
Building Belonging: The Science of Connecting in a Lonely World



**Southeast Regional
Eldercare Coalition**

Quality Care • Care Coordination • Social Engagement

We are so grateful to St. Charles Health System in Central Oregon for partnering with Happy Brain Science by funding and collaborating with us in the development of this workshop.

Build belonging. Choose and catalyze connection.

We are experiencing what the Surgeon General calls an “epidemic of loneliness.” The costs are enormous. For example, loneliness reduces job performance, and the health effects of loneliness are worse than smoking 15 cigarettes a day! Fortunately, science can guide us in building a sense of belonging for ourselves and those around us. This highly interactive session brings people together to explore these three keys:

- **Comprehend:** Develop a deep understanding of the many factors affecting loneliness and social isolation, from brain chemicals to societal influences.
- **Connect:** Learn about specific actions we can take as individuals to build better connections.
- **Catalyze:** Discover what all of us can do to build belonging in our organizations and communities.

Please note we designed this handout to accompany a live presentation of the content. Is it NOT intended to be a stand-alone document; please don't think you've experienced the presentation if you're only reading this. If you're reading this without participating in a session, we strongly encourage you to contact Happy Brain Science through www.HappyBrainScience.com to inquire about how you can experience this workshop.

TALK SUMMARY

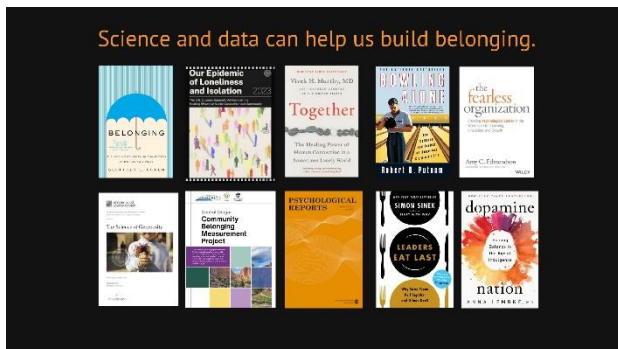
Connecting in today's
world can be hard.



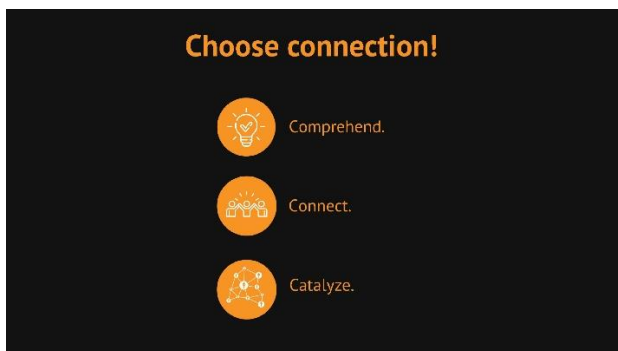
Many factors make building belonging difficult in the modern world. These factors include:

- Digital communication, overreliance on technology, and social media
- Frequent relocation and urbanization
- Life-work imbalance
- Cultural influences such as an individualistic society and stigma around loneliness

- Mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and social anxiety
- Political polarization, division, and lack of trust
- Lack of social skills with more people spending less time face-to-face



Fortunately, science and data can help us build belonging. This session features as little opinion as possible, and as much information grounded in solid peer-reviewed data and research as possible. Please see the recommended reading list at the end of this handout for more information on these sources if you care to learn more.



Building belonging boils down to choosing connection, but it's much easier said than done, so we explore these three themes in this session.



One great tool for building trust and relationships is called a "Pecha Kucha" presentation. At Happy Brain Science we've adapted this format to be 10 pictures, each on their own slide, auto advancing every 10 seconds. We suggest only showing pictures about your life outside of work. We've never seen anything build trust and teamwork better. We have a blog post with instructions and a free PowerPoint template here: www.happybrainscience.com/pecha-kucha/.



To build belonging, we first need to understand the complex web of issues affecting loneliness, social isolation, and more.



Which of these are true about loneliness? Participate in the workshop to find out!



Experts generally agree on definitions such as these. Loneliness and belonging are both subjective feelings. Loneliness is an indicator of need, analogous to thirst.



Those who feel different and marginalized by others can experience extra belonging insecurity and challenges. When we build diverse communities, make them as equitable as possible, and work to make everyone feel included, belonging is typically a result. This is, of course, a complex topic and many books, workshops, videos, and other resources explore these issues in much more depth than we have time for in this session.



