

THE SOCIAL MUSCLE

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Loneliness and social isolation are deeply physical ailments, on par with obesity and smoking for negative health outcomes. They have a damning effect on productivity, innovation, and organizational commitment, and they exact a high price on individuals, organizations, and our entire society. Loneliness is also contagious. Just one person in a network can infect many others, even mere acquaintances, causing cascading effects.



But there is good news. The effects are reversible, as we learned in our work with the U.S. Army, where we conducted a five-year study on loneliness. The army has long had a deep understanding of how to build cohesion in groups, but much less was known about reducing loneliness and strengthening social resilience — two critical factors for improving soldiers' mission readiness and quality of life. Our study looked at the problem through a physiological and psychological lens. Just as you can start an exercise regimen to lose weight, gain strength, or improve your health, you can combat loneliness through exercises that build emotional strength and resilience. The soldiers engaged in a range of social fitness exercises over the course of the study, and the results were encouraging: Social fitness training reduced loneliness and improved well-being in the soldiers.

We believe that companies stand to reap similar benefits. It's time for managers to turn their focus from traditional structural interventions that are designed to reduce social isolation — such as mandatory social activities at work or specialized workspace design efforts — which studies have shown are less effective. They should instead develop social exercise regimens that reverse the negative effects of loneliness in the workplace. And just as loneliness is contagious, the benefits of replacing negative behaviors with positive ones also spread.

IT WORKS FOR SOLDIERS

Our study was informed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Advances in equipment, training, and battlefield medicine had raised the proportion of soldiers who returned home from the wars; however, those who did come home showed an alarming rate of adverse outcomes, including suicide. In 2011 a large-scale study confirmed that many returning soldiers struggled with loneliness and found that those who committed suicide had reported being lonelier and more depressed and tended to think in more catastrophic terms than soldiers who did not commit suicide.

To address the problem of loneliness among soldiers, we worked with now-retired General Rhonda Cornum, then the director of the Army's

Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program, to develop a program focused on social resilience and social fitness. Our training was designed to improve the capacity of soldiers to develop and sustain positive relationships, adapt to social challenges, deal with the inevitable feelings of stress and loneliness, recover and grow from personal and social adversity, and forge and capitalize on healthy relationships.

We developed about 50 social fitness exercises to help soldiers identify and address maladaptive social cognition and behavior. Interventions ranged from very simple tasks — doing someone a favor, for example — to more-complex exercises, such as getting groups to go beyond settling for easy solutions. We applied those exercises in a randomized controlled experiment to evaluate the effectiveness of the social fitness training. In some cases, the instructions were explicit: Say hello to someone. In others, people were coached through situations to help them learn techniques for forming, maintaining, and strengthening their bonds with fellow soldiers. The goal was to give them tools to deal with their own feelings of isolation and help others who were feeling lonely.

Before starting, we assured the soldiers that social fitness is malleable. We explained that just as training in physical fitness strengthens muscles and improves the body's endurance, resilience, flexibility, and coordination, training in social fitness strengthens the brain in ways that increase social fitness and well-being. We did this for two reasons. One, soldiers know well the positive effects of physical fitness; they work out every day. Drawing that parallel helped them readily grasp the concept that you can cope with loneliness through workouts. And two, it helped them overcome the natural inclination to attribute well-being to deterministic factors such as genetics. Often subjects may say "Yes, I'm lonely, but that's just how I am" or "The people around me are wretched"; we wanted to make it explicitly clear that the brain does not work that way, that people have the power to improve their social fitness.

Each platoon in the study received social fitness training for two hours a day over five days. The soldiers learned techniques for identifying the behaviors and moments in a day that reinforce loneliness and isolation and for transforming those negative moments into positive ones. For

example, soldiers learned that loneliness is contagious, and learned to identify moments when their isolating behavior may be having a negative effect on others. We then gave them several ways to intentionally change their behavior in that moment. Instead of avoiding conversation, for example, they could choose to ask someone a question. Instead of looking down to check their phone, they could put it away and engage with someone.

