

# **SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS:**

**The secret to employee health and happiness**



HEALTH SOLUTIONS



## **Our need for social connectedness is ingrained in us from day one**

and remains crucial to our intelligence, happiness, and health throughout our lives. From this report, you'll learn the science behind social connectedness, and how social behaviors impact our health and the workplace. You'll also receive key takeaways on driving social engagement in your wellness program.

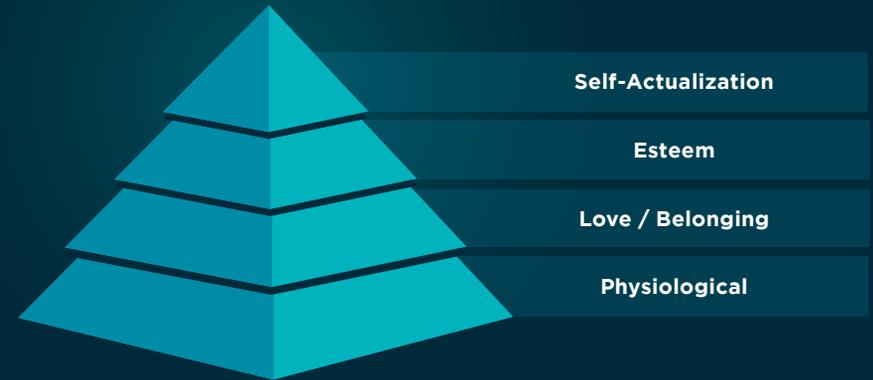
# THE SCIENCE OF SOCIAL:



Social connectedness refers to the relationships people have with others. It's the measure of how people interact, cooperate, and collaborate. In fact, we have entire sections of our brain dedicated solely to social thinking. When the brain is in "default mode"—meaning, when the brain is not focused on cognitive, motor, or visual tasks—it has the same active areas as when processing social information.<sup>1</sup> This finding suggests that the brain can still be primarily focused on being social, especially during down time.

There's also a link between social connectedness and intelligence: researchers have found that if you learn something with the intent of teaching others, you end up learning the material better than if you learn for the sake of an analytical reason, like passing a test.<sup>2</sup>

When considering how the brain reacts to pain, there seems to be a disconnect between the perception of physical and social pain—even though similar terms are used to describe them, such as "my back hurts" versus "my feelings are hurt." But research has shown that when people feel social pain, an alarm is triggered in the same region of the brain as when it feels physical pain.<sup>3</sup> This supports the notion that social feelings can have a noticeable impact on the brain.



**You may be familiar with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs—the pyramid developed by American psychologist Abraham Maslow that describes the common needs of humans. In this model, it is clear that social connectedness plays a major role in the "social" and "esteem" pillars.<sup>4</sup> Recent studies show that social connection may be even more important than Maslow originally thought. When looking at the needs of infants, social connectedness is of primary importance from the beginning. Babies wouldn't survive without someone else providing them food, shelter, and other basic needs.<sup>5</sup>**

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3. Eisenberger, N. (2014). Social Pain and the Brain: Controversies, Questions, and Where to Go from Here. Annual Review of Psychology, 66, 601. Retrieved 2017, from <https://sanlab.psych.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2016/08/A-84.pdf>

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# SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON HEALTH

When linking the relationship between social connection and health, researchers have identified four major characteristics:<sup>6</sup>

## SOCIAL ISOLATION:

The relative absence of social relationships

If someone lives by themselves in the remote countryside, they are likely to feel more isolated than someone who lives in a suburban house with their family. In fact, low social connection is associated with health concerns such as higher blood pressure and slower wound healing.<sup>7</sup> And even more serious, a study of almost 7,000 adults discovered that those who lacked social and community ties had a two times higher rate of all-cause mortality risk.<sup>8</sup>



## SOCIAL INTEGRATION:

The overall level of involvement with informal social relationships (like a spouse) and formal social relationships (like volunteer organizations)

Research has shown that social integration is associated with enhanced mental health,<sup>9</sup> improved cardiovascular functions,<sup>10</sup> and reduced blood pressure.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the more someone is socially integrated, the better their health may be.

