



PSYCHOLOGY

Connecting for success

Interventions that increase our sense of belonging can help us confront new challenges

By **Matthew Lieberman**

What if there was a pill that could significantly improve your child's grade point average (GPA) and increase their long-term success without negative side effects? What would you pay for it, and how might it achieve this seemingly magical outcome—by increasing IQ, by enhancing willpower? What if I told you there was a way to accomplish the same ends without affecting either of these variables and without the help of a fictional pharmaceutical intervention? As unlikely as it sounds, the key to raising students' GPA often starts with raising their sense of belonging at school.

All mammals are born immature and incapable of caring for themselves, so they have evolved a need for social connection and some capacity for empathy. From an evolutionary perspective, the social pain infants feel when separated from their caregiver and the distress that this causes in caregivers keeps the two groups bonded long enough for the infant to mature and reach self-sufficiency. Humans, unlike many other spe-

cies, however, have a generalized need to feel like we belong in groups, a need that flies in the face of the American myth of rugged individualism, making it all the more important to come to terms with.

Belonging, by social psychologist Geoffrey Cohen, focuses on the current “crisis of belonging” preventing many teens and young adults from reaching their full potential. In the book, Cohen alternates between telling the deep history of successful social psychological interventions and focusing on modern interventions that are being used to astounding effect. It is in the description of these more recent interventions that the book shines.

The main tool under consideration is what Cohen and his colleagues somewhat dubiously call “wise interventions.” Wise interventions are best understood in contrast to the better-known “nudges.” Nudges depend on people's mental laziness. For example, health care choice forms with precompleted options count on people sticking with the default selections. In contrast, wise interventions focus on “subjective construals”—our idiosyncratic understandings of our situations and ourselves (*1*).

Sometimes a modest change to how we un-

Mentees can benefit from mentors who share the same race or gender.

derstand a situation can have dramatic cascading effects over time. Believing that you are up to a challenge can alter how you respond to the next roadblock you face, which in turn affects your ability to overcome the one after that. What makes wise interventions more remarkable is that they are typically inexpensive, simple, and not zero-sum. Helping members of one group feel that they belong does not deprive other groups of any resources or opportunities.

The wise interventions discussed in the book take a variety of forms, from small gestures of welcome, to behaviors that affirm a person's values, to opportunities that allow an individual to reinterpret evidence. They can even take the form of working with a mentor who is of the same race or gender, which can help a mentee to more easily imagine surmounting comparable challenges.

Consider Cohen's 2011 *Science* paper, written with Greg Walton, which showed that a brief wise intervention with first-year Black college students significantly closed a race-based GPA gap 3 years later (*2*). The intervention? Allowing Black students to see that white students experienced uncertainty about whether they belonged at their respective institutions early on in their college careers—an act that helped the students realize that others felt this way regardless of their race. This hour-long intervention at the start of college also produced demonstrable effects on participants' work success and general well-being a decade later.

No book is perfect. Some of the time that Cohen devotes to the well-trod history of social psychology might have been better spent on why we have a need for belonging in the first place, and some of the chapters seem tangential to the book's thesis. And although Cohen rightfully promotes the importance of situational factors in academic performance, he unnecessarily denigrates the reality of individual differences in ability. We should nurture both belonging and ability, which is harder when school districts increasingly deny the latter to support the former.

But ultimately, these issues are quibbles. If we want more people to have the chance to maximize their abilities and their contributions to society, reading *Belonging* is the right place to start. ■



Belonging
Geoffrey L. Cohen
Norton, 2022.
448 pp.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. M. D. Lieberman, *Psychol. Rev.* **129**, 830 (2022).
2. G. M. Walton, G. L. Cohen, *Science* **331**, 1447 (2011).

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