



## CPNRI Speaker Series

### “The Importance of Belonging”

by David Pitonyak, Ph.D.



#### About David Pitonyak

The largest part of my work involves meeting individuals who are said to exhibit "difficult behaviors." Most of these individuals exhibit difficult behaviors because they are misunderstood and/or because they are living lives that don't make sense. Often they are lonely, or powerless, or without joy. Often they are devalued by others, or they lack the kinds of educational experiences that most of us take for granted. Too often their troubling behaviors are the result of an illness, or even a delayed response to traumatic events.

You might say their behaviors are "messages" which can tell us important things about their lives. Learning to listen to an individual's difficult behaviors is the first step in helping the individual to find a new (and healthier) story.

I also believe, to paraphrase Jean Clark, that a "person's needs are best met by people whose needs are met." Supporting a person with difficult behaviors also involves an honest assessment of and attention to the needs of a person's supporters.

Another part of my practice involves training. I provide workshops and seminars on a variety of topics, including supporting people with difficult behaviors and supporting the needs of a person's friends, family, and caregivers.

In the recent past, I have provided consultation and training for individuals, families and professionals throughout the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, England, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I have worked with people in a variety of settings, including: home and professionally-staffed residential settings, schools, supported competitive job sites, sheltered workshops, and day activity programs.

*David Pitonyak lives in Blacksburg, Virginia with his wife Cyndi and two boys, Joe and Sam.*

[Interview and links next page ►](#)

## **A Few Questions with David Pitonyak**

**You point out that many people experiencing our services are profoundly lonely. For that matter, you can say that there are lonely people in all walks of life. Being lonely is unavoidable. Right?**

Loneliness does not discriminate. It affects all kinds of people – white, black, brown, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, people on the straight and narrow, people on the edge of things, people who experience disabilities, people “typical” in their development -- it knows no bounds.

But however widespread loneliness may be, it is not an inevitable part of the human experience. It is not in our nature, our biochemistry, to be alone. In fact, it is an integral part of our DNA. We are pack animals. We need to be a part of the larger human community. Being connected boosts our immune system. It dramatically increases our chances to live longer and happier lives.

I believe that loneliness is a central cause of many people’s difficult behaviors. They live lives of extreme isolation and the solution to their difficulty is the development of enduring, freely chosen relationships.

**Why are some people who most need relationships actually the most resistant to relationships?**

It is natural for people who have had their hearts broken time and time again to develop a resistance to relationships. Many people served by our field have experienced incredible loss throughout their lives and are reluctant, as anyone would be, to take a chance on someone who might also leave. Some people served by our service system experience attachment disorders, which is another way to understand their resistance.

**You talk about how we often know very little about the life stories of people who experience developmental disabilities. What happens when we become separated from our “stories”?**

Being ‘known’ is critical to our well-being. Having our stories held and told by others gives us a sense of place in the world, a sense of belonging. A sad and all too common truth for people who experience developmental disabilities is that little, if anything, is known of their stories. Reams and reams of paperwork are generated each year, but only a fraction of what is generated describes the person’s connection to the world. The file is instead a collection of things that the service system wants — a chronicling of interventions, evaluations, signatures, data points. There is no unfolding of things in these files, no character development, no plot. It all reads like the fine print on a cough medicine bottle. A person who has lost his or her story is at risk of being misunderstood and disrespected.

### ***Articles & Publications By David Pitonyak***

David Pitonyak’s website provides an extensive collection of his ideas and published work on a wide range of topics. The address for the site is: [www.dimagine.com](http://www.dimagine.com).

**Articles and information currently available include:**

[10 Things You Can Do To Support A Person With Difficult Behaviors](#)

[Importance of Belonging \(Handout\)](#)

[Loneliness Is the Only Real Disability](#)

[What Do I Do Next...? Strategies for Supporting A Person with Difficult Behaviors](#)

*And much more!*