Psychological safety is a shared feeling in a group that the environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. In a psychologically safe environment, individuals feel confident that they can express themselves, share ideas, ask questions, or admit mistakes without fear of being embarrassed, rejected, or punished. This is a complex topic; Happy Brain Science has a ½ day workshop about it. In this short program, suffice it to say that feeling psychological safety is almost always a building block for belonging.

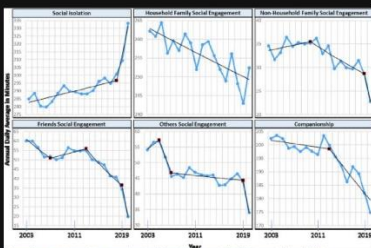


About 1/3 of all Americans report feeling lonely regularly. Social connection contributes to health, community safety, resilience, and prosperity.

Again, the Surgeon General has said that the USA is experiencing an “epidemic of loneliness.” Loneliness, social isolation, and a lack of belonging are affecting millions of people regularly.

This is an enormous problem, because feeling connected to others significantly boosts health, community safety, resilience, prosperity, and much more.

We are getting more isolated.



Unfortunately, the data can be quite discouraging. We are getting less connected and more isolated in recent years. While the above graphs are especially discouraging because the final year of data is from 2020—the year the pandemic hit—even without that data, we are on a clear negative trend.

Geoffrey Cohen offers us a wonderful analogy in his excellent book *Belonging: the weather*. In harsh weather, we can protect ourselves with good gear, giving us a

buffer. Similarly, while some of this session is about how we can make a difference in society and for other people, it’s also about finding tools and choices that can build belonging and give us a buffer against the harmful influences that are largely beyond our control.

Choose brain chemicals carefully!



One of the factors working against us is the way various neurotransmitters work in our brain, and with society. In particular, as Dr. Anna Lembke puts it in her great book *Dopamine Nation*, we are wired for a world of scarcity, but living in a world of abundance. There’s nothing wrong with dopamine, a brain chemical that helps motivate and reward us to do things such as find and eat food. But in today’s world, it’s far too easy to get out of balance. When we are frequently chasing our next “hit of dopamine,” we are not pursuing other more pro-social neurotransmitters.

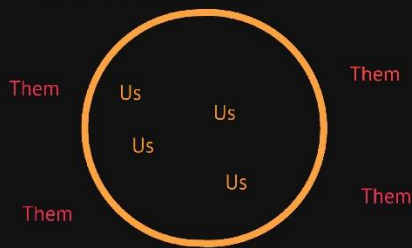
Oxytocin and serotonin are both released in our brain when, among other things, we experience strong social connection and help other people. Which neurotransmitters are you pursuing most often? Could you find a better balance that helps you connect better with others?

We are wired for connection;
our survival depends on it!



Some good news is that we are wired to connect with other people because for most of human history, our survival has depended on being part of a group. We can share food, protect each other, build shelter together, and much more, so connecting with other people and building belonging is a huge need for all of us.

We are wired to see the world
as 'us' and 'them'!



The sad news is that human history has countless examples of groups of people forming tight bonds, and then being aggressive and violent toward other groups of people. And that has resulted in our brains very quickly sorting the world into 'us' and 'them.' We want to belong to 'us,' not 'them.' The more of the world we see as 'them,' the less we want to connect with other people. We often fear strangers.

A connected brain is a happier, safer,
smarter brain that sees more 'us'.



But more good news: a connected brain is a happier, safer, and smarter brain that sees more of the world as 'us.' Experiments show that when we feel more positive, we are more likely to look at someone different from us and see 'us'. Science is also clear: the #1 factor in our happiness and well-being is the quality of our relationships with other people. So, let's look at how we can better connect as individuals.

Connect.

Now that we understand some of the issues better, let's take a look at what we can each do as individuals to better connect with others. If you aren't experiencing loneliness, that's great, but we encourage you to learn these techniques so you can help teach them and role model them to others.

Be a friend to yourself



Start by being a better friend to yourself! Self-care matters. When we eat right, get exercise, and sleep well, we feel better, which helps us be more social.

Also, treat yourself the way you would treat a friend. Many of us talk to ourselves in very harsh ways that we would never use toward another person. “We see the world not as it is, but as we are.” If we feel bad, the world can feel bad to us. But when we feel good, life and other people can seem good, too.

