

Missing Your People: Why Belonging Is So Important And How To Create Itⁱ

Tracy Brower, 2021



We are **hardwired** for connection. During hard times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when we missed our people terribly — for such a long period of time, we struggled.

Par. A

It's all about our need for belonging — but belonging is more than what you might have thought. Understanding it can help contribute to our emotional

Par. B

wellbeing and it can pave the way toward more **fulfillment**.

Here's what to know and how to create it.

Engagement and Social Identity

Belonging is, of course, that feeling of connectedness to a group or community. It's the sense that you're part of something. You feel attached, close and thoroughly accepted by your people. But belonging is more than just being part of a group. Belonging is also critically tied to social identity — a set of shared beliefs or ideals. To truly feel a sense of belonging, you must feel unity and a common sense of character with and among members of your group.

Par. C

In his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt calls this "**vital engagement**." It is a web of relationships and a sense of community in which you feel connected with activity, tradition and the group itself. Jeanine Stewart, senior consultant with the Neuroleadership Institute, whom I had the chance to interview, says when we share a sense of social identity with a group, we can **lean in**, use our strengths and be authentically who we are. "Being surrounded by other human beings doesn't guarantee a sense of belonging. Belonging actually has to do with identification as a member of a group and the higher quality interactions which come from that. It's the interactions over time which are supportive of us as full, authentic human beings." All of these are important to fulfillment and to the success of the organization as a whole. [...]

Par. D

A study published in *PlosOne* found belonging was more than just about having friends. Group membership was also important, and it contributed to **self-esteem**. A large group of friends didn't predict self-esteem but belonging to multiple groups did. Says Jolanda Jetten, the lead researcher, "Groups often have rich value and belief systems, and when we identify with groups, these can provide a lens through which we see the world." One of the reasons work is such a powerful source of belonging is because we typically share identity and goals with our team.

Par. E

The Impact on Habits and Performance

The human desire for connection also drives behavior. Smartphone design and addiction are a case in point: A study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* found smartphones are **compelling** because they **tap into** fundamental needs to connect. According to the research, humans have a deep desire to monitor others and to be monitored by them — to be seen and heard and considered by others. It is this **alignment** with our social needs which makes smartphones especially hard to put down. Separate research related to teams at work found that when people felt a great level of **cohesion** with their colleagues, they performed better and the desire for acceptance from the group was a greater motivator than money. People have a clear need to identify with a group and be accepted as a vital member of a community.

Par. F

Creating Belonging

Since belonging is so important — and since the pandemic has **exacerbated** the need for belonging — we must be intentional about creating it with and among others. We can do this in **tangible** ways.

Par. G

- Embrace groups. Build your friendships with individuals, but also consider joining personal or professional groups with which you feel a common sense of purpose and solidarity. Remind yourself of the identity you share...and consider joining or creating additional groups. [...]
- Be authentic. According to some experts, trust is built when you are authentic, empathetic and perceived as competent. You can create the conditions for belonging when you are open and vulnerable as well as when you are empathetic toward others. [...]
- Signal acceptance. When people lack a sense of belonging, they may feel threatened or alone, causing them to withdraw or hold back. On the other hand, Stewart points out, "When we are feeling a sense of comfort, we are in the best state physiologically to engage." Members of a group can signal acceptance and help ensure the people around them feel safe, by asking questions, listening and demonstrating focused attention [...] Listening is the new super power," she says. "If we can't create belonging through physical closeness in the ways we used to, we can and must think about how we might create that through focused attention and listening." Creating these kinds of conditions will contribute toward our collective willingness to **invest ourselves**.

Belonging is a necessary ingredient for our performance — individually, in teams — because we can more effectively engage and bring our best selves. And even more importantly, belonging is good for our wellbeing as humans. It's important for individual physical, mental and emotional health and it's critical to the health of our communities. Our opportunity is to find a way to create belonging for ourselves and others.

Par. H

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PART I: Reading Comprehension

Answer the following questions according to the text you read, by choosing A, B, C, or D.

1. According to the author, it is important to understand belonging because...

- A.** it can help us take care of ourselves.
- B.** it can help us be more financially successful and independent.
- C.** it can help keep us safe during a disaster like the COVID-19 pandemic.
- D.** it can help us so that we do not miss people when we are alone for a long time.

2. Which of the following helps create a true sense of belonging?

- A.** Maintaining a sense of individuality within the group.
- B.** Surrounding oneself with as many people as possible.
- C.** Trying a large variety of group activities and traditions.
- D.** Identifying as a member of groups with shared values.

