

Peer Support and Mutual Support in the Community of Ionia: A Natural Experiment

A presentation of
Marcus C. Deede, M.D.
December 13, 2012

Ionia community Kasilof, Alaska



Self-chosen isolation to practice macrobiotics
and self-healing

Community population of approximately 50
adults and children

What are the Ionians up to?

- ▣ Aging hippies?
- ▣ Health food fanatics?
- ▣ Anti-social cult?

They began as 5 married couples – 10 Social Security-qualified mentally disabled people.

What is going on?

Results: Question 5

Reported Occurrence of Mental and Other Disabilities in the Community of Ionia

Mental Health SSI Recipients	Developmental Disability SSI Recipients	Other Mental Health Consumers	Family Members (Non-disabled)
11 adults	2 adults	8 adults	2 adults
6 children/teens	3 children/teens	3 teens	18 children/teens

(Ionia, 2004)

They are doing “well” with:

Self-care

Multi-generational
quality of life

Supportive lifestyle:

Dr. Wolf

Mental health grants

State-wide respectability



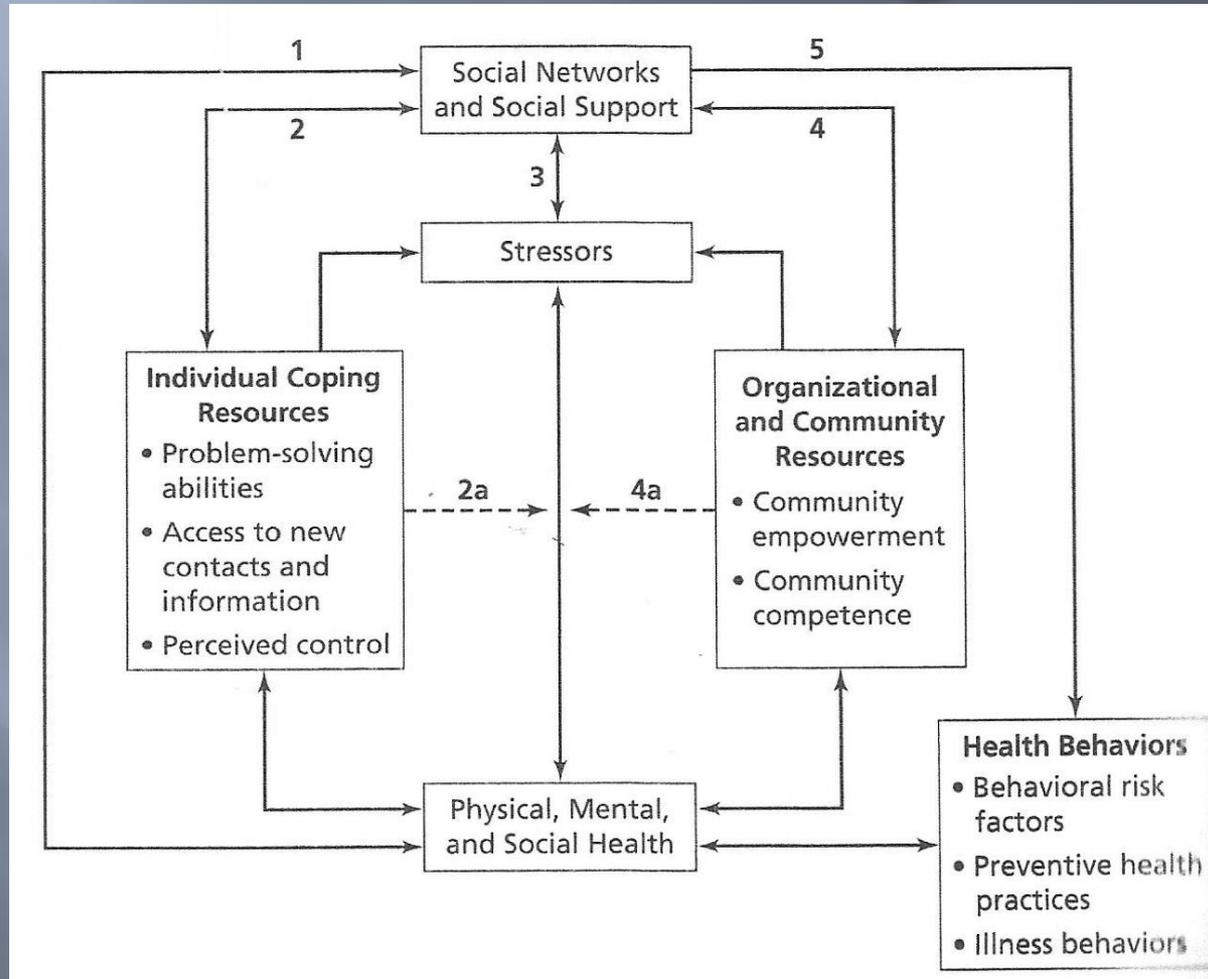
Limited exacerbations of mental health conditions

