

## Lack Of Belonging Can Kill You

We humans are the ultimate social animals. So much so that lack of belonging (or loneliness) increases our chances of dying earlier. By 45%. That's a lot.

That makes lack of belonging more dangerous than obesity, which increases our odds of dying early by 20%, or excessive drinking, which increases our odds of dying early by 30%, and means it has a greater impact than lack of exercise and smoking.

Humans need to belong. Not just for our mental health, but for our physical health too.

Scientists Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith and J. Bradley Layton conducted a meta-review of the impact of social connection (belonging) on mortality. Their results took into account differences in age, gender, cause of death and even the participants' initial health status. Regardless of all these variables, their findings were consistent.

John Cacioppo founded the University of Chicago's Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience. His research showed that negative social images prompted greater brain activity in more lonely people than they did in less lonely people. The lonelier the person, the less their brain could display empathy for others. Loneliness causes the brain to become hyper-alert, it increases defensiveness, depression, morning cortisol levels, increases sleep fragmentation and alters gene expression.

It is entirely possible to be lonely, to feel a lack of belonging, while surrounded by people - either literally back in those days when we were all in offices - or figuratively on the end of a video conference.

Most of the activity that is associated with lack of belonging is subconscious. Our subconscious is silently screaming at us "if you don't belong you will die".

This has profound implications for organisational culture.

It's one of the reasons culture can be so hard to see - we don't know we're in it, but it's all around us like a silent invisible electromagnetic field - drawing us in to behaviours we don't even understand, but feel compelled to enact.

Culture is the rules of belonging. If you want to understand, describe and change your culture - you need to figure out what earns and loses belonging in your team.



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