

SHASTA NELSON

THE

BUSINESS

OF

FRIENDSHIP

MAKING THE MOST OF OUR  
RELATIONSHIPS WHERE WE SPEND  
THE MOST OF OUR TIME

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Making the Most of  
Our Relationships Where  
We Spend Most of Our Time



HARPERCOLLINS  
LEADERSHIP

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To Greg, my husband, and also my favorite coworker.

Office holiday parties with you are the best!

And for Naomi, Myles, Edda, Asa, Dante, Lily, and Lucy—  
the little people in my heart: it is my hope that when you one  
day contribute to our workforce, no matter what you do,  
you thoroughly enjoy those who do it with you.

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## Research and References

This book stands on the shoulders of some amazing researchers who have long been studying relationships, business, culture, and health in their respective fields. I do my best to footnote every study I quote in the back of this book and am in deep gratitude for their curiosity in asking big questions, their bravery for pursuing the answers, and their wisdom in their reporting. (The biggest of thanks for Kiran Adcock for compiling all those citations!)

While my expertise runs deep in friendship research and application, having written two other books on the subject, my foray into the world of business will forever be indebted to the visionary leaders who started inviting me to speak to their organizations, facilitate their team off-site meetings, and consult their managers. As promised, your names and organizations do not show up in this book, but your wisdom is loud and clear, and your stories and examples are everywhere. And even more of you took your teams through my *Healthy Team Relationship Assessment*, which not only gave you an accessible report on the health of the relationships within your team, but that collective data continues to reveal so much about the trends, tendencies, and needs we all face in our organizational culture.

Additionally, I facilitated my own *Friendships in the Workplace Survey* via social media, in which 550 respondents answered almost thirty questions about their opinions and experiences of relationships at work. These responses were invaluable, not only for the snapshot they

## RESEARCH AND REFERENCES

provide of what many of us are feeling (which I'll be showing in graphs throughout this book), but the results ended up reshaping part of my book outline when I saw the incredible prevalence of some questions and fears. Additionally, their open-ended comments and stories are woven throughout this book (with fictitious names) as they give significance to what is otherwise just a statistic. If you were one who took the time to fill out that survey, thank you; my trusty calculator and I poured over your answers every which way, with wholehearted earnestness, like a kid on Christmas morning.

Speaking of stories, I am grateful to a private Facebook group of volunteers, who generously shared illustrations, triggered ideas, and acted as a focus group for me throughout my writing process. Huge thanks, also, to those of you who agreed to phone interviews with me so I could add details to your stories, updates to the data, and tips for those in similar situations. In most cases I changed your names, and in some I changed some details, but you'll undoubtedly recognize your contribution.

And in informal, but never less important, ways, I share stories throughout this book that have long stayed with me from conversations with friends, coaching clients, and off-site meetings with employees.

All that to say, that while writing a book is often solitary work, the finished product was very much a community effort. (Not that any of us who value relationships are the least bit surprised!)

# Introduction

## Why We Need This Book

“I’m not here to make friends.”

Words spoken at workplaces around the world.

For some, this oft-repeated line is used like a war cry to justify our competitive behavior, to shrug off what others think of us, or to convince ourselves why the end justifies the means. For others, we simply whisper it as our affirmation for why we’re heading home instead of joining our coworkers for a round of drinks; we assure ourselves that it’s best to keep a clear line between our professional and personal lives.

So many of us—employees and managers alike—still have serious doubts when it comes to making friends at work. When I wrote my other two books—one on making new friends as an adult and the other on how to deepen our friendships—no one challenged me as to whether those were appropriate topics. But upon moving those very-needed friendships to our workplaces where we spend most of our time? Almost 30 percent of us aren’t so sure.

| It is appropriate to have a best friend at work. <sup>1</sup> |                      |                     |                       |                         |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Definitely True</i>  | <i>Probably True</i> | <i>I Don't Know</i> | <i>Probably False</i> | <i>Definitely False</i> |
| 36%   | 35%                  | 15%                 | 11%                   | 3%                      |

## INTRODUCTION

Now, obviously, the good news is that the remaining 70 percent of us are more or less on board with the idea of close friendships at work. And, in fact, if we have a best friend at work now, we're closer to 90 percent convinced it's a good thing.

| <b>With best friend: It is appropriate to have a best friend at work.</b> |                      |                     |                       |                         |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Definitely True</i>  | <i>Probably True</i> | <i>I Don't Know</i> | <i>Probably False</i> | <i>Definitely False</i> |
| 64%   | 26%                  | 5%                  | 3%                    | 2%                      |

| <b>No best friend: It is appropriate to have a best friend at work.</b> |                      |                     |                       |                         |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Definitely True</i>  | <i>Probably True</i> | <i>I Don't Know</i> | <i>Probably False</i> | <i>Definitely False</i> |
| 20%   | 36%                  | 22%                 | 16%                   | 6%                      |

Put a different way, we are three times more likely to think it's appropriate to have a best friend *if* we are experiencing the benefits of one, and conversely, we're three times more likely to say it's definitely inappropriate if we don't have one.

