

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
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Ep. 134: Belonging: How To Combat The Serious Isolation That's Wreaking Havoc on Our Health and Happiness

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi, everyone. It's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today I'm excited to be with Stanford's Geoff Cohen. He's a social psychologist and the author of *Belonging, the Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides*. I'm looking forward to learning how a terrorist group was dismantled using this science and what we can all do to make every situation a little bit better for ourselves and for the people with whom we share it. Welcome Geoff, and thank you so much for joining 3 Takeaways today.

Geoff Cohen: Thank you Lynn for having me.

LT: It is my pleasure. Let's start by talking about the Black September terrorist group. Back in 1971, they assassinated Jordan's prime minister and one of the killers even lapped up his blood, as you describe it, as it was oozing from his body. And then they famously murdered 12 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics. But only two years later, the group had been silently dismantled and disappeared without a single one of the assassins being jailed or killed. Can you start by telling us what happened? And then we'll talk about the lessons learned.

GC: There was an effort to dismantle the Black September group by the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the PLO. And to make a long story short, what they did was to bring the members of the Black September group together for what was a sort of mixer in which they had the opportunity to meet prospective wives that they could start a new life with. And what the mixer successfully did was to pair up these men with women with whom they started a family. The PLO even provided some seed funding for these former terrorists to buy an apartment and incentives for having children. Then the key question was how many of these terrorists, former terrorists, returned to terrorism years later? And the answer that Bruce Hoffman, who recounts this story, gives is none. None. Once these individuals had something to invest in, a family from which they gained a sense of belonging and purpose, they abandoned their extremist path and became productive citizens. Not one of them returned to their terrorist activities. And so it's just a nice demonstration. I mean, it's a sort of very difficult issue. Of course, terrorism has many different causes, many different sources, but it's an interesting example of the power of creating a sense of connection and a sense of belonging to bring people back who've actually gone down a really dark path.

LT: How do you think about belonging, Geoff? What happens when people don't feel they belong?

GC: When people feel like they don't belong, it's actually associated with an experience of physical pain. Research by Matt Lieberman and Naomi Eisenberg show that when people feel ostracized,

even momentarily, the regions in their central nervous system associated with physical pain are actually activated. So as a social species, we've evolved this mechanism to feel when we're excluded as though we're in pain. It's actually painful. And that makes sense as a social species who depend on one another. We need other people. And so it makes sense that our biology would be wired to alert us to the problem of being excluded.

LT: Geoff, how does belonging impact people's physical health, or does it?

GC: It impacts it a lot. A big finding in the health research is that a sense of social support is one of the strongest predictors of people's health and even longevity. And there's research that demonstrates that when people feel lonely and isolated, it actually activates genes that stimulate bodily inflammation. And that actually puts people at risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and it actually even aggravates the course of cancer. So one set of strategies for helping to promote health is to promote social belonging.

GC: And there's a lot of different strategies out there that demonstrate the power of this sort of approach. One of my favorites is just getting people to participate in volunteer activities where they support other people. One of the best ways to feel like you belong is to feel like you matter, like you're contributing to some social problem or helping with the welfare of other people. And even along these key markers, physiological stress markers, there's large improvements in how people fare as a result of just getting out there and helping other people. So helping other people, being of service is one way in which we can promote our own belonging.

LT: Is belonging a byproduct of success?

GC: Yes, belonging is a byproduct of success. When people feel like they're successful, they are more likely to feel like they belong. On the other hand, research also suggests that when people feel like they belong, they're more likely to be successful. Having that sense that someone has our back, that we feel respected and accepted at our organization or in our school is actually beneficial to our performance and motivation. So it's not just a byproduct of success, it's in some ways a requirement for success.

LT: Do most people feel like they belong?

GC: Belonging is a situational experience. It depends on the situation we're in. And I think all of us can feel like outsiders sometimes. And we've all been in situations where we feel like we don't belong. It's kind of part of the human predicament. So I would say that, whether we feel like we belong, depends on the situation we're in. And today in our country, as Pete Buttigieg has put it, we are living through a crisis of belonging where people don't have enough situations where they have that sense of belonging or connection, either at school or at work or out and about in their community.

