“True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.” Brene’ Brown.

For the last three years, we have been making weekly recommendations for books, podcasts, and short movies we believe are worth your time and money. Last week, we recommended Brene’ Brown’s “[Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone](https://www.amazon.com/Braving-Wilderness-Quest-Belonging-Courage/dp/0812995848)” and while we stand by all of over 150 recommendations, this book has a special place in our hearts as we begin a new year at the dawn of a new decade. Brown is an internationally recognized social science researcher, author, and speaker with the [4th most watched TED talk](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability) at just over 45 million views. She has spent her career investigating vulnerability, courage, shame, and grief, and most recently turned her attention on belonging.

While there are many meaningful observations, it is Brown’s distinction between “fitting in” and “belonging” that ring the most true for me and my experience leading the Brain Injury Association of Maryland (BIAMD) for the last 8 years. Brown’s premise is simple. When we seek to “fit in” to a group, we are shaping our morals, beliefs and self-concepts into something that best approximates the expectations of the group to which we want to belong. It may or may not be close to who we believe we are or aspire to be, but in most cases we are taking our “square peg” and shaving off the unique parts of our self to make it better able to fit into the group’s “round hole”.

“Belonging” on the other hand, not just encourages you, but requires you to “be who you are”. You are accepted, not shunned, because of your uniqueness. You are recognized for who you are and what you aspire to be. The group recognizes that the empty space in the puzzle can only be filled by you and no one else. And while we certainly grow and change over time, that evolution enhances the diversity, and therefore the strength, of the group.

Brain injuries change the trajectories of individuals, families, and communities. One of the most common comments from individuals and families dealing with brain injury is the loss of community and the isolation created in the wake of the injury. Year after year we hear the heartbreaking stories about individuals with brain injuries and their family members losing friends, colleagues, and even family members in the aftermath of the initial injury.

“When is he going to be “back to normal?”

“How much longer until she “get’s better”?

“Why is he acting so weird these days?”

“It’s just so awkward to be around her anymore.”

“She just doesn’t fit in the group now. No offence.”

As sad as this is, and it is truly sad, this does not need to mean that you no longer belong.

Many times as we are struggling to identify and adapt to our new normal, we no longer live up the expectations and norms of the groups of which we used to be a part. Sometimes, once we see those groups through our new experiences and new histories, we realize we never really fit in to begin with and really don’t want to now. And sometimes, we are lucky enough to pick up a new group along the way who are also on the same journey as we are. That is how BIAMD was created almost 40 years ago. Families on quest into uncharted waters gathered together for courage, companionship, and strength.

Maryland’s brain injury community is vibrant and evolving. Certainly, there are places where there may not be support group in your area, or where services are thin, but you still belong. You are part of a community that understands your new normal, that appreciates the challenges you face on a daily basis. With the advent of new technologies, you can meet face to face with others who share your interests and are somewhere on the same journey with you. Using the new technology in old ways (like actually using your phone to make a phone call) is also available anyone who wants it. And there are friendly voices looking to put you in touch with connections you can use or just plain listen.

One of the Brain Injury Association of America’s themes is that “You are not Alone”, and that is true.

But even more importantly, you belong.

If I have learned anything working with BIAMD, it is that the more we use inclusive language, the more we recognize all the ways brain injuries occur, the more we discover new treatments and alternative therapies, the more teachers and healthcare professionals and families we educate, the more groups we talk to and the more lives we touch, the less we have to try and “fit in” and the more we discover that we belong.