Lots of NSRF “news you can use” happening right now!

Sorry you haven’t seen Connections in your inbox in awhile, but we have been quite busy here in the office on other tasks important to CFG work and your professional development.

#1: New website coming up soon!

After surveying our members and other users of our website, we are making some dramatic upgrades to the website. Soon it will be easier for you to find protocols, news, information about trainings, and other great content. We’re hoping to launch in December or January, and we’re also seeking a few people to fine-tune it before we launch. If you’re interested, please email ivan@nsrfharmony.org.

#2: Better indexing of protocols!

In addition to the familiar “A-Z index,” you’ll soon be able to click to preview the purpose of each protocol or activity without downloading it. You will need to login to see protocols, including our older, original protocols (which will still be freely accessible without a paid membership). The login information will help us understand what materials are in demand, so we know what’s most helpful and needs to be supported. We will also have a new mechanism by which you can search for terms mentioned in the purpose of every protocol and activity.

#3: Help matching the right protocols to your work!

Members of the NSRF will be able to use a new Protocol Matching Tool on the protocol page that will help you find a variety of resources specific to the type of work you have to do. You’ll first identify a general type (e.g., dilemmas, student work, etc.) and then narrow it down to a subset (e.g., preparing for dilemmas, looking at one student’s responses to a variety of assignments).

#4: Because we want as many people as possible to have that membership benefit, organizations can purchase “bulk renewals” of trained coaches*!

If you were trained as a coach on-site in your district, your organization can renew everyone who completed training all at once, for only $375, even if they’re renewing coaches from multiple trainings! For the cost of five coach memberships, 15 or more coaches at a school can be renewed. (* “Regular” $25 members who did not complete our coaches’ training are not included in this benefit.)

If you were trained individually or are responsible for paying your own renewal, you can earn a 20% discount as long as you renew before your coach membership expires. If you have questions, please email ivan@nsrfharmony.org or call us at 812-330-2702.

#5: Training benefits are increasing in 2018 (along with our rates) BUT you can save if you book another training now.

CFG Coaches’ Trainings will now include Collaborative Cue Cards and some other benefits, and thus our training fees are going up a little. BUT if you’ve booked a training with us since 2014, you can get a 2018-value training at 2017 prices IF you sign a contract before January 31. Call 812-330-2702 or email nsrf@nsrfharmony.org for details.
When coaching a CFG session we make sure that when participants enter the room they’re welcomed by the sounds of relaxing music, the smell of fresh coffee, and the temptations of (mostly healthy!) snacks. We as facilitators know that the atmosphere sets a tone for the work that’s to be done; we also know that the thoughtful preparation behind our group’s most successful work reaches far beyond grocery lists. The preparation for the CFG meeting really begins only when we have a confident understanding of why we are there and proceeds successfully only after the careful selection of processes to meet those needs. Often the effectiveness of the CFG meetings themselves depends upon the work that is done outside the group, most notably in the pre-conferences, which are perhaps the most crucial part of the CFG process.

When discussing pre-conferencing within CFG Coaches’ Trainings, NSRF facilitators stress that an effective pre-conference results in you, the coach, becoming an advocate for the presenter. It is vital that you understand as authentically as possible their perspective and needs.

It is in this context that we’ve sought to create more tools to help make CFG pre-conferences even more successful. One such tool can be found in the newly released version of the Collaborative Cue Cards, featuring the revamped quadrant of “Focused Listening,” which outlines its characteristics and stems for use in CFG work. Created by a team of NSRF National Facilitators, the Focused Listening strategies help us as coaches to intentionally hone our listening and ultimately improve our understanding.

**Advocating, not just coaching**

As we encourage people to bring less-than-perfect work and dilemmas to the meeting, we must first have built significant trust within the group, and with us as their coach. Coaches must develop techniques and strategies to understand the presenter’s needs, not merely at a surface level, but at a deeper level of empathy. By fully empathizing with the presenter’s issues, we can more accurately select the best protocol to address those needs. Then, in the meeting, we guide the group to provide the best possible help—focused in scope yet broad in options. Remember, when we run a protocol, we are not only ensuring the participants follow the protocol with fidelity, we are actively championing the presenter. We must ensure that their needs are met and the protocol results in content that helps in the specific, desired way revealed in the pre-conference.

