

# Making sense of belonging



**Dr Kelly-Ann Allen MAPS**

<https://psychology.org.au/for-members/publications/inpsych/2019/june/making-sense-of-belonging>

*Do you dread public speaking? Does the mere thought of standing on a stage behind a microphone before an audience erode your inner core? Or can you portray an air of confidence to get the job done knowing deep down you are masking an underlying anxiety? Most of us fear public speaking, but have you ever stopped to wonder why?*

*We walk through life treading carefully between the unspoken norms and boundaries of social interactions. We modify our remarks, gestures and actions to ensure our behavior is acceptable for the context, group, culture or community we are in. Most of us strive to fit in and belong. When asked why they hate public speaking, most people give reasons based on irrational thoughts related to other people (e.g., fear of being laughed at, ridiculed, embarrassed, made to look stupid). These concerns are usually not related to the act of speaking itself, but rather, our fear of social rejection which is a product of our need to belong.*

Belonging is defined as a unique and subjective experience that relates to a yearning for connection with others, the need for positive regard and the desire for interpersonal connection (Rogers, 1951). A sense of belonging does not depend on participation with, or proximity to, others or groups. Rather, belonging comes from a perception of quality, meaning and satisfaction with social connections. Belonging may also relate to a sense of belonging to a place or even an event. It is therefore a complex and dynamic process unique to each person. A sense of belonging has been described as a fundamental human motivation underpinned by a pervasive and compelling need to belong that we continually seek to find and maintain (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1957). Even as we strive to belong, we are also deeply

conditioned to provide a sense of belonging to others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It is our sense of belonging and its importance to us as a species that shapes the way our relationships with others, groups, and even whole communities function.

An absence of belonging has negative and devastating effects on people, both physically and psychologically. This article aims to outline the importance of belonging for own lives and for the people around us, and to provide an overview of current thought, research, and practice in the field as it relates to, informs and draws from psychological science.

### **A short history of belonging**

Like most psychological constructs, we can trace our need to belong back to our prehistoric ancestors when group life and cooperation were essential for safety and survival. People lived in small groups where jobs like hunting, gathering and sentinel labor were shared. A person who wanted to do it alone in ancient times was unlikely to last very long. Likewise, rejection from a group would have been tragic for an individual. The fear of rejection as a human trait deeply embedded in our prehistoric roots is one explanation as to why a fear of rejection persists today. Have you ever struck conflict with someone over a difference in opinion only to find yourself softening your stance or ending up in agreement? This is a form of conformity to a social norm. It is likely that the skills we use to avoid rejection, conform to social norms and enhance belonging persisted due to natural selection and evolution. Belonging was, and always has been, necessary for our survival.

The increasing economic wealth of our society means that we can afford to live on our own and migrate away from the neighborhoods where we grew up. This is a luxury that our ancient ancestors did not have, when living alone may not have been an option. While the modern single person is unlikely to fall prey to a deadly predator, we are still learning what kind of impact the changes to the way we live, work and socially interact have on our psychological health.

### **The pain of rejection**

Social rejection is at odds with belonging. The two experiences are inversely related. We have come to understand that social pain caused by ostracism can create a response in our neural processing not so different from that caused by physical pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). When we talk about feeling heartbroken or shattered following a fallout with a friend or social group, we use words that best describe our feelings at that given time.

Neuroscientists now have research to support the notion that physical and social pain are not that different from one another. Simply observing the social pain of others can give us painful feelings.

When our sense of belonging is threatened, however mildly, we know intuitively that it feels unpleasant. As humans, we have used this knowledge in ways contrary to our need to belong.

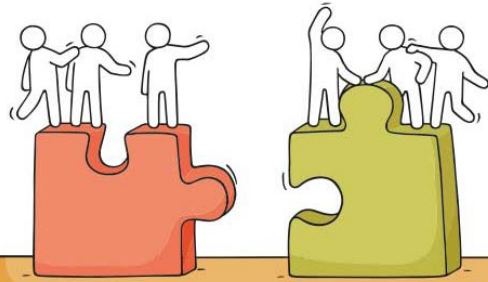
### **Sentenced to solitude**

Isolation as a form of punishment has a rich history. For instance, in many tribal groups, being condemned to isolation would invariably result in death. Pews in jails are often separated by dividers that deny incarcerated church attendees access to other people, in a place otherwise devoted to community and belonging.

In schools and in homes, children are denied social interaction for short periods through punishments such as time out or even planned ignoring.

More extreme examples have featured in the media, and involve highly restrictive practices whereby schools have used cages and isolation rooms to manage the behavior of children with autism spectrum disorder.