Unfortunately, too many of us don't have one. One of the largest workplace studies to date shows 42 percent of us don't have one.<sup>2</sup> By my survey, the number was even higher with 53 percent of us not thinking we do.

| <b>Currently, I have at least one best friend at work.</b> |                      |                     |                       |                         |
|--|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Definitely True</i>                                     | <i>Probably True</i> | <i>I Don't Know</i> | <i>Probably False</i> | <i>Definitely False</i> |
| 23%  | 17%                  | 7%                  | 19%                   | 34%                     |

And most of us wish we did.

## INTRODUCTION

| I wish I had a best friend at work. |                      |                     |                       |                         |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Definitely True</i>              | <i>Probably True</i> | <i>I Don't Know</i> | <i>Probably False</i> | <i>Definitely False</i> |
| 29%                                 | 31%                  | 15%                 | 13%                   | 12%                     |

Most of this book is written for the majority of us who want better friendships at work—maybe even a best friend. I'll teach you the science behind how relationships work, provide advice for navigating through some of our fears, and help set healthy expectations for the workplace.

But, before we get into the *how* for those who know they want those closer friendships, let's start with making the case for *why* we should all want more friendships at work and see if those of us who have been conditioned in the leave-your-personal-life-at-the-door philosophy might be open to the research that says otherwise.

What if these close relationships that scare us so much could actually help us be happier, healthier, and more productive at work and at home?

### WHAT IF . . . FRIENDSHIPS AREN'T JUST A PERSONAL LIFE ISSUE?

The belief that “friends” are to be relegated to the “personal life” still permeates so many of our beliefs. In her book *How to Be Happy at Work*, leadership advisor Dr. Annie McKee says with the clarity that comes from a lifetime of studying teams and leaders, “One of the most pernicious myths in today's organizations is that you don't have to be friends with your coworkers. Common sense and my decades of work with people and companies show the exact opposite.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, while too many in our world report feeling lonely, among the fortunate ones who don't, 99 percent of them report having meaningful connections at work.<sup>4</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The truth is, my friends, that I've been out here preaching friendship for more than a decade—two books, dozens of YouTube videos, hundreds of keynotes and team off-site meetings, and hundreds of media interviews—and what I know to be true is this: our loneliness is less a personal issue that reflects on us as individuals as much as it's a systemic issue that will be solved only when we're willing to collectively and radically reorient our lives to that which really matters most to us, our relationships. Our friendships are not a “personal life” issue but a human issue that needs to be addressed in all aspects of our lives. And top of that list should be our work, where we spend so much of our lives.

Indeed, if we're coming home from our jobs lonely, it's almost impossible to make up for it in our off hours. If we relegate our friendships to our nonwork life—where we have to try to “fit them in” between exercise classes, kids, walking the dog, binge-watching our favorite show, running errands, cleaning the house, and sleeping—not only do we not have enough time to regularly clock the hours we need in order to feel close to people, but if we're coming home lonely then we also won't have the energy.

Steve, a pharmacist, articulated his experience painfully well on the *Friendships in the Workplace Survey*: “The problem with my weekends, besides the fact that I'm already starting to get depressed as Monday looms nearer, is that I'm so tired from the week that all I can do is the bare minimum with my family and chores—which means making time for friendships takes more energy than I have.”

He nailed this vicious cycle on the head: if our workplace relationships drain our energy then it's more likely that we have less energy to invest in relationships outside of work, which then contributes to us feeling burned out and exhausted at work. As the authors of *The Happiness Track* say in a *Harvard Business Review* article about burnout at work: “The more people are exhausted, the lonelier they feel.” Their research found that 50 percent of respondents, from a wide range of professions, are lonely and burned out at work.<sup>5</sup> For our sake—to feel less burned out by our work (and therefore feel more energy when we're away from

work), we would be wise to foster supportive friendships at the very places where we need to protect ourselves from the effects of stress.