Thesis Statement

A social network structure with a mutual support/peer support system can service and facilitate the health of mentally disabled individuals.

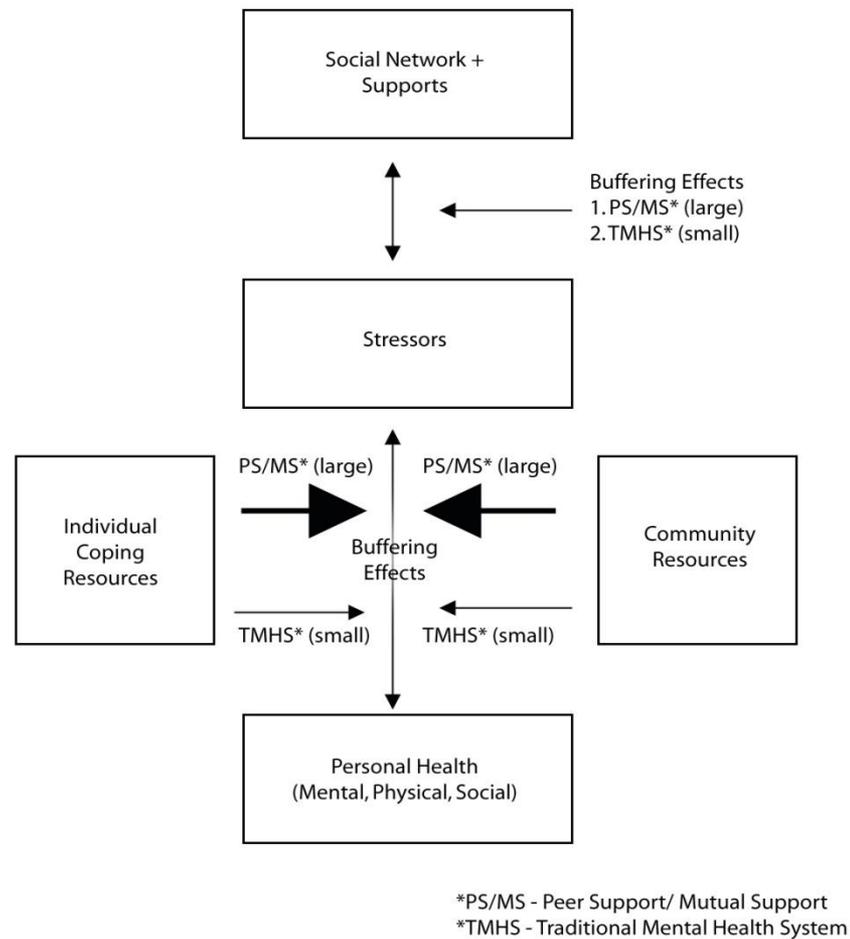


Theoretical Background



(Heaney and Israel, 2008)

Conceptual Model For the Ionian Social Network



What were the lessons – transferable – from Ionia?

- ▣ Theoretical basis – Bowlby's theory of infant attachment: "Mother" protects/buffers the infant from life
- ▣ Mother/child bond – leads to socially balanced personal development
- ▣ Social network/mentally disabled – supported balanced life course
- ▣ There is not a mother/child relationship, there is a network/individual relationship

How does life at Ionia support mental stability?

- ▣ Social milieu factors:
 - Stress reduction through:
 - ▣ Isolation, simple activities, ownership
 - ▣ Social pressure/ job stress reduced
 - ▣ Time stressors eliminated
 - Communal support system:
 - ▣ Family life structure
 - ▣ Egalitarianism, village, social capital
 - ▣ Group mind

How does life at Ionia support mental stability?