3. Scientists believe...

- A.** smartphones are a valuable new tool to combat isolation.
- B.** smartphones are popular because people are fundamentally social.
- C.** smartphones were invented by people who felt a strong sense of belonging.
- D.** smartphones can help people to connect with groups they would not normally belong to.

4. A sense of belonging...

- A.** primarily benefits individuals' physical health.
- B.** is crucial for individual and collective well-being.
- C.** matters more in professional settings than in personal life.
- D.** is essential for team performance but has no impact on individuals.

5. Which example best demonstrates the concept of "vital engagement" from paragraph 4?

- A.** A student is very popular and almost everyone at school knows their name.
- B.** A student is a part of a comic book club that meets weekly to discuss new comics.
- C.** A student is cut from the basketball team but continues to practice so they can try out again.
- D.** A student is known by the teachers as having a really good work ethic and earning high grades.

6. According to the text, how does "signaling acceptance" help to create belonging?

- A.** Signaling acceptance helps people feel psychologically safe in order to build social connections.
- B.** Signaling acceptance tells people the rules that they need to follow in order to feel a sense of belonging.
- C.** Signaling acceptance lets people know that they are part of a group where everyone shares identical beliefs.
- D.** Signaling acceptance shows people that their efforts will be rewarded if they work hard to prove themselves.

7. Which statement best describes how the author chose to structure the information in the text?

- A.** The author compares the human need for belonging to belonging in other species, and then describes the several factors that help people to feel belonging.
- B.** The author first explains what belonging is and the benefits of belonging, then concludes by explaining how people can support belonging for themselves and others.
- C.** The author describes how understanding of the concept of belonging has changed over time, and then explains how COVID-19 has changed the circumstances around belonging.
- D.** The author begins by making a claim that belonging is more difficult to find compared to other historical periods and ends by making an argument for policy changes that would support belonging.

8. Which statement best summarizes the central ideas in the text?

- A.** The evolution of technology has created many new opportunities as well as challenges in the realm of social belonging.
 - B.** Human beings were not always social creatures, however today there are many reasons why humans need to be a part of social groups.
 - C.** Feeling meaningfully connected to others in a group or a community is a basic human desire, and when we cultivate connection it offers a range of benefits.
 - D.** Scientists are just beginning to understand why people want to be a part of communities and how communities can have positive or negative effects on individuals.
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PART II: Vocabulary

Explain what the following words mean ***in the context of the article you read*** by selecting the correct option, A, B, C, or D. All words appear in the text in **bold** font.

1. What does "**hardwired**" (Par. A) most accurately mean?
 - A. Electrically connected through wires
 - B. Genetically or inherently programmed
 - C. Temporarily modified
 - D. Learned through experience

2. What does "**fulfillment**" (Par. B) primarily refer to?
 - A. Personal satisfaction
 - B. Emotional contentment
 - C. A sense of completion
 - D. Achievement of life goals

3. The phrase "**lean in**" (Par. D) best represents which of the following concepts?
 - A. To physically bend forward
 - B. To actively engage and embrace challenges
 - C. To rest against something
 - D. To avoid confrontation

4. "**Self-esteem**" (Par. E) is best defined as:
 - A. How others perceive you
 - B. Your physical appearance
 - C. Your social status
 - D. Your overall sense of self-worth

5. When something is described as "**compelling**," (Par. F) it means:
 - A. Strongly persuasive or convincing
 - B. Slightly interesting
 - C. Physically demanding
 - D. Traditionally accepted

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6. What is the most precise definition of "**alignment**" (Par. F)?
- A. Random arrangement
 - B. Temporary placement
 - C. Proper positioning or arrangement in relation to something or someone else
 - D. Agreement
7. The term "**cohesion**" (Par. F) most accurately describes:
- A. The process of separating elements
 - B. A state of conflict between parts
 - C. The act of competing with others
 - D. A state of unity or logical connection between elements
8. Choose the best definition for "**exacerbated**" (Par. G):
- A. To improve or enhance a situation
 - B. To remain neutral in a conflict
 - C. To make a difficult situation worse
 - D. To solve a complex problem
9. Which of the following best defines the word "**tangible**"(Par. G)?
- A. Real and easy to understand or do
 - B. Imaginary or abstract
 - C. Difficult to understand
 - D. Constantly changing
10. The phrase "**invest ourselves**" (Par. G) is best understood as?
- A. To dedicate time, effort, or emotions to something
 - B. To spend money on a business or project
 - C. To withdraw from a situation or responsibility
 - D. To make a quick decision without thinking