But our workplaces need us to have friends here too. For our health and happiness, yes; but also because the more we feel like we belong, the more loyal and engaged we are to them. And the truth is that while we may like our paycheck, job description, or even the brand where we work, it is only the people we work with who can determine whether we feel like we belong, or not.

In the first section of this book—the next two chapters—I lay out the research (and there’s a lot of it) that will hopefully convince all of us, and our bosses, that friendships are not just worth it at work but are actually helpful.

## WHAT IF . . . FRIENDSHIPS INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY AT WORK?

Speaking of helpful, by far the greatest fear we have about friendships at work is that they’ll negatively affect our work.

Organizations like Gallup (one of the most reputable, comprehensive, and long-standing organizations to be providing organizational analytics) have been reporting the importance of having “a best friend” at work for nearly two decades. And other researchers have only piled on. There isn’t a single study that shows we perform better, or are happier, without friends at work; and yet twenty years later, too many of us still pause, shake our heads a bit, and grimace when the subject comes up. It’s like we don’t *really* believe all the studies that show that liking whom we work with is one of the most significant predictors for our engagement, retention, inventory control, safety, and productivity.

But our fears and hesitations don’t change the data. They’ve retested it with softer words like “good” or “close” or just “friend,” but despite whether we are comfortable with it or not, it’s those with “best friends” who make the best employees. As they say themselves, they



## INTRODUCTION

“would have dropped the statement if not for one stubborn fact: It predicts performance.”<sup>6</sup>

To be clear: they’re saying that not only do friendships *not* hurt our productivity, they actually help it.

The real question we want to ask then isn’t “Are work friendships good or bad?” Or even “Are they appropriate?” They are good *and* appropriate—even desirable from an organizational perspective. The better question we should be asking then is “How can we make work friendships the healthiest they can be—both for the sake of the employee and the mission of the company?”

And the answer isn’t to discourage friendships but rather to teach healthy relationship skills that will benefit the entire workforce.

Because ask those same people who are uncomfortable with friendships in the workplace what they *do* want from their colleagues, and most of them would say yes to a list that looks pretty similar to what we’d expect from friends:

- Do you want to *enjoy* whom you work with?
- Do you want to feel like you can *trust* the people around you to “have your back” and *support* you when needed?
- Do you want to feel *valued* for who you are, the ideas you have, the work you do, and the way you contribute?
- Do you want to look forward to coming to work because you *feel a part* of something bigger?

What we say we want actually sounds a lot like friendship. For some reason we resist the word, even when we want the outcome.

Yes, we may not want to be best friends with everyone, but if given the choice—don’t we at least want as many of the positive and rewarding aspects of friendship from as many of our coworkers, clients, and managers as possible? Absolutely.

In the second section of this book, “What Makes All Relationships Actually Work?” (Chapters 3–7), I teach all of us—whether we’re overwhelmed with the responsibility to lead, manage, and create a

healthy work environment for others, or completely underwhelmed by the lack of authority we have to make key workplace changes—how better relationships start with us. We don't need a budget, title, or even fun colleagues to get started. We'll define friendship and make sure we know what we're aiming toward so we can create the relationships that bring us more joy at work in a way that also increases our productivity and engagement.

## WHAT IF . . . FRIENDSHIPS DECREASE THE DRAMA AT WORK?

And lastly, our fears. All I had to do was mention that my next book was on friendships at work and I'd hear an immediate earful of all that could go wrong: But what if a manager waits too long to fire someone because of their friendship? Or hires someone because of that friendship? What if two colleagues who are friends have to compete for the same promotion? What if someone plays favoritism? What if we feel left out because two people are closer friends than we are? What if we are the boss and can't share as honestly anymore? What if I have to start supervising one of my friends? Or worse, one of them has to supervise me? What if I hire a friend and the person doesn't perform well? What if we encourage friendship but it leads to sexual harassment? What if I confide in someone and the person breaks my trust, but we still have to work together?

The irony, of course, is that those risks are already real in our workplace whether we're friends or not. We could be against friendship and have no friends, but that doesn't protect us from jealousy, gossip, drama, or feeling left out. Our boss could have no friends and it still won't stop our suspicions of favoritism or make firing someone faster and easier. Our friend could be promoted over us, but isn't that better than reporting to someone we don't admire or respect? One thing is clear: being against friendship doesn't protect our workplaces from our list of fears.