▣ Physical/structural factors



- Isolation from society abuses
 - ▣ Illicit and other substances
 - ▣ Domestic violence
 - ▣ Refined foods
- Many simple useful activities
 - ▣ Agricultural practices
 - ▣ Food preparation
 - ▣ Family care
 - ▣ Firewood
- Macrobiotic diet – quality eating/quality self-care

How does the community at Ionia seem to define mental illness?

- ▣ They don't! They view themselves as “canaries”, keep to Ionia for quality functioning.
- ▣ They eliminate stigma and support respectful space for dysfunction.
- ▣ They pursue mental and physical wellness.
- ▣ They value each person intentionally.

How do social structures help to foster mental wellness at Ionia?

- ▣ Mutual respect
- ▣ Governance
- ▣ Division of labor
- ▣ Resource use



Mutual Respect

- ▣ Daily living with valuing each person
- ▣ Social and financial egalitarianism



Mental wellness must always occur at the individual level, but it happens at Ionia because the group listens to, respects, and values contribution from each person.

Governance

- ▣ By consensus democracy, mutual assent
- ▣ Group meetings and group mind
- ▣ Spirit – common understanding

Division of labor

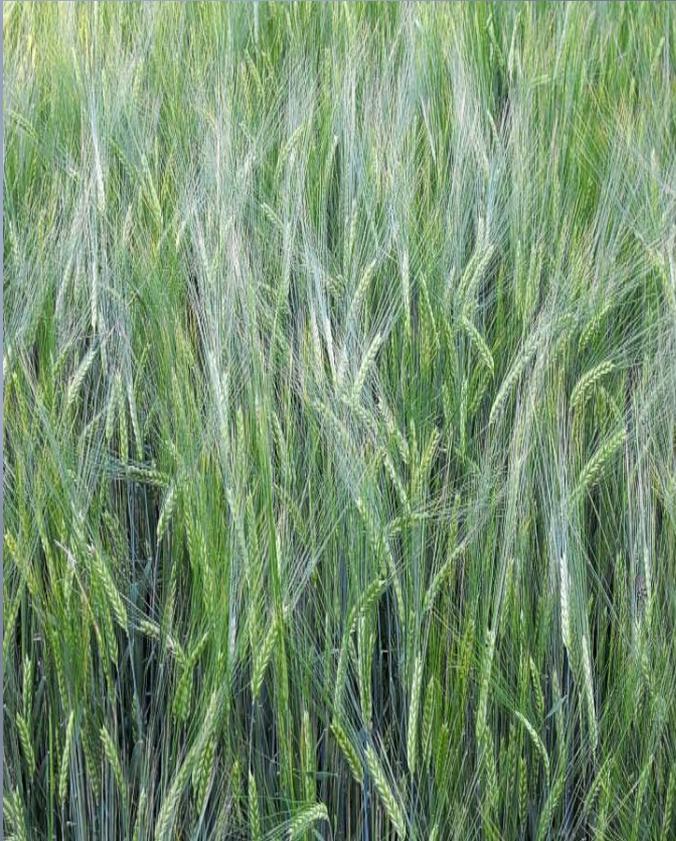
- ▣ Meaningful activities of daily living
- ▣ Projects by consensus and personal choice
- ▣ Stress taken out of work

“I play all the time. If I had considered it work, I would be in a lot of trouble.”

Ionia Interview



Resource Use



- ▣ Avoid materialism
- ▣ Increase thrift
- ▣ Reduce the stress of being wasteful

“The Ionian experience of interconnection supersedes the pursuit of materialism.”
(Ionia brochure)

Preliminary Conclusions

Is Ionia a peer support/mutual support system?

▣ Peer support:

- Definition: “Peer support refers to people with psychiatric disabilities helping one another”¹ to “bring about a desired social or personal change”²
- *“We didn’t get together because we liked each other, we got together because we needed each other, which we found to be much better.” – Ionia Interview*

¹ Boydell, Gladstone & Crawford, 2002.