**Deep, focused, generative listening**

Although this quadrant of the Collaborative Cue Cards will be helpful to anyone doing CFG work, the terminology of Focused Listening was carefully crafted in the context of pre-conferencing. We looked at a wide variety of resources to help convey this skill effectively.

In his widely acclaimed book outlining *Theory U*, Otto Scharmer suggests that, to move to a higher future possibility, we must pay more attention to our “field structures of attention” and seek to “shift the inner place from which we operate.” To clarify the differences, he points out that listening occurs at four levels and he contends that by becoming more conscious of how we listen, we increase the likelihood that we can access the “intelligence of the heart,” a level that Scharmer calls “generative listening” or connecting to the higher future possibility.

When we as coaches pre-conference, we must move beyond, what Scharmer refers to as the “downloading” listening stage, when people listen to confirm what they already know, and the “factual” listening stage, when people listen for what is different from what they know. Instead, through careful practice of Focused Listening, we can learn to listen “empathically” to “begin to see how the world unfolds through someone else’s eyes” (Scharmer, Intro).

An article from *Mindful magazine* reminded us that the listener’s internal impulses can too easily interfere with focused listening, and so we caution you to listen from a
Slowing down and placing understanding at the forefront creates much more satisfying results in any conversation, but especially those in which we have responsibility for leadership: coaching, teaching, parenting, and more

non-judgmental, accepting stance. Avoid any inclination to dispute, dismiss, or try to fix the problem within the pre-conference. Remember, within the pre-conference, you don’t want to jump ahead to possible results of a protocol, you only want to understand the problem and the presenter’s desired outcomes deeply enough so that the best protocol match can be made, the one most likely to give the presenter what they need so they can move forward.

Cycling through listening focuses

Our steps of focused listening and the variety of suggested stems we offer widen the potential for understanding and empathy. We propose listening for clues in five categories, not necessarily in a specific order. Our Focused Listening stems illustrate that understanding occurs at levels of depth, ranging from surface understanding of the information, facts or needs to deeper understanding of the values, emotions or assumptions behind those needs.

Information/Facts: Paraphrase or mirror the language of what the presenter has been seeing or experiencing.

Needs: Discern the presenter’s intended requests or needs out of the protocol.

Values: Understand the underlying values that the presenter holds in the context of this problem or piece of work. What are they revealing, in the pre-conference, that is especially important to them?

Emotions: Identifying and empathizing with the presenter’s emotions as they outline the piece of work or dilemma will help you both know that you, as coach, “get it.”

Assumptions: Check in with the presenter when you hear or infer beliefs and assumptions that they may be holding around the problem/work or around a specific direction or subset of advice they’re hoping to receive.

The process of applying Focused Listening calls on us as coaches to first listen, then paraphrase or mirror the content, and then, after receiving confirmation that we’ve “heard” correctly, ask follow-up questions that widen our understanding of the situation, moving beyond specific needs to the context behind those needs.

Expanded uses of these skills

Like many other skills and strategies of CFG work, Focused Listening has broad applications beyond a coach’s pre-conference sessions. Focused Listening skills help anyone listen better, with fewer internal distractions that inhibit true collaboration. These skills help us be more effective educators, colleagues, and participants in any sort of meetings. Not surprisingly, participants often comment about how useful the strategies are in personal relationships, work interactions, and especially in situations that begin as misunderstandings.

Over and over again, while consciously practicing Focused Listening, we’ve found that slowing down and placing understanding at the forefront creates much more satisfying results in any conversation, but especially those in which we have responsibility for leadership: coaching, teaching, parenting, and more. To be the best partner, colleague or coach, when I remember to place understanding above sharing my own experiences or stances, I move closer to empathy and even to a better future self.

“To be the best partner, colleague or coach, when I remember to place understanding above sharing my own experiences or stances, I move closer to empathy and even to a better future self.” – Dave Nelson

Collaborative Cue Cards in a variety of packaging options are available in the NSRF online store. They will be included in upcoming CFG Coaches’ Trainings as part of the training materials kept by the hosting organization. If you have ideas or resources about teaching these skills, we’d love to hear them.