Social isolation and exclusion from groups is painful; it is easy to understand why these methods are so readily used as a punishment. However, it is less clear why isolation, social exclusion and the denial of social belonging can have such a profound impact on us.



## Why are people rejected?

Most of us crave a degree of predictability and certainty from others. In the absence of this, we can be wary about people, especially those we do not know well. Researchers leading our understanding of social rejection have allowed us to gain insight into the most common reasons why people are rejected by examining social exclusion in the classroom.

### Undesirable behaviour

This means behaviour that is disruptive, impulsive or aggressive, and in fact, any behaviour that steps outside our social norms. The socially anxious or withdrawn are also vulnerable to rejection.

Their rejection is based on inherent characteristics fundamental to who they are. Socially oriented approaches to address people's biases, attitudes and prejudices help all people feel included.

### Different physical or behavioural characteristics

Cultural, ethnic or racial differences, gender diversity, disabilities and even physical attractiveness can fall into this category. Representation is important. Unlike those exhibiting the behaviours described above, people who fall into this category cannot receive training or interventions to address problematic behaviour.

### Reputation

When someone has been rejected before, the resulting reputation can be enduring and difficult to shift, creating a compelling case for early intervention in schools to support those at risk and prevent things like the *recursion effect*, where people who may expect a particular behaviour from others can behave in a way that actually promotes the expected behaviour (Harrist & Bradley, 2002).

## Belonging is in our biology

From the moment we are born, we strive to connect to our primary caregivers. Of course, this makes sense biologically. Our primary caregivers are the same people who ensure our wellbeing and provide food, safety and shelter. Once again, belonging is critical to our survival. Neuroscientist Mathew Lieberman suggests that we never actually switch off thoughts about others and our relationships to them. Put simply, our brain enters a default network when resting, which mirrors the same neural cognitive system that occurs when we engage in social interaction. The default network has been observed in babies as young as two weeks using resting functional magnetic resonance imaging providing evidence that we are indeed born to belong (Gao et al., 2009).

But there is more at play. Attachment theory shows how pivotal those early bonds and relationships are for the trust and relationships we form with other people throughout our

lives. Endocrinological research demonstrates the powerful role of oxytocin – known as the herding hormone – in social inclusion and social bonding (Stallen, De Dreu, Shalvi, Smidts, & Sanfey, 2012). Research in this area provides more substantial evidence that belonging is in our biology. But before you decide to spray oxytocin up your nose to address the world's loneliness crisis, note that research shows that oxytocin's benefits in stimulating cooperation, trust, ethnocentrism, conformity, empathy and favouritism appear limited to in-group members only, which is bad luck for those in the out-group.

The most compelling evidence of our need to belong from birth is borne out when belonging is absent. In cases of abuse, neglect or disorganised attachment, the absence of a sense of belonging has a devastating impact on psychological and social functioning, which extends through childhood and adolescence and well into adulthood. Examples can be drawn from social psychological literature where children have experienced social isolation from a young age (Braddock & Gonzalez, 2010; Matthews et al., 2015).

### **Importance in youth**

Rejection and ostracism can be devastating and research shows that adolescence is the developmental period that is most sensitive and vulnerable to their negative effects (Arain et al., 2013; Blakemore, 2008).

Adolescence is a complex developmental period marked by neural attrition and growth. Neural imaging research shows that, during adolescence, the brain undergoes unique neural development and maturation in regions involved in complex social processes (Arain et al., 2013; Burnett, Sebastian, Kadosh, & Blakemore, 2011). Peer groups and the need to belong become important for social identity, transition into adulthood, psychosocial adjustment, along with coping-skills and resilience.

Self-presentation and reputation management become central concerns for adolescents learning social norms and boundaries. Children and adolescents with poor social and emotional skills, such as difficulty with emotional regulation, can have issues related to belonging. One could say that a solid understanding of social skills coupled with successful social development is the foundation for belonging.

### **School belonging**

Schools offer a common, central place for most adolescents to belong. However, a sense of belonging to school may also occur within a home-learning school community or through distance education environments.

Most people have different feelings of affiliation or attachment to their school. Our bonds with school have a positive relationship with a range of variables related to psychological functioning, mental health and wellbeing. Mounting evidence demonstrates that school belonging is inversely related to school attrition rates, truancy and school violence, while a low sense of attachment to school has been linked to school shootings, suicidal ideation in adolescence and youth radicalization (Langille, Asbridge, Cragg, & Rasic, 2015; Marraccini, & Brier, 2017; Wike & Fraser, 2009).

Our research found that, of the predictors associated with a sense of belonging to school, the student-teacher relationship was one of the most powerful (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018). Yet, how we nurture that relationship within a climate of high teacher stress, standardized testing, high attrition rates among graduate teachers and students not feeling a sense of belonging to school requires critical ongoing discussion (OECD, 2017).