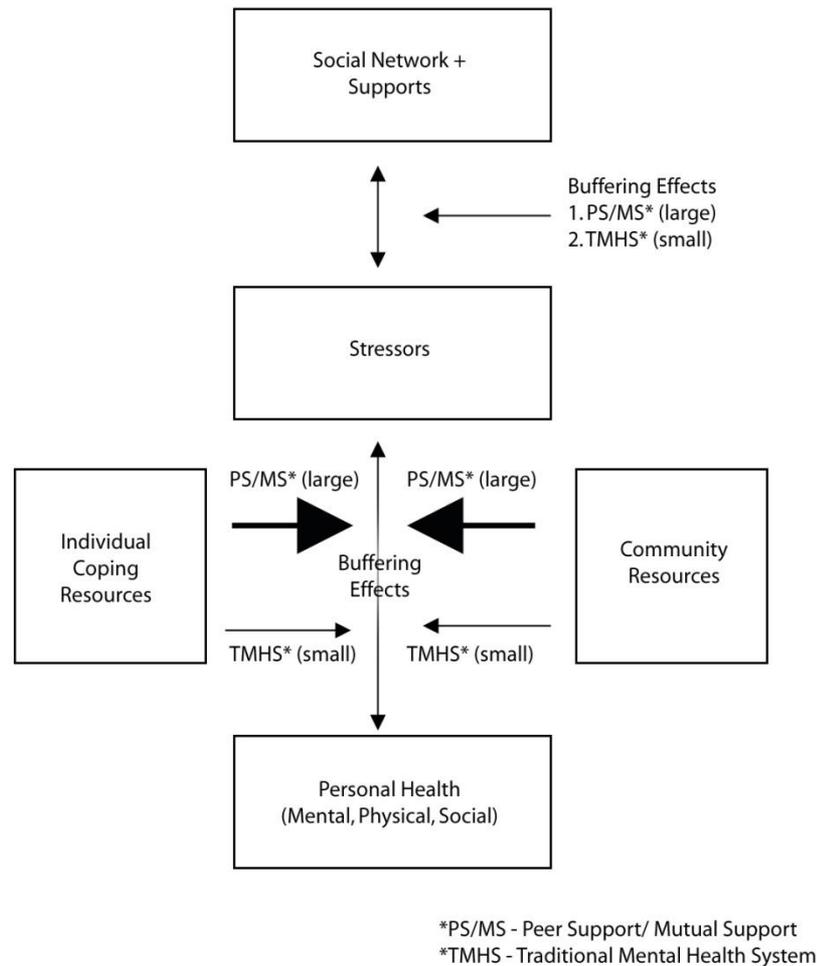
² Solomon, 2004.

Preliminary Conclusions

- ▣ Mutual support:
 - Definition: A purposeful “process by which persons voluntarily come together to help each other address common problems or shared concerns.”¹
 - In Ionia, mutual support manifests as a group of well residents without mental disability choosing to make their homes there, as well as all residents being committed to the common good.

¹ Davidson et al., 1999

Conceptual Model For the Ionian Social Network



What are the social buffering elements identified at Ionia?

- ▣ Group social buffers (i.e. what would be seen as group activities)
 - Distraction reduction
 - Egalitarianism
 - Group meetings
 - Macrobiotic diet



Buffers identified at Ionia

- ▣ Interpersonal predispositions (i.e. what would be perceived in an individual's actions)
 - Interpersonal respect
 - Willingness to nurture
 - Love between residents

Group Social Buffers: Distraction Reduction

- ▣ Self-selected isolation, used as a “tool”
 - Cultivates:
 - ▣ Inter-awareness
 - ▣ Inter-dependence
 - ▣ Inter-respect
 - Controls:
 - ▣ Outside influences
 - ▣ “Pressures”



Group Social Buffers: Distraction Reduction

- ▣ Primary effects:
 - Stigma reduction
 - Reduction of unhealthy influences
 - Focus on/have clarity for purposeful living
 - Dignity, self-respect cultivated
 - Creativity/ generosity
 - Unselfish focuses

Example of Distraction Reduction

- ▣ Resource use – avoids materialism through:
 - Simple clothes
 - Simple food
 - Simple lifestyle
 - Limited costs/
consumption
 - Communalism
(Selfishness avoided)



Group Social Buffers: Group Meetings

- ▣ Regular basis
- ▣ 2-4 hours
- ▣ No agenda
- ▣ Thoughtful/reflective questioning
- ▣ Clarity of statement, not rhetorical brilliance
- ▣ Socially secure, none alone
- ▣ All comments treated with respect

