

Opening Keynote Session

The Power of Human Connection Russell Lehmann

Session Description:

There is not much more powerful than human connection, yet it is often misunderstood or reduced to surface-level interaction. In this keynote, Russell Lehmann explores connection as a foundational human need through philosophical insight, lived experience, and practical application. Moving beyond compliance-driven approaches, this session challenges attendees to examine why certain forms of support resonate more deeply than others.

Russell dissects the inner workings of a struggling mind and provides actionable strategies to support individuals during moments of distress. Attendees will learn conversational reduction techniques, effective listening practices, intentional language use, and critical physical “dos and don’ts.” The session emphasizes that true connection is not about fixing—it is about understanding. By embracing the fluidity of human experience, participants will leave with a clearer framework for fostering environments where all individuals can be heard, supported, and valued.

Learning Objectives:

1. Attendees will identify and apply effective communication strategies (e.g., conversational reduction, intentional word choice) to support individuals experiencing cognitive or emotional distress.
2. Attendees will demonstrate improved active listening skills that prioritize validation, presence, and attunement over problem-solving.

Russell Lehmann is a charismatic activist, motivational speaker, and acclaimed author and poet for autism, mental health, and disabilities. He is the International Disability Rights Advocate at UCLA’s Tarjan Center for Disabilities and captivates audiences with his powerful message of acceptance and resilience. Lehmann’s work has had a positive and life-changing impact on many, and his advocacy and activism have helped to increase understanding and support for individuals in the disability community. He serves on numerous national boards, taskforces, and councils, and his influence extends beyond borders. Russell’s talent lies in several areas, showcasing his diverse skills and abilities to deliver impactful, educational, and encouraging presentations about the nuances of autism and mental health, while also contextualizing the intersection of disability and society.

Russell has emerged as a beacon of inspiration. He shares his intense and painful personal journey of being diagnosed with autism at the age of 12 after 5 weeks in a lockdown psychiatric ward for severe OCD and phobias. These struggles, on top of a lack of support, compassion, and understanding led him to withdraw from the world for the next 15 years resulting in prevalent isolation. Russell has transformed his unique experiences into a compelling narrative that challenges stereotypes, fosters understanding, and shifts perspectives.

Russell is a dynamic and engaging speaker who captivates audiences with his authentic storytelling. His presentations leave a lasting impact, offering deeply reflective insights into the complex world of autism and mental health, while encouraging empathy, sincerity, and inclusivity.

A powerful poet, Russell performs spoken word throughout each presentation that presents a unique vehicle to the audience to provoke deep thoughts. Russell’s multifaceted talents have allowed him to reach a wide audience and make a significant impact in the numerous areas of inequity throughout society, and his ability to engage and inspire audiences showcases a talent for connecting with people on a deep and meaningful level. His global reach continues to make waves, shaping perceptions and challenging societal norms.