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Using protocols in online discussions

By Zora Wolfe, CFG Coach in Philadelphia, PA, and assistant professor in K-12 educational leadership at Widener University. zmwolfe@widener.edu

Readers of NSRF Connections already know the benefits of using protocols to structure conversations during Critical Friends Group meetings, other meetings, in classrooms, and in other professional development opportunities. However, meetings can be short, and we may feel rushed or limited in our opportunities to really process and think deeply, even with the use of protocols.

To address some of these issues, I’ve started adapting NSRF protocols for use on online discussion boards to begin or extend conversations that occur in school-based professional development. In my work, we’ve used online discussions as part of the mandated hours for PD. Teachers were happy with the more flexible mode of online conversations rather than scheduling additional meetings. I facilitated “choice groups,” groups in which teachers choose to take part because they want to engage in the topic, which makes the participation go more smoothly.

In addition, I have found that using protocols in other online communities, such as university classes or even informal teacher groups, brings together a wide variety of voices that may not have been able to be heard in face-to-face meetings due to time or location constraints.

Research shows that online modalities offer the opportunity to extend the learning community beyond limited in-person interactions. Conversations that occur online offer the benefits of allowing discussion to continue asynchronously over time and distance, allowing educators from different schools to bring their expertise and experience to the learning community beyond regularly scheduled professional development sessions.

However, participants in online forums often comment on the lack of quality communication and activity. They note that they post infrequently on discussion boards, responding only to the required prompts, and they remain disconnected and isolated from each other. While frequent interaction is helpful to building a sense of community and lessening isolation, quality interactions are also important to help develop collaborative or critical inquiry stances towards leadership and teaching. This indicates that participating and leading conversations in online formats requires additional skills and expertise for effective online collaboration and inquiry to occur—skills and expertise NSRF coaches learned in training and through the use of protocols in in-person arenas.

In this article, I’ll share how and why I’ve used online protocols and some of my “lessons learned” about adapting protocols for asynchronous online conversations.

Why protocols in online discussions?

One criticism of online discussion boards is that often there is no clear focus in a discussion. To counter this criticism, a facilitator can use a protocol to clearly identify the purpose, content, and how people can participate. For example, I’ve modified the Four A’s protocol to introduce a specific reading before a meeting. About one week before our face-to-face meeting, I asked the participants to read a short text and follow the protocol by posting their Assumptions, Agreements, Arguments, and Aspirations to the board thread. Then each participant reads each others’ posts so that we could jump right into our discussion when we arrive at the face-to-face meeting. This allows participants to clarify their own thinking as they write their posts, and to process what was written by others in the group before we met, which allowed for us to dive into a deeper discussion in a shorter amount of time.

Similarly, the Text Rendering protocol can be used to help participants focus on the text during a discussion about a topic, rather than just going off on tangents or stories. In the first round of the discussion, I gave participants a reasonable deadline, asking them to list their sentence, phrase, and word. Then I added a second round to the protocol, asking participants to respond to each others’ posts after reviewing everyone’s contribution. In their responses, participants were able consider the different perspectives, comment on themes that emerged and their reactions to what others had chosen, and consider questions raised from reading each other’s writing.

I’ve also found that using protocols in online discussions, similar to face-to-face discussions, helps to facilitate participation, ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to participate and helping people talk to each other, rather than just respond to a discussion board prompt. For example, using the Three
Levels of Text protocol, I’ve asked each participant in the group to select a passage, share a brief reflection about the passage, and then what they think are the implications to their work in their first discussion board post. Then after everyone has posted their initial thoughts, the group can go back and write their responses to each others’ posts.

**Save the Last Word for Me** is another protocol that can be modified for online discussions. In this protocol, participants share a passage that is meaningful to them on the discussion board, and then other members post their response to the passage. After everyone has had a opportunity to add their responses, the “presenter” then has the opportunity to read everyone’s responses and have the “last word” in a final response. This format has allowed for more substantive discussion board responses since the asynchronous nature of the posts allows participants to have more time to construct their responses and process the ideas that are raised by others.

Using online discussion boards can also extend the amount of time you have for a group to engage with each other. For example, a simple protocol such as the **Closing Quotes activity** can also be used to help reflect on a discussion after a meeting, particularly if you were rushed or limited by time at the end of a session. I often link to a list of quotes and then ask each participant to post the quote they picked and then share what it means to them in relation to the work we had just completed.