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”
- Plato

Group Meetings: Primary Effects

- ▣ To self-examine
- ▣ To cultivate “social security” in the social network
- ▣ To enhance learning
- ▣ A unique style of group therapy

“In the meetings...is where I discover that I’m much like others, that I’m understood, and I have value, and that others are of great value, and sometimes the very thing that I needed to hear, that I couldn’t come up with by myself is right there. And oftentimes, it is where commonality is discovered and also where simplicity is discovered.” - Ionian interview

Group Social Buffers: Egalitarianism



- ❑ Social and financial
- ❑ Establishes ownership, belonging, equality, self-esteem
- ❑ Antithesis of stigma
- ❑ Unearned, just extant

Egalitarianism: Primary Effects

- ▣ Builds self-respect - ownership confidence
- ▣ Builds interpersonal respect – no competition, status elimination
- ▣ Reduces failure anxiety, promotes creativity

Group Social Buffers: Macrobiotic Diet

- ▣ Hippocrates/Hufeland/Kushi
- ▣ Primarily vegetables and whole grains
- ▣ All about quality self-care
- ▣ Difficult to transfer but needs emphasis
- ▣ Health is founded on some mode of seeking quality nutrition

Macrobiotic diet: Primary Effects

- ▣ Macrobiotic philosophy promotes quality and balance in all aspects of life:
 - To promote healthy lifestyle
 - To stabilize physical wellness
 - Simple and cost-reasonable



Interpersonal Predispositions: Mutual Respect

- ▣ Non-stigmatized acceptance of each by all – personal dignity
- ▣ Each trusted to modulate themselves – privacy
- ▣ No demeaning behavior tolerated – stresses reduced in relationships

Mutual Respect

“Our world was just needing each other. We couldn’t possibly have gotten to build a life that had elements in it that we no longer had to respond to . . . the idiosyncratic ways we did that wasn’t something acceptable to the world around us. . . . We built a world here that didn’t have that kind of pressure.”

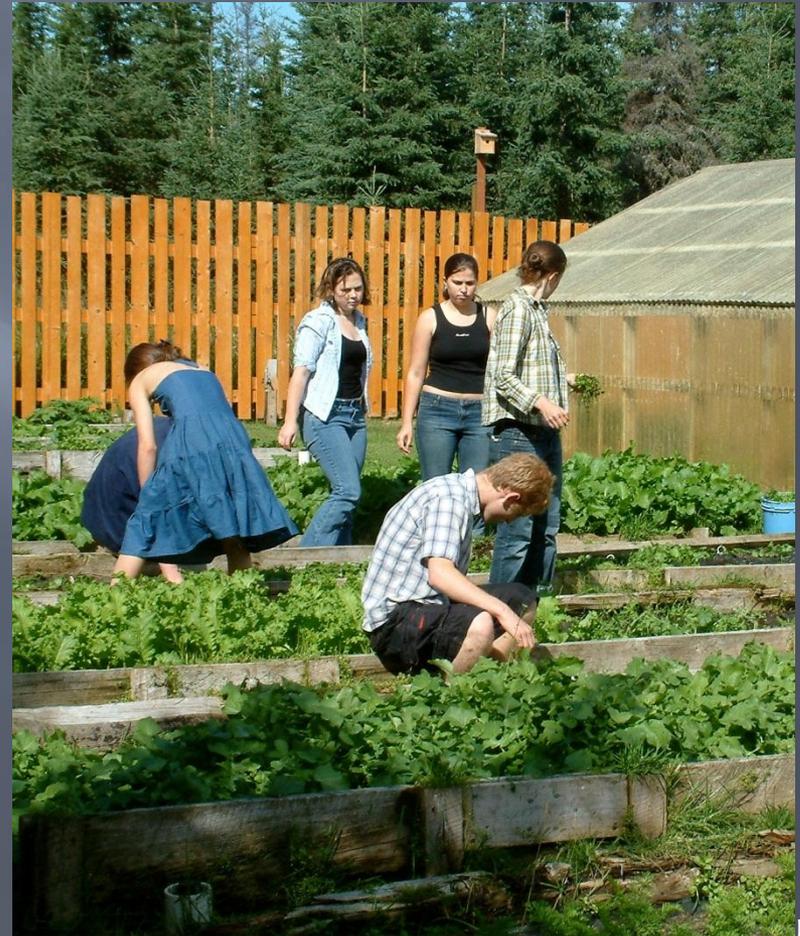
– Ionia interview

Interpersonal Predisposition Buffers: Willingness to Nurture

- ▣ Those effected have substantial experience with psychiatric illness
- ▣ Recognize dysfunction and promptly intervene
- ▣ Generously and spontaneously offered without hesitation