GC: Relationships at work have been fraying, relationships with institutions, such as the church, have been fraying. So that's created this sense of isolation among too many. One indicator of the degree to which people today feel isolated is what's been called the epidemic of loneliness. Roughly 20% of Americans feel lonely, persistently lonely to such a degree that it is threatening to their physical health.

LT: That is remarkable.

GC: As bad for their physical health as smoking a pack of cigarettes.

LT: You believe that slight adjustments in the way we interact with people in our daily lives can do much to nurture belonging. What are some of the small specific steps that we can take?

GC: There's a lot. And there is a suite of practices that have been called Wise Interventions by Greg Walton and Claude Steele and many others that show how small changes to the situations that we're in can have really big effects. To give some examples of that, one kind of intervention that's been shown to be very effective is what's known as, values affirmation. And with values affirmation, what you do is to ask people in moments of stress or psychological threat to reflect on the values that are really important to them. And that might be their compassion, their relationships with friends and family. And research shows that that small act of reflecting on your core values can have really large consequences. So for example, in one study that we did with middle school students and then later with college students, when we asked students of color to write about their most important values during the stressful transition to either middle school or college, it improved their grades over the course of two years. And years and years later, the effects were still apparent. For instance, for those middle school students, they were actually more likely to make it into college.

GC: Values affirmations are kind of situational opportunities we create for people to express their values and to feel valued for them. And they've been shown to help, under certain conditions, foster in people a sense of belonging. Another one is, Wise Criticism, wherein you take this mundane task that we're doing all the time, giving people critical feedback to help them do better. One of the problems with criticism is that oftentimes when people get it, they feel like, "What does this mean? Does it mean that this person thinks I don't belong or thinks that I'm incapable?" Well, one thing we can do when we give criticism is to say upfront, "I'm giving you this critical feedback because I have high standards and I believe in your potential." In one study that we did with Julio Garcia and David Jaeger, we found that when students got regular criticism, only 17% revised their work, criticism from their teacher. But when the same criticism was given by teachers with the following note, "I'm giving you this critical feedback because I have high standards and I believe in your potential to reach them." Then 71% of students revised their work. That's an example of how a small tweak to how we do these sort of everyday rituals like giving critical feedback can have a big effect.

LT: How about asking questions and listening to answers?

GC: Asking questions and listening to the answers is one of the lessons, I think, of a lot of research on how to bridge the divides that now beleaguer much of our country and the world. Asking questions and listening to answers. I know it sounds simple. This is the art of the conversation and we don't have enough of it. Research suggests that when we try to read other people's intentions, beliefs, and attitudes, when we try to kind of take their perspective, we often get it wrong. We're way vastly overconfident in our ability to understand and read people's minds. And I'm forever feeling this way sort of just in talking to people, people who think that they have an uncanny ability to read other people's minds and intents, the kind of overwhelming consensus of a lot of researchers that we're just really not as good at that as we think.

GC: Research by Nick Epley and Juliana Schroeder demonstrate that an alternative to trying to just imagine people's point of view is to do what they refer to as "perspective get". Get people's perspectives by asking them good questions and listening to the answers. And they show it, in a series of studies, that when people take the time to find out a little bit more, just ask the question, what do you think about this? What would you like to do over the weekend? What are your hobbies? What are your interests? They show huge gains in empathic accuracy. They're much better able to predict the other person's behavior, beliefs, and intentions under a controlled condition than they are when they simply try to imagine the other person's point of view. That's an example of perspective getting, asking good questions and listening to the answers. And I know that sounds kind of obvious, but the interesting thing is it's not obvious. People don't ask questions and listen to the answers as much as they could or should because they have this outsized faith in their ability to know other people just by trying to imagine what they're thinking and feeling.

LT: Geoff, you also talk about using affirmation. Can you explain what you mean by that? Is that doling out praise or flattering people or what is it?

GC: The term affirmation comes from Claude Steele, a social psychologist. He uses affirmation to describe situational experiences that draw out the assets inside of people so that they can be surfaced and seen. Affirmations, literally, the term affirmation means to firm up, self-affirmations, affirm the self. And so, one example of affirmations, are what we talked about earlier, these sort of values affirmations. They are often opportunities that we create in the situation for people to express who they are, what they value and to feel valued for it. And that's why rather than flattering people about how good or smart they are, one of the best strategies to create true, strong and robust sense of self-worth is to create opportunities in the classroom for them to show their worth.