One thing we know is that teachers' sense of connection to school predicts their students' sense of connection. Tending to teacher wellbeing needs to be urgently evaluated. Staff massages and compulsory mindfulness training may actually run counter to what well-meaning approaches are trying to achieve. Likewise, asking teachers to run interventions and produce new dazzling strategies to increase student belonging may be at odds with building connected school communities. What if we asked teachers directly what would assist their belonging? What if they were provided more autonomy and more resources instead?

### **Creating inclusion for young people**

Building belonging in schools should be absorbed into ongoing practices that already occur throughout a typical school day rather than being an additional task. Starting with social and emotional competencies, and prioritizing relationship and social skills, and emotional regulation can help lay solid foundations for a culture of belonging.

We should strive to create a culture of social inclusion so that acceptance, inclusion and empathy towards others become social norms. The work of Vivian Paley and her rule, you can't say, "you can't play" is one approach to creating a norm around belonging for children as young as three-years old. The need for early-years approaches is recognized in Australia through The Early Years framework 'Being, Becoming, and Belonging' which prioritizes the need to belong at a young age.

### **Technological impacts**

It is difficult to discuss belonging in the absence of technology. This is best described in the title of Sherry Turkle's book, *Alone Together*. Thanks to the internet and technologies we are in many ways more connected than ever, and yet we are also reporting increased loneliness. Despite this, the effects of technology on adolescent wellbeing may not be as bad as the media leads us to believe (Orben & Przybylski, 2019), however, research is still exploring the implications of technology on our sense of belonging to groups and others. People are already intuitively aware that the effects of technology can be profound and they are taking it upon themselves to digitally detox. There are apps available to block some social media sites and a greyscale filter to make screen time less appealing, while some schools have banned the use of mobile phones on their grounds.

We know that screen time or the compulsion to check a phone can disrupt our ability to connect with others but the long-term implications are yet to be identified. Technology is making us more aware of the way we connect with others, especially within the relationship between parent/caregiver and child.

One promising benefit of technology has been the effectiveness of smartphones in delivering therapeutic apps. Interventions specifically related to belonging, such as social belonging interventions, have proven to be effective when delivered through mobile phone technology (Devers et al., 2016).

### **The role of psychologists**

Researchers like Greg Walton and David Yeager are leading the way in how we understand and apply brief, psychologically wise interventions to address social issues such as belonging uncertainty. A growing body of work highlights a variety of significant changes that result from simple exercises that focus on preventing recursion (that is, when we expect someone to be

mean to us, we may behave in a way that elicits meanness) and fundamental attribution error. Based on the tradition of attributional retraining, the aim is for young people to understand that feelings of not belonging can be normal and can be overcome. People can change.

Other interventions to increase belonging aim to challenge peoples' beliefs about others and allow them to see that other people are different, but more similar than they may think. This work seeks to shift cognitions around social inclusion and create opportunities to belong for self and others (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997).

Psychologists can take other roles and responsibilities with their knowledge on belonging and its importance for people in society. First among these are psychoeducation and advocacy.

Psychologists are in a unique position to translate science to practice and provide a message to the general public and clientele about the importance of belonging. Psychologists also have an important role to play in advocating for social and emotional competencies (including social skills) to be prioritized for young children.

### **Towards an inclusive language**

We need to approach belonging through a sensitive and inclusive lens that recognizes the diversity of our communities, past and present. In Australia, our cultural history is undeniably stained with stories of isolation and exclusion. For instance, how does belonging look and feel for Aboriginal people who were stolen from their families, segregated from their communities or relocated from their traditional home lands? In this way, belonging is not only perceptual, but also contextual. DeLeon Gray and his team have made great inroads through research in how we understand belonging in relation to history, race and culture, especially in schools. Psychologists should consider their use of language in written policy, reports and public forums. Language should not unintentionally exclude members of a particular audience. This means we should strive for a consistently inclusive language that precludes feelings of otherness. As psychologists, we can be particularly good at communicating with each other. Most of us share similar tertiary-level privilege. Using scientific jargon for written communication to non-psychologist audiences could be interpreted by the reader as, "this information does not relate to me", or worse, "perhaps I don't belong here". Psychological reports are one form of written communication that should be constructed with the audience in mind, however this notion is also relevant for psychologists working in other contexts.

Psychologists in schools and organizations must ensure policy and practice are articulated in a way that is inclusive and offers opportunities for people to feel as though they belong and that the message being communicated is for everyone.