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## QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIP:

How happy or satisfied someone is in their relationship

Poor marital quality can be associated with health concerns, such as compromised immune function and depression.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, increased relationship stress can lead to greater food and alcohol consumption, as well as smoking, which can lead to major health consequences in the long term.<sup>11</sup>

## SOCIAL NETWORKS:

An individual's various social relationships

Not to be confused with dedicated social websites, in this instance “social networks” refers to real-life social groups, like co-workers and friends. There has been evidence that uncovers both positive and negative effects on health when related to social networks. It has been found that likelihood of obesity increases when someone has an obese spouse or friend.<sup>12</sup> Another study observed that people were more influenced by friends who shared mutual friends.<sup>13</sup> This study also revealed that when related to exercise, runners who linked their fitness tracker to online social networks saw more of their friends or social connections taking up running. This suggests that social networks may have a notable impact on the social norms people follow.

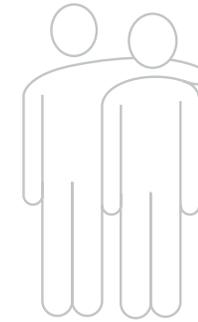
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# MORE FRIENDS, MORE STEPS

A study of 44,000 Fitbit users found that for each additional social tie, participants walked an average of 6.5 more steps per day, implying that people with larger and more active social networks may have higher levels of physical activity.<sup>14</sup>



## THE SOCIAL WORKPLACE

Social connections are just as important in the workplace as they are in other aspects of life. In fact, having a best friend at work consistently correlates to improvements in customer engagement, profit, employee safety incidents and patient safety incidents. But, only 2 in 10 U.S. employees strongly agree that they have a best friend at work. By moving that ratio to 6 in 10 employees, researchers posited that organizations could experience 36% fewer safety incidents, 7% more engaged customers and a 12% higher profit.<sup>15</sup>

What's more, positive social interactions at work have been shown to boost employee health, such as lowering heart rate and blood pressure.<sup>16</sup> Compassionate, friendly, and supportive co-workers can boost productivity levels at work<sup>17</sup> and even their commitment to the workplace.<sup>18</sup>

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# THERE ARE WAYS OF EMPHASIZING SOCIAL NORMS TO INGRAIN THEM INTO COMPANY CULTURE.

It is especially important to implement work policies that promote social health, so that making connections are seen as a priority at work. Some general policies that encourage positive social health include:

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**Family friendly policies**, including flexible work hours and generous parental leave. In a Gallup survey of more than 195,600 U.S. employees, 54% of office workers said they would leave their job for one that offers flexible work time.<sup>15</sup>

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**Floating holidays**, which gives employees more flexible time off while enabling employers to manage the quantity of that time.

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**Manager training** to teach social relationship and interpersonal skills that foster positive employee-manager relationships.

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**Promote positive “social norms”** at work with initiatives such as healthy lunches or snacks, walking clubs, and company-sponsored races or marathons.

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**Remote employee considerations** to promote inclusiveness, particularly for the growing number of employees who telecommute. Currently, 43% of employees work away from their team members at least some of the time, up from 39% in 2012.<sup>15</sup> To help prevent them from feeling isolated, be sure to practice consistent communication with them. You may even want to think beyond email, and utilize online group chat services like HipChat or Slack.



# STATUS CERTAINTY AUTONOMY RELATEDNESS FAIRNESS

The nature of a corporate wellness program—where a large group of people unite under a common goal of well-being—lends itself well to leaning on social connections. The SCARF model, a framework for collaborative situations developed by the co-founder of the NeuroLeadership Institute, Dr. David Rock, can be used to ensure that the correct elements are incorporated into wellness programs. SCARF is made up of five parts: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness.<sup>19</sup> By considering these aspects, corporate wellness programs will be seen as inclusive and engaging, ultimately leading to more successful results.

19. Rock, D. (2008). SCARF: a Brain-based Model for Collaborating with and Influencing Others. NeuroLeadership Journal, Issue 1. Retrieved, 2017 [https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-09/documents/thurs\\_georgia\\_9\\_10\\_915\\_covello.pdf](https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-09/documents/thurs_georgia_9_10_915_covello.pdf)

20. National Business Group on Health, Fidelity Investments. (2017). Embracing a Broader Definition of Well-Being: Eighth Annual Employee Sponsored Health and Well-being Survey. Retrieved 2017, from <https://www.businessgrouphealth.org/pub/?id=ab4d3eb8-782b-cb6e-2763-ae1848e722a6>

## How to incorporate social technology into your wellness program

Employers value the integration of technology into their wellness solution. According to a recent survey from NBGH and Fidelity Investments, over half of employers have or are considering subsidies for fitness wearables.