We made sure that subjects understood that the choice to focus on work at the expense of spending time with friends and loved ones was an isolating behavior. By contrast, choosing to put aside work and focus on social interactions activates the ventral striatal regions of the brain, which are steeped in dopamine receptors, evoking feelings of pleasure and happiness. In other words, positive interactions are rewarding and make people feel closer to one another. We also emphasized the benefits of doing small favors to create reciprocity. A small favor implicitly creates a sense of obligation to return the favor. When the initial act is perceived as kindhearted, the social norm of reciprocity stimulates a sense of gratitude and mutual respect, promotes cooperation, and strengthens the trust and bonds between people.

The interventions produced the results that we expected: Soldiers assigned to the social fitness training showed reductions in loneliness and improved well-being. On a follow-up visit to one of the Army bases, we spoke to a master sergeant who had participated in the training. When we asked about his experiences, he said that he'd applied what he learned to interactions with his spouse, who in turn responded, "What has the army done to you? And why haven't they done this sooner?"

APPLYING THE LESSONS IN THE WORKPLACE

Loneliness reaches far beyond the lives of soldiers, of course. It's a growing problem in most industrialized nations, and efforts are under way in the United States, United Kingdom, Denmark, and Canada to raise awareness and to develop treatments. Most of these efforts target older adults, and few if any address loneliness or social fitness in the workplace.

But there are many simple tools that managers and individuals can use to decrease social isolation. Often it's a matter of realizing that our ingrained patterns and behavior may be making the problem worse. We are creatures of habit, and many of our responses in social interactions have a reflexive quality. An unpleasant act by a coworker tends to be reciprocated. An error tends to elicit criticism. Each response can undermine an individual's ability to fight a sense of loneliness and can inhibit the capacity of groups to learn and excel. We've seen this effect very often in meeting settings. Getting many people together who are all feeling isolated and lonely can go badly.

It's in our power to replace those negative habits with positive interactions and improve not just our own well-being but the social fitness of our organizations and communities. This is our recommendation for an entry-level social fitness class:

Unplug. Find moments each day to put away screens and connect with someone, even for a brief exchange. Lonely and isolated people tend to bury their faces in their screens and their minds in work. Consciously choosing to be social reaps benefits, just as consciously choosing to go out and walk a mile for some exercise makes us feel better.

Do small favors. Make an effort each day to do something helpful or nice for others. Gratitude is powerful, and some will repay your kindness, making multiple people feel connected and less isolated.

Work together. Find moments each day when you typically divide labor, and choose instead to work together. A simple example of this in daily life is when one partner may do the dishes and the other may fold the laundry at the same time to be efficient. Instead, change things up occasionally, and do each task together. Take the opportunity to speak with and listen to one another and reconnect. Whatever efficiency is lost will be repaid through feeling better and less isolated. The same applies to work, where efficiency reigns. Look for ways to work together rather than dividing up the labor and sending everyone off to their own corners to work alone. Doing so on occasion not only lessens the monotony of work but also can lead to new insights or previously unrecognized efficiencies.

Reach out. Choose to engage with people on different levels and on a range of topics. In meetings or when interacting with colleagues, we tend to focus on what we have in common. Staying close to what everyone knows is comforting, but the quality of our decision making and the resilience of the group benefit from the diversity of knowledge, experiences, and capacities of the members. Force yourself and others to share ideas and opinions that may be unexpected and that come from a place of difference, not commonality.

Just say hello. Take a cue from Oprah Winfrey, who is leading a “Just Say Hello” campaign to combat loneliness. The idea is to begin simply, by just saying “hello” to a friend, a stranger, or someone with whom you would like to reconnect. Even simple actions like this can stretch the social muscle.

The social muscle is among our greatest and most distinct evolutionary traits. Humans are not particularly strong, fast, or stealthy relative to other species. We lost our canine teeth thousands of years ago, and have never had the protection offered by natural armor or flight. What makes us such a formidable species is our ability to reason, communicate, work together, and learn from one another. We do all this through culture, by establishing norms, sanctioning violators, forming alliances, recognizing the transient and dynamic nature of alliances, and adjusting our interactions and alliances accordingly. Isolation and loneliness run counter to this. They run counter to being human. It’s a cliché, but it’s true: We are social creatures. We have a social muscle. The more we exercise it, the healthier we’ll all be. | **THE**

BIG IDEA

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