Academic psychologists require unique skills to communicate to the public in order to disseminate their research to the people who will benefit the most. Use of "the individual" for example, can be problematic. Indeed, George Orwell suggested such phraseology was pretentious diction, but I will add that this type of language can depersonalize our communication, treat people as isolates and overlook the unique and intricate connections people have with each other. Even if you don't agree, at least you will probably concur that the rest of the world does not talk this way.

Taken together, our professional language has the capacity to influence and interfere with notions of belonging and there is much we can do to refine our communication with others.

## Key points

Belonging is essential for our psychological and physical health and can play a role in the way we think and interact with the world. The way we engage with others is central to our humanity. When feelings of 'not belonging' arise, we can turn to the scientific literature outlining the practices that may help to counter these feelings.

So too, a sense of belonging in childhood and adolescence is fundamental to the way we function throughout our lives. Therefore, fostering proactive strategies from birth is recommended, especially during early childhood when children first begin interacting with groups outside the family. Emphasizing the importance of social skills along with social and emotional competencies should be an ongoing conversation with the people we work with. We should also remember that, as psychologists, we are in a unique position to create opportunities for belonging through our work, language and our own personal interactions with others.

*The author can be contacted at: kelly-ann.allen@monash.edu*

## References

- Allen, K., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2018). What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis. *Educ Psychol Rev*, 30(1), 1-34.
- Arain, M., Haque, M., Johal, L., Mathur, P., Nel, W., Rais, A., ... Sharma, S. (2013). Maturation of the adolescent brain. *Neuropsychiatric disease and treatment*, 9, 449-461.
- Aron, A., Melinat, E., Aron, E. N., Vallone, R. D., & Bator, R. J. (1997). The experimental generation of interpersonal closeness: A procedure and some preliminary findings. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23(4), 363-377.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>
- Blakemore, S. J. (2008). The social brain in adolescence. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 9(4), 267-277.
- Braddock, J. H., & Gonzalez, A. D. C. (2010). Social isolation and social cohesion: The effects of K-12 neighborhood and school segregation on intergroup orientations. *Teachers College Record*, 112(6), 1631-1653.
- Burnett, S., Sebastian, C., Kadosh, K. C., & Blakemore, S. J. (2011). The social brain in adolescence: Evidence from functional magnetic resonance imaging and behavioural studies. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 35(8), 1654-1664
- Devers, C. J., Daugherty, D., Steenbergh, T., Runyan, J., Oke, L., Alayan, A., & Ragsdale, E. (2016). *Mindsets, smartphones, and student success*. In Proceedings of World Conference on E-Learning in Corporate, Government, Healthcare, and Higher Education 2016 (pp. 576-579). Chesapeake, VA: AACE.
- Eisenberger, N. I., Lieberman, M. D., & Williams, K. D. (2003). Does rejection hurt? An fMRI study of social exclusion. *Science*, 302(5643), 290-292.

- Gao, W., Zhu, H., Giovanello, K. S., Smith, K. J., Shen, J. D., Gilmore, J. H., & Lin, W. (2009). Evidence on the emergence of the brain's default network from 2-week-old to 2-year-old healthy pediatric subjects. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *106*(16), 6790-6795. doi: 10.1073/pnas.0811221106
- Harrist, A. W., & Bradley, K. D. (2002). Social exclusion in the classroom: Teachers and students as agents of change. In J. Aronson (Ed.), *Improving academic achievement* (pp. 363-383). New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Langille, D. B., Asbridge, M., Cragg, A., & Rasic, D. (2015). Associations of school connectedness with adolescent suicidality: Gender differences and the role of risk of depression. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, *60*(6), 258-267.
- Matthews, T., Danese, A., Wertz, J., Ambler, A., Kelly, M., Diver, A., ... & Arseneault, L. (2015). Social isolation and mental health at primary and secondary school entry: A longitudinal cohort study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *54*(3), 225-232.
- Marraccini, M. E., & Brier, Z. M. (2017). School connectedness and suicidal thoughts and behaviors: A systematic meta-analysis. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *32*(1), 5.
- OECD. (2017). *PISA 2015 Results (Volume III): Students' Well-Being*. Paris: OECD Publishing. doi: [10.1787/9789264273856-11-en](https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264273856-11-en)
- Rogers, C. R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy*. Oxford, England: Houghton Mifflin.
- Stallen, M., De Dreu, C. K., Shalvi, S., Smidts, A., & Sanfey, A. G. (2012). The herding hormone: Oxytocin stimulates in-group conformity. *Psychological Science*, *23*(11), 1288-1292.
- Wike, T. L., & Fraser, M. W. (2009). School shootings: Making sense of the senseless. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *14*(3), 162-169. doi: 10.1016/j.avb.2009.01.005