### Important considerations

As you can see, protocols can be very helpful in structuring online discussions. However, here are some “lessons learned” and suggestions for how they can be facilitated to support the needs of the people in your group.

**Agreements** Just as in any community, it is important to establish trust and set Agreements for online participation. Perhaps this is even more important in online communities because of the potential for words to be misconstrued without the additional context and nonverbal cues present in face-to-face interactions. Sometimes it is possible to extend your existing Agreements and adapt them to online conversations, but in other situations, you may need to structure a separate conversation about what people want to have happen in your online spaces. Also,
just like in other communities, it is helpful to revisit your agreements regularly and examine your discussion threads to see the patterns of interaction. Are responses substantive? Do people respond to the ideas that are posted, or do they just add their own ideas? Do people tend to simply agree with each other without adding content, or to avoid conflict?

**Timing** Establish specific time frames for posting and when to respond. From the examples above, you can see that some protocols require that participants share an initial thought after which others can respond. If time frames are not specified, it would be difficult to respond: without a deadline, fewer people will post their initial ideas in time for collaboration. I found that it is helpful to ask everyone to complete their initial post by a specific date, and then ask everyone to go back to respond to the posts by a second date. Also, specifying an end date is helpful so that you can remind everyone to see how others responded, as well as to get a full picture of the conversation.

**Group size** Because it takes time to read and write substantive posts, you may find it necessary to consider the size of the online groups. Depending on your selected protocol, you may find that having only 4-5 people in a group is sufficient for a rich conversation. So, just as you manage group configurations in face-to-face discussions, you should also keep that in mind for online discussions.

Perhaps you can use the online space for some small group discussions, and then have a larger shareout during your face-to-face meeting time.

**Debrief** Just as in “live” protocols, it’s important to de brief the protocol experience and ask for feedback. Asking participants to consider “What were some aspects of the use of protocols that you found helpful to stimulate the discussion? How do you think the protocols helped you to be a better online participant? What suggestions do you have to make this experience better?” gave me great, thoughtful responses and encouraged participants to use these protocols in their own work.

**Conclusions**

Online discussions provide an opportunity to extend and deepen the collaboration that occurs in our regular learning communities, which generally are limited by time, and sometimes geography. Adapting and using protocols in online spaces provides facilitators with structured formats that have set schedules and specific guidelines for communication among participants. Just as in face-to-face meetings, the use of protocols promotes a safe environment by providing frameworks for equitable participation and focused feedback.

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**Happy holidays from everyone at The NSRF!**

We’re so grateful to have you doing CFG work, helping your colleagues and students complete all the work “on their plates.” Thank you for this service!
Ready to sharpen your facilitation skills?

Which dates for Critical Friends Group® Coaches’ Open Training work for you?

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To enroll or learn more, click through to the NSRF website or call 812-330-2702!
Book review

Are you “Willing to be disturbed?”
A review of Turning to One Another

By Kevin Mabie, Connections Contributing Editor, NSRF National Facilitator, kevinmabie@nsrfharmony.org

Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future
by Margaret J. Wheatley
Berrett-Koehler
Publishers; 2nd edition, 2009

If you have been part of a Critical Friends Group® Coaches’ Training, you likely experienced the Text Rendering Protocol using an excerpt called “Willing to be Disturbed.” This text, written by Margaret Wheatley, is part of a thought-provoking book called Turning to One Another.

As a National Facilitator of these trainings, I love Willing to be Disturbed because it fits so well with one of the themes of our work. At one point in the text, Wheatley points out that “we have to be willing to admit that we’re not capable of figuring things out alone,” so it’s a perfect fit for these trainings: one of the purposes of CFG work and NSRF protocols is to allow the voices in the room to share airtime, allowing the wisdom of all to come forth.

The Text Rendering Protocol encourages each participant to select from the text a sentence, phrase, and word that they believe is “particularly important for our work.” Participants often enjoy that we do not ask them to have a “back-up” for one’s sentence, phrase, or word. Instead, like-minded thinkers feel a connection to one another when they have chosen the same pieces of the text. After the participants have shared their sentences, phrases, and words, an open discussion occurs about the text.

For years, using Willing to be Disturbed with this protocol has consistently inspired an extremely positive response from participants. Most of our participants welcome the idea of embracing the wisdom in one’s group. Doing so makes everyone’s life easier, right? However, in recent trainings, I have begun to notice that some lines in the text are also giving participants pause.