In fact, of all physical health initiatives, fitness wearables are receiving the most consideration from employers.<sup>20</sup> Here are some ways to make sure the technology you implement is not only meaningful, but social, too:



**Use activity trackers:** Link your wellness program to an activity tracker that employees can easily set up and readily wear.



**Run team challenges:** Deploy corporate activity challenges that encourage physical health and team camaraderie, and foster healthy competition.



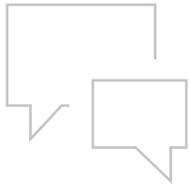
**Make sure the challenge can be managed on a platform that aggregates user data and offers seamless organization of teams.**



**Leverage a leaderboard:** Provide clear visibility into activity challenge progress. Implement a leaderboard or dashboard where employees can follow their individual, team, and company-wide progress in real-time.



**Chat online:** Offer a feature that encourages teamwork and support through real-time chat among employees.



## To wrap things up...

Social connections are an integral part of human existence and can have major implications on health—especially as it relates to corporate wellness. It's important to incorporate social interactions into your workplace wellness strategy, and to find the right technology that will support these interactions to help you track and scale your efforts.

A photograph of two women in a professional setting, possibly a meeting or collaborative work environment. One woman with curly hair is looking down at a document, while the other woman is looking towards her. The image is overlaid with a teal gradient.

# TIPS TO IMPLEMENT **SCARF**

To optimize engagement within your corporate wellness program, consider leveraging the SCARF model, created by the co-founder of the NeuroLeadership Institute, Dr. David Rock.

Read on to learn more about what the SCARF model stands for, and some tips for how to implement each part of the acronym into your next corporate activity challenge.

# STATUS CERTAINTY AUTONOMY RELATEDNESS FAIRNESS

This refers to the idea of one's importance in relation to others—the social feeling of reward and prestige.



## TIP:

Use a leaderboard in a competition and get creative. Try rewarding employees for titles such as “Most Improved,” or “Most Active Minutes.” This recognition provides status to those who may not be constantly winning their weekly step challenges.

# STATUS CERTAINTY AUTONOMY RELATEDNESS FAIRNESS

In order to thrive, individuals need to know what's expected of them, and what is going to happen so they have a sense of predictability. The more your employees recognize a social norm, the better sense of certainty they may have.



## TIP:

Communicate upcoming events often and in advance—and avoid drastic changes. Consider having your Wellness Director or HR Admin send out weekly emails to the company, informing them of any upcoming health and fitness initiatives or events. This way employees can count on being in the know every week.

# STATUS CERTAINTY **AUTONOMY** RELATEDNESS FAIRNESS

People like to have control and a sense of flexibility over their environment, especially when it comes to health and fitness.



## **TIP:**

Encourage flexibility. Let employees choose a schedule that works best for them, whether that's enabling them to go for a run during their lunch or afternoon break, or sneaking out of work a bit early for a workout class.

# STATUS CERTAINTY AUTONOMY RELATEDNESS FAIRNESS

People like to feel safe and secure, and free of judgment. The human brain thrives on social interaction, and as a result, our relation to others greatly impacts the decisions we make.



## TIP:

Share testimonials. It's motivating to see the stories of others. If someone learns that a coworker lost 30 pounds, other employees might feel inspired to work harder on their own fitness goals. Plus, the person who is recognized for making these healthy strides will feel a boost from the status or prestige.

# STATUS CERTAINTY AUTONOMY RELATEDNESS FAIRNESS

Finally, people value fairness. The perception of fair exchange among employees encourages a positive environment where everyone has a chance to win.



## TIP:

Change your challenge strategies to give everyone an opportunity to win. This can be done in a variety of ways, whether that's creating competitive tiers within a challenge, utilizing different metrics such as distance traveled versus steps counted, or awarding highest step counts for a given day vs. a given week.



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