Willingness to Nurture

- ▣ A very practical response in a small, tight-knit community; causes community social fitness
- ▣ Shared value of avoiding medications and hospitalizations
- ▣ Exacerbations don't get out of control



Interpersonal Predisposition Buffers: Love for Fellow Residents

Definition: “Strong affection arising out of ties of kinship or personal ties; ... affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common interest;... unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another.”

(Webster’s online dictionary)

Love for Fellow Residents

- ▣ Unselfish concern for one another
- ▣ Bonds built by proximity and familiarity
- ▣ Efforts that go beyond normal expectations

“This social network structure (i.e. love) helps to buffer stresses by giving the stressed individual a diversity of individual ties (i.e. social capital) to draw on in crisis moments.”



Public health implications

The study demonstrates:

- ▣ Ionians have developed innovative solutions to long-standing and under-funded mental health care needs.
- ▣ Their fresh creative paradigm for living is very therapeutic, adding hope.
- ▣ This new paradigm needs more trials, more study, and publication

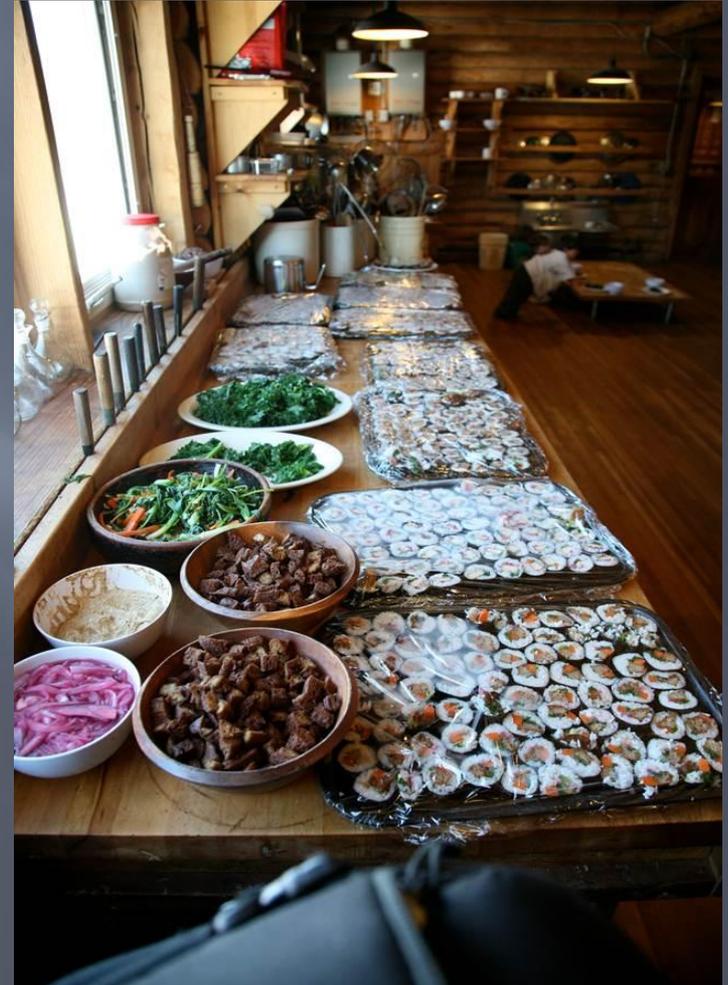
Discussion



- ▣ PS/MS system impressively effective at Ionia.
- ▣ Social networks are complex, daunting to build; need motivated group and an establishing purpose.
- ▣ Ionia works as a “village”, so basics of life and mental health are provided.

Conclusion

- ❑ Ionia is a social network with PS/MS system – a natural experiment in mental health disability management that is working.
- ❑ Intentional communities like Ionia have much to offer traditional psychiatric care – a new complimentary paradigm.



Questions?

