organizing and making collective decisions that are relational and networked rather than prescriptive and top-down.

8

Key Takeaways

While Soloss is not a panacea, three years of co-design and prototyping indicate Soloss is a bright spot illuminating alternative ways to approach houselessness, addiction, social isolation and loneliness.

Novel solutions start with reframing stuck social problems and tired public narratives. While public discourse tends to paint houselessness and addiction as material challenges -- caused by lack of housing, income, employment, social services, and treatment centers -- the roots of houselessness and addiction intertwine with the roots of social isolation and loneliness: profound disconnection and loss of self, community, culture, ground, spirituality, meaning, and purpose. Building more affordable housing, raising benefit rates, reducing barriers to employment, and adding beds to treatment centers will certainly help ease the pain. Still, such interventions rarely get underneath the pain. Unless we learn to attend to people's body and soul needs, we risk slapping more band-aids on deep wounds. Soloss can be a vehicle for teaching us how to look after people's spirits so we can foster healing, and strengthen connections across lines of difference.

For institutions seeking to address bedeviling social challenges, foster wellbeing, and tackle ever growing social fragmentation, we offer our most enduring insight: healthy, two-way relationships -- not programs or services -- underpin deep personal and cultural change. Through Soloss, we've repeatedly witnessed how relationships are sites for beauty, magic, and transformation. Being in an authentic relationship, where we can be our vulnerable, messy, full selves,

cannot be substituted by relationships with professionals, no matter how skilled. While professional relationships can offer much needed expertise and guidance, they cannot, on their own, quench our human thirst for love, belonging, meaning, and purpose. We need both formal and informal support to navigate this maze of a world and thrive.

Rather than try to plant informal approaches within formalized, institutional spaces, we've come to appreciate their distinct growing requirements. For informal support to ethically proliferate what's needed is freedom from fixed rules, top-down agendas, rigid boundaries, empirical and legalistic paradigms. It's neither fair nor realistic to expect institutions to cultivate these conditions when they've been set-up to adjudicate rules, execute on political agendas, and manage liabilities. Instead of institutions trying to adopt and run models like Soloss, then, we believe institutions can acknowledge, value, and collaborate with them. Over the last three years, the City of Edmonton's RECOVER team has modeled this kind of allyship approach. They have functioned as an investor, co-learner, relationship broker, and barrier buster. The opportunity is for cities to embed and spread this less managerial, and more symbiotic role by flowing resources to emerging models while resisting system urges for greater control. From work in other jurisdictions,

we've seen how seemingly innocuous layers of oversight build up over time: institutional flexibility afforded during the early stages of an innovation process gives way to institutional rigidity during implementation and scale.

This is the same risk we are attuned to as we look to grow Soloss' reach outside of institutions. Even outside of institutions, institutionalization can creep into practice in a myriad of ways. Perhaps the most common way is through programmatization. In an effort to scale a promising model, it's all too easy to set-up fixed structures and lines of accountability, standardize curriculum, create eligibility requirements, and veer away from continuous learning towards meeting delivery targets. To guard against these natural tendencies, we are experimenting with 'scree scaling' and networked governance, where we scale lots of small experiments, led by Losstenders, Sharers, and Circle of Support members who rotate leadership roles, make collective decisions, and self-organize future cohorts. Mutual desire and shared values, rather than professional obligations, function as the organizing glue. Instead of a manager, staff, and non-profit board, we envision a collective of artists, musicians, poets, dancers, facilitators, debriefers, bannock makers, builders, designers, and healing practitioners able to buttress the work of the network. We are not there, yet. We have, though, encountered many glimpses of this future reality.

Here again is where the interests of Soloss and institutions like the City of Edmonton meet. The future that the City of Edmonton envisions in its 10-year plan is very much the same future Soloss imagines: one where "creativity and community spirit are lights to the world" and where "the city's heart is its people, who make everything possible."

Synergies between Soloss and City of Edmonton Strategy

Connect(Ed)monton Strategic Plan, 2019-2028

Guiding principle:

"We create as a community to connect people to what matters to them. We care about the impact of our actions on our social, economic, cultural, spiritual and environmental systems."

Goals:

"Edmonton is a neighbourly city with community and personal wellness that embodies and promotes equity for all Edmontonians."

Community Safety and Wellbeing Strategy, 2022

"All Edmontonians benefit when more people in our city feel safe and included. Community safety and well-being is a responsibility shared by everyone."

From three rounds of prototyping, we are confident everyday people in Edmonton have the desire to create and contribute, if only they knew how. Over the last fifty years as we've professionalized care, we've lost some of our collective capacity to reach out to one another, and perhaps we've never really nurtured our collective capacity to engage across lines of difference.