GC: For instance, by expressing their values or by giving them roles in which they can enact competence. One of my favorite examples of this is work by Elliot Aronson in the Jigsaw classroom where he simply puts students from disadvantaged backgrounds in roles where they can enact mastery and be the expert at something. And he finds that that's one of the best ways to improve their achievement and their sense of self-worth in the classroom. What we're doing with self-affirmations is making people participants in showing their worth. We're not telling them that they're worthy and that they have self-esteem. We're giving them opportunities to manifest that self-worth in the situation before them.

LT: Can you give some examples of nonverbal affirmations?

GC: Nonverbal affirmations, one of the ways in which we convey respect is through the nonverbal route. And that includes making eye contact, smiling when appropriate, having kind of open body language. And research suggests that some of the ways in which we convey respect is through this sort of nonverbal route. And one of the best examples I know of this is in research by Ruth Dittmann and Valerie Purdy Greenway, where what they did was to bring Black and White adults together to have a really tough and rough conversation about the legacy of slavery in America. And they watched videos beforehand and then they had a conversation. And what they're looking at is the degree to which the White participant feels curious about the issue, afterward wants to learn more about it and isn't so defensive about the topic of race in America as a lot of White people are today in America. And what they discovered is that in some of these conversations, it seems to go really well. The White participant leaves the conversation much more interested, much more curious in the topic and not so defensive. What they did then was to zero in on what was going on

in those conversations. And what they found is that those constructive conversations, the Black interlocutor seemed to do things a little bit differently.

GC: First off, they addressed the topic of slavery head on. They talked about the harsh, hard realities of it. They didn't avoid. But in addition, they had nonverbal means of reassuring the White person that they saw them as a person of dignity. They looked them in the eye, their body language was more direct. They weren't glancing askance at the White person with whom they were talking. And that together with the verbal affirmations where they were just asking the person questions and listening to their perspective, created a sort of comfort zone for White participants. So they felt like they were being seen and being respected, which enabled them to feel more comfortable talking about this really difficult issue and being open to learning more about it. In the conversations that didn't go well, those affirmations and gestures of affiliation through the nonverbal route, but also the verbal route weren't being made as much. And that's not, of course, to put the onus on Black people to put White people at ease. Of course not. It's just a demonstration of how when situations are made to feel psychologically safe and affirming, we're actually much more open to learning because we feel like we belong in that moment.

GC: We feel like we're respected and accorded a full measure of regard in the eyes of the other person, which just makes us less defensive and more open to information that we might otherwise feel threatened by.

LT: Geoff, what are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

GC: One is to fight the tendency to blame people rather than their circumstances. This bias known as the fundamental attribution error causes all kinds of mischief. We're way too quick to blame people and way too slow to find out more about their lived circumstances, which are often hidden from us. And research suggests that this tendency to blame people, rather than circumstances, causes a lot of mischief. So the tendency to judge people rather than their circumstances is one of the main causes of the crisis of belonging, I think. This tendency to blame people rather than their circumstances leads us to undermine other people's belonging rather than offer them the kinds of support that they need.

GC: Second takeaway would be to "perspective get". Ask good questions and listen to the answers. Try to find out what people's situations are like from their point of view. We're much too confident in our ability to read people and we don't spend enough time trying to understand their point of view. A final takeaway is to address the underlying psychological causes of problems rather than the problems themselves. One of the big lessons of research on belonging is that when we look at so many of the problems in our society ranging from extremism, to bad health, to prejudice to underachievement in school, it's very easy to think that these are just different problems and to some degree they are.

GC: However, research suggests that there's a similar underlying cause and that cause is uncertainty about one's belonging. And I think a lot of the research that is being done in this area of wise interventions just suggest the power of helping students to feel affirmed in the classroom, reassuring them of their belonging leads them to do better, feel better, have better health, and it comes from addressing the sort of powerful underlying causes of problems rather than the symptoms.

LT: Geoff, thank you so much. Thank you for our conversation today. I really enjoyed your book,

Belonging.

GC: Thank you so much, Lynn. I enjoyed our conversation.

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