Meditate.



Mindfulness meditation is shown to bring a long list of benefits, including greater self-awareness, better self-control, higher quality relationships, and more happiness. When our mindfulness practice focuses on being in the present moment and accepting things—and other people—as they are, mediation can reduce loneliness.

Get out where people are.
Acquaintances matter.



Get out! Hang out where people are. Building belonging is not just about deep personal relationships with others. Acquaintances can play a crucial role in our social lives and contribute to our well-being and opportunities. People we know—but who aren’t close friends—can broaden our connections. Sociologist Mark Granovetter’s concept of “weak ties” suggests that acquaintances often provide new information and opportunities that close friends might not, because they are in different circles and access different networks.

We may find work opportunities, diverse perspectives, social support, reduced loneliness, and build bridges through acquaintances.

Act like an
extrovert.



We know that not everyone is an extrovert, and we know it can be frustrating when an extrovert says you should act like one. But studies show that extraverts are typically happier with higher well-being. Most importantly, research indicates that when we *act like* an extrovert—even if we aren’t one—our happiness improves due to social connection. We understand that if you’re introverted, you may want a quiet rest after acting like an extrovert. We suggest you experiment with your own life! Try initiating a conversation with a

stranger, even if that feels scary or like something you don’t want to do, and see how your social connections

and mood are affected. The data suggest that for the vast majority of us—introverts included—your social interactions will be more positive than you predict they will be.

Strengthen social skills.

- Eye contact
- Active listening
- Tone of voice
- Body language
- Empathy
- Appropriate humor
- Be vulnerable

- Respect
- Conflict resolution
- Assertiveness
- Emotional intelligence
- Patience & flexibility
- Manners
- Ask ?s

Exercise: show them you understand.

If you feel socially awkward sometimes, you are certainly not alone! Social skills are rarely taught. Younger generations who have spent more of their lives online may have had fewer opportunities to practice face-to-face social skills. While we don't have time in this session to learn and practice all of these, we encourage you to find ways to learn and practice social skills. Showing others that you understand them and what they are saying may be especially important for building belonging and well-being.

Be kind.

Being kind to others makes *us* happier, too. Happiness boosts health, longevity, creativity, resilience, productivity, and success. One kind thing you can do is to reach out to people who you suspect may be lonely or socially isolated.

Use your phone to connect.
Limit social media, TV, tech.

Too often, technology is driving us apart more than it's pulling us together. Research suggests that technology can often be a double-edged sword. While *a little* TV or social media can help us reduce loneliness, way too often, these and other technologies are driving division, anxiety, loneliness, social comparison, and even depression.

We urge you to use your phone to connect with other people. Text them or call them! Perhaps you would like to make a policy for yourself: before you go on social media, read the news, or play a game on your device, you need to use it to reach out to someone.

Assume positive intent
and forgive.



Assuming positive intent-giving each other a break and assuming that most people's intentions are good-helps us overcome what psychologists call the "fundamental attribution error." That error is attributing other people's behavior we don't like to their character. Data shows it's much more often someone's circumstances than their character.

If you are brusque with me in an interaction, I might think "that guy is a jerk!" That's an example of the fundamental attribution error. If I'm brusque with you, I

know it's because my child was sick last night and I didn't sleep well, so give me a break and please don't take it personally.

Another example of the fundamental attribution error: if I cut you off on the highway, it's because my wife is in premature labor in the hospital and I'm trying to get there before my kid is born! If you cut me off on the highway, it's because you are a maniac!

When you are ready and able, forgive people. If you aren't perfect (and who is?) then don't expect others to be, either. Forgiving is a choice, and it may not always be the right choice for you. But studies show that forgiving improves relationships and boost *our* happiness.

Don't believe everything you think!
People are more generous, interested, and
mood boosting than expected. CBT can help.



Sometimes the thoughts in our head prevent us from wanting to interact with others. Studies show that other people are consistently more kind, generous, and interested in us than we think! Many of us predict that conversations with strangers will be difficult or problematic, but the data suggest that most often they are very pleasant and boost our mood.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a common, evidence-based form of psychotherapy that focuses

on the connections between our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Our thoughts significantly influence our emotions and behaviors, and by changing unhelpful or distorted thinking patterns, we can improve our emotional well-being and change our behavior. CBT typically consists of identifying negative thoughts and changing and reframing those thoughts. Doing so can support new behavior, such as engaging in social connection that can improve mood and more. Professional CBT help is available, as well as self-help CBT resources listed in the resources section below.