For instance, Wheatley writes that we must be willing to have our beliefs and ideas challenged by what others think. She points out that we have “spent many years listening to others mainly to determine whether we agree with them or not...we don’t have time or interest to sit and listen to those who think differently than we do.” On the surface, this idea seems easy enough to swallow. But as some of my training participants have pointed out, there are some closed-minded beliefs that exist in the world today that are undeserving of our time and interest. Paradoxically, it seems that we have become closed-minded to closed-mindedness!

After having a similar response from multiple training groups, and because I loved the Willing to be Disturbed essay so much personally, I sought to share with my future groups the positive intent of Wheatley’s words. To do so, I thoroughly reviewed the full Turning to One Another book, and I am confident that any past or future participants who do so will be equally as moved and inspired as I was.

On page 14, Wheatley describes the setup of the book. Part One, she says, “contains shorts essays about things relevant to conversation.” This part of the book is designed to inspire a commitment to changing the world positively. Willing to be Disturbed is featured in this part of the book.

Wheatley describes Part Two as quotes and images around which readers can pause and reflect on what they have read. Part Three has twelve short conversation starters, each beginning with a thought-provoking question. Wheatley’s goal here seems to be giving her readers some complex issues to discuss; she hopes, of course, that participants in these potential discussions will see things differently enough to have deep conversations that challenge the thinking of one another. These essays include topics such as “When have I experienced good listening?” and “Do I feel a vocation to be fully human?”

Reading through Part One leading up to her use of the Willing to be Disturbed essay, I quickly discovered that Wheatley may have intended to upset some of our participants...and she did so for very positive reasons. At no point does Wheatley encourage readers to accept the opinions and perspectives of others as sacrosanct. However, only through our willingness to listen to the opinions of others with a sincere willingness to be disturbed will we inspire closed-minded individuals to do the same.

Wheatley wrote, “For conversa-
tion to take us into a deeper realm, I believe we have to practice several new behaviors.” She says that we must acknowledge one another as equals, try to stay curious about one another, remember that conversation is the natural way humans think together, and expect it to be messy at times.

Regarding the “messiness,” she added that a person hosting a conversation may feel a responsibility to draw connections between diverse contributions. However, she writes that “It’s important to let go of that impulse and just sit with the messiness...if we connect too early, we lose the variety we need. If we look for superficial commonalities, we never discover the collective wisdom found only in the depths.”

“We humans want to be together,” Wheatley wrote. “We only isolate ourselves when we’re hurt by others, but alone is not our natural state. Today, we live in an unnatural state—separating ourselves rather than being together.” If we can accept Wheatley’s belief as true, we must accept that even the most closed-minded of individuals wants to gravitate back towards their “natural” state. Perhaps modeling this behavior is the practice that will allow us to break through to our closed-minded friends. This point is the point that I hope will allow my future training groups to positively appreciate and the intent of the Willing to be Disturbed text.

Clearly, encouraging closed-minded peers to listen with a willingness to be disturbed is not an easy task. However, Wheatley would likely tell us that it is a task that can be achieved. In Willing to be Disturbed, Wheatley writes, “…the world now is quite perplexing. We no longer live in those sweet, slow days when life felt predictable.” After reading Turning to One Another, I know this is true... but after reading the book, my inspiration to positively affect those people around me has also been renewed. I hope you will read this book, too, and join Wheatley in her vision.
Last summer, I had the opportunity to provide professional development to middle school teachers in a populous school district just outside Mexico City in collaboration with the Centro de Enseñanza de Ingles Texcoco. This interdisciplinary partnership between US and Mexican educators is part of the U.S. State Department Fulbright Program, specifically its short-term teacher exchange program. It seemed an obvious match to me to connect the Fulbright Program’s goals to promote academic collaboration and “to build relations between the people of the United States and the people of other countries to solve global challenges,” paired with NSRF’s mission to tackle educational challenges of equity and student achievement, and to build relationships between the people of the United States and the people of other countries to solve educational challenges.