What it looks like to be in relationship across lines of difference:

- ▶
 - ▶
 - ▶
 - ▶
 - ▶
 - ▶
- We get to know people as fellow humans sharing the land with us**

We have no agenda other than to be present with people with a posture of care, love, and openness

We share moments & morsels without the need to rationalize outcomes

We recognize boundaries are emergent as we learn to pay close attention to how we and others are feeling

We ask permission, listen, check-in, invite, exchange, and honour

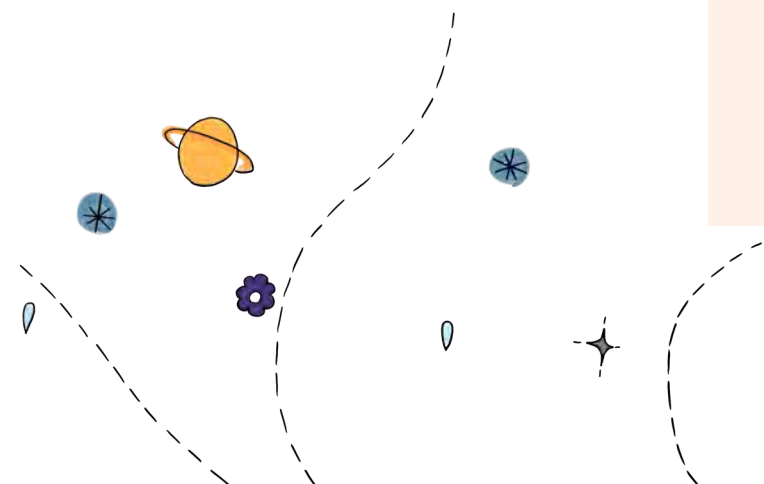
We lean into beauty and ugliness

Moving towards a shared future means cultivating and unleashing our relational capacities. Cities and institutions can help by embracing the pockets of possibility, and supporting prototypes like Soloss to stay forever prototypes: spaces for rich, continuous learning that offer institutional and non-institutional actors ongoing opportunities to engage, even momentarily, as fellow humans.

Questions for finding the pockets of possibility

We share these reflective prompts as a way for institutions & cities to locate the pockets of possibility, or cracks of light, that can seed and support more relational models of practice.

- Where within the system is it possible to challenge rules & norms rather than enforce rules & norms?
- Where in institutions might people be freed to work more relationally? How can relationships, rather than top-down agendas or priorities, drive action?
- Where is there room for flexibility to cede, rather than hold, control?
- Outside of consultation exercises, how might institutions come to deeply know the desires of community members, especially people on the margins?
- What are some ways to enable the direct exchange of wisdom and insight between people on-the-ground and institutional actors, rather than filtered through reports, briefing notes, presentations, and highly managed information?
- How might an institution nourish spaces that prioritize learning over deliverables?
- How can institutions expose their staff to more relational and grassroots models of practice, not with the expectation that they must run such models, but with the expectation that they value and contribute to such models?



Closing in a good way...

We offer lyrics written by Losstender Kate Blechinger to honour the life of O, a dear friend to Sharers Keitha and Marcelle.



Rolling like Thunder (Song for O)

Voice rolling like thunder across the prairie sky
You were dancing like wonder
like the northern lights up high

I met you out on the Pow-wow Trail
With you by my side, I knew we could never fail

Ooh - ooh - ooh x 2

You were my brother, closer than kin to me
We were there for each other
Through all the heartache and harmony

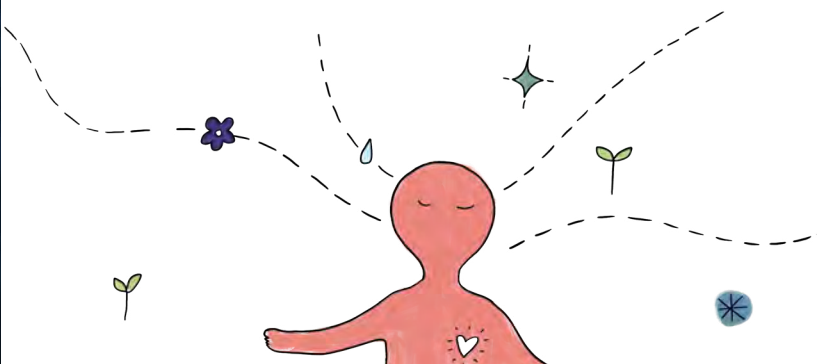
Listening to Hail to the King and playing chess
Man, that was everything

Ooh - ooh - ooh x 2

I know my life ain't gonna be the same
I'm gonna keep on playing that game
Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose
I'm grateful for your love and how it sees me
through

Ooh - ooh - ooh x2
Oh, I will remember you

Voice rolling like thunder
Across the prairie sky
Now you're dancing with wonder up there
where the angels fly



REACH
EDMONTON
Council for Safe Communities

GO
WITH
FORWARD

RECOVER.