Get professional help
if you want it.



At Happy Brain Science we are not mental health professionals. We are not qualified to diagnose or treat any mental health issue. But professional help is available. We highly recommend looking into professional help if you feel you may benefit from it.

Our biggest contribution to building belonging may be in what we can do to help others.

Catalyze.

Encourage reflection
on core values



When we reflect on our core values, we feel more secure and centered. Data suggests that when we do this, our sense of belonging increases. Could you find a way to encourage your team, group, and/or community to reflect and write about core personal values?

Nurture a culture of specific
gratitude.



Gratitude is a wonderful tool to boost mood. It's difficult to feel grateful and lonely at the same time! When we express *specific* gratitude to other people, it can boost relationships and belonging. There's a 'recipe' we like at Happy Brain Science:

- 1) What *specific behavior* are you grateful for?
- 2) What *impact on mood* did that behavior have? How did it make you feel?
- 3) What of *value* resulted?

Invite! Host well and
teach others to host well.



Host an event! Invite people! Be a great host by creating an environment where your guests feel comfortable, welcomed, and valued. Understand your guests' preferences if you can. Prepare the space, set the mood, and greet each guest personally. Encourage interaction. Handle problems and issues gracefully. Be authentic. Thank guests for coming and follow up as needed.

Share stories of adversity.



Sharing our own stories of adversity can help others feel less alone and more understood. For example, when I first moved to Sisters, Oregon and didn't know anyone, I felt lonely and isolated. I had to work hard to volunteer, join clubs and sports teams, find people to make music with, and build community. If I tell other people who move to a new city about this, it can help them feel a sense of connection and optimism.

Help others help
through volunteering!



One of the best things anyone can do to feel less lonely and isolated is to volunteer. Can you provide volunteer opportunities to others?

Offer "bridging thoughts".



When someone has negative thoughts about connecting with other people, many of us try to provide the opposite thought. If someone says, "All people are rude," we might want to say "no, all people are wonderful!" What helps more is to provide "bridging thoughts." These are thoughts that might help someone more toward a more positive approach. So a bridging response to "all people are rude" might be "Is it really everyone?" or "Have you ever met someone who's not rude?" or "I don't think you are rude."

ACTIVITY: CHOOSE CONNECTION ACTION PLAN

We hope you will think, feel, and especially *do* things differently because of this workshop. Please make a specific action plan and share it with others.

Name:	Partner:
To build belonging, I will focus on doing these things:	When and where I will act on these:

*Please consider sharing your plan with others, in person or online.
When you share a plan publicly, research shows you are more likely to follow through.*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books, and other Reading:

- ***Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides***, by Geoffrey L. Cohen
- ***Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation***, by Vivek H Murthy—the US Surgeon General—and colleagues
- ***Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World***, by US Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy
- ***Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community***, by Robert D. Putnam
- ***The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*** by Amy C. Edmondson
- ***Central Oregon Community Belonging Measurement Project***, Central
- ***Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*** by Simon Sinek
- ***Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*** by Anna Lembke, MD
- ***Subtle Acts of Exclusion*** by Dr. Tiffany Jena and Micheal Baran
- ***Blind Spot: Hidden Bias of Good People*** by Mazarin Banjo and Anthony Greenwald

CBT resources:

A variety of online resources may help with an approach grounded in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. A few examples are below. Many others exist; we suggest you find what works best for you.

- [MoodGYM](https://www.moodgym.com.au/) <https://www.moodgym.com.au/>
- [CCI Self-Help Resources](https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself) <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself>
- [Beck Institute Resources](https://beckinstitute.org/cbt-resources/) <https://beckinstitute.org/cbt-resources/>

“Pecha Kucha” PowerPoint template and instructions: www.happybrainscience.com/pecha-kucha/

Scientific Studies:

We drew on many scientific studies published in peer-reviewed journals to develop this session. Rather than giving a long list here, we'll highly recommend scholar.google.com as a wonderful resource for finding studies about virtually any topic. Just keep in mind that science isn't perfect, and not all studies are high quality studies. Multiple studies are almost always more reliable than a single study.

We'd love to hear your thoughts this topic, any questions you have, and any way we might help. Please contact us using happysupport@happybrainscience.com or one of the methods below.

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