As a coach, another of my challenges was to choose protocols that allowed for meaningful collaboration in subdivided smaller groups, while providing enough guidance to engage active, equitable participation. While I strive to practice adaptive facilitation with all the groups I have the opportunity to coach or train, these challenges highlighted for me the importance of surveying teachers before the meetings, and then carefully reading participant reflections after each session to adapt our agendas. While the sessions after each session to adapt our agendas. While the

Promoting academic collaboration in Mexico using NSRF protocols

By Emily Sprowls, NSRF International Facilitator, Harmony High School science teacher, esprowls@harmonyschool.org

The district encompasses 921 public schools, crowded with 388,000 students aged 5-15 (preK-grade 9). Middle schools are usually staffed with 20 to 30 teachers, and 50 students per classroom. The school day is 8 hours long, with an additional 2 hours for recess and lunch. Classrooms contain 48 desks and 48 chairs, and students are required to wear uniforms. With 3,740 teachers to serve, creating an intimate Critical Friends Group community was a drastic shift in scale for administrators. However, we were able to bring together two groups of twenty interested teachers to work in a new environment.

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coaching challenge was to choose protocols that were accessible in a second language, either for me as a non-native Spanish speaker, or for the participants as English language learners. NSRF has been partnering with CFG Coaches at the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala who are also native Spanish speakers to translate protocols contained in our Coaches’ Handbook, and I was grateful for the opportunity to use some of those early drafts.

Based on these challenges, I put together the following agenda to scaffold trust and to build group collaboration skills, while periodically circling back to the needs and issues raised by the group over the multi-day workshops.

- Picture Metaphors Activity
- Compass Points Activity
- Agenda Planning Protocol
- Chalk Talk Protocol
- Success Analysis Protocol
- Reflections Review
- Zones of Comfort, Risk & Danger
- Feedback Carousel Protocol

In the final workshop evaluations, teachers indicated that the foundational activities like Compass Points and Comfort Zones were most useful: “I liked the activities because they required creativity and reflection.” By using the Chalk Talk protocol to tackle issues raised by the group during the Agenda Planning activity, teachers were able to discover and to discuss some of their commonalities: “I learned that we all confront similar situations, with different resources.” The valuable warm and cool feedback that each teacher received during the Feedback Carousel activity left many teachers eager for more opportunities to collaborate: “I learned that I miss having more communication among teachers.”

The Mexican teachers’ feedback underscored the importance and value of scaffolding and trust-building protocols, regardless of our wide variety of school settings and cultural contexts. We learned that translations are tricky when the original content includes common colloquialisms and idioms. (NSRF will be taking extra care in future versions of our materials to remove those for better clarity.)

I am grateful for the opportunity to have used the NSRF collaboration tools that we English-speaking CFG Coaches have at our fingertips, and the opportunity to use translations. They truly helped me fulfill the objectives of the Fulbright Program to build international relationships.

Mil gracias to my collaborators Mtro. Luiz Gonzalez and Mtra. Berenice Olvera of El Centro de Enseñanza de Inglés Texcoco. Thanks also to the Institute for International Education and La Comisión México-Estados Unidos para el Intercambio Educativo y Cultural (COMEXUS) for the opportunity to collaborate, and to Universidad del Valle de Guatemala for the translations.

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**NSRF IN THE TWITTERSPHERE**

Have you tweeted @TheNSRF or tagged us at #CFGwork lately?

Janet Graham @jangra24  Jul 17
Quote introductions @TheNSRF #CFGwork

Lissa Layman @MmeLayman

Spontaneously using @TheNSRF Rendering Protocol with an # class to collaboratively construct and expand thinking on this article planning in Kuwait. #AISQ8gr #CFGwork #CriticalFriends
Shout-out to researchers

Have you written a thesis or dissertation on a topic associated with Critical Friends Group® work or NSRF® protocols?

Now and then, we hear from someone seeking published research on the efficacy of Critical Friends Group® work, or the use of protocols in the classrooms. We’re happy to share research we have on file, but realize that it’s a bit dated. We expect some of you can point us to fresher research. If you know of any studies we should know about, too, please contact luci@nsrfharmony.org. Thanks so much!

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What do you think? How are we doing with the new design and content of Connections, and with the new website?

We’re working hard to eliminate bugs and add all current members and member-coaches to the new website. We really want to hear feedback from you, whether you have warm or cool feedback to share ... especially if you’re having a problem finding something you need!

Please send comments of any variety to luci@nsrfharmony.org. We appreciate it!

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