On the contrary, I'm convinced that it's in building *more* healthy relationships, not fewer, that the drama we fear will diminish.

Indeed, the lonelier we are, the less empathy we tend to feel for others, the more likely we are to take offense, the more defensive we act, and the more likely we are to hurt others by pushing them away or clinging. Avoiding the subject of friendship at work only increases the odds of unhealthy expectations, unspoken concerns, inappropriate behaviors, and lonely workers.

In the third section of this book, "How to Make Relationships Work Better for Us" (Chapters 8–12), I'll be tackling our biggest fears and teaching us new ways for showing up at work so we can increase the chances of meaningful connection while decreasing the chances of hurt feelings, angst, and rejection.

## WHAT IF . . . FRIENDSHIPS AT WORK BENEFITED ALL OF US?

"I'm not here to make friends" is not only a shortsighted philosophy that has permeated a lot of work cultures, but it's also frequently heard on competitive reality TV shows followed by the words, "I'm here to win."

And it would be one thing if those people actually won and we had to talk about whether it was worth winning and being lonely. But they don't.<sup>7</sup> Uttering those words might sound as though we're focused on what matters most (and therefore more likely to accomplish that mission), but that motto actually increases our chances of losing the competition we claim is our priority. And it endears us to no one along the way.

It's time to let go of our hesitations, guilt, and fear about friendships at work and instead see that the more connected we are the better it is for all of us. I very much want this book to be a win-win-win for us. If we have friends at work:

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- *we* will win because we'll be happier and healthier because we love our jobs and the people with whom we work;
- *our companies* (and their missions and profits) will win because we'll call in sick less, have fewer accidents, and treat their customers better because we feel connected to our teams and skilled in interpersonal relationships; and
- *our world* will win because we'll be decreasing the amount of loneliness that is plaguing us individually, and collectively.

For too long we've believed that either work will suffer from the act of socializing and the supposed "drama" that we associate with friendships, or conversely, that our friendships will feel strangled if they are tied up with work issues.

What if instead of believing that workplace friendships hurt one or the other, we were open to believing that they could actually help both? In the next chapter I am going to show you how important friendships are to you personally, especially the ones at work, and in the following chapter we'll get deeper into the research on how those friendships benefit our organizations. Both are important.

Hopefully soon, we'll be hearing a lot more of us say at work, "I'm here to make friends."

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# **PART 1**

## **Why Relationships Matter at Work**

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# How We Benefit from Friendships at Work

**A**lyson confided in me that “even though nearly everyone else who works here is a millennial like I am, it’s having the opposite affect I had hoped.” She had gone into a job at a magazine, eight months prior, thinking that being surrounded with people in a similar life stage would help her make friends. But instead of the resonance she expected to feel, she confessed that it felt more judgmental and competitive as they all seemed to feel pressure to outdo each other. “It’s almost like we each have to magnify our differences, no matter how small they are, to convince the powers-that-be that we are each the coolest and most reliable representation for our generation!” Her exhaustion in trying to stand out left her wondering who her people were, if not her age group.



Similarly, Drew expected to feel an instant camaraderie when he joined a team of engineers in Austin. While, for the most part, they had a lot in common—mostly men, engineer backgrounds, transplants to Texas, and similar temperaments—he was quick to assure me that while they were all nice, he had no idea how to connect with them. “It’s pretty quiet in the offices,” he said. “Everyone is polite and friendly, but they all seem eager to do their work and go home.” With most of their energy and skills being devoted all day to strategic thinking, problem solving, and data analyzing, they weren’t naturally prone to prioritize connection and getting to know one another. He wondered if his choice in profession doomed him to a career surrounded by people who were “in their heads all the time.”

On the opposite side of the spectrum, in a workplace filled with Ping-Pong balls, music, free lunches, and hosted happy hours, Prisha wasn’t having much luck either, despite what seemed like obvious commonalities with her coworkers. “We all chose to move here to the Silicon Valley, so you’d think that choice alone would basically self-select people like me—ambitious, business minded, progressive, highly educated, and committed to social change—and ensure that we could all be friends if we wanted?” She ended the sentence with the heightened sound of a question mark, basically begging me to agree with her. But my answer was unimportant because it couldn’t change the fact that while she felt grateful for what seemed like a cool job, all the perks in the world weren’t producing the relationships that made her feel like she belonged.

When we interview for a job, whether we do it consciously or not, we are looking around and asking, “Are there people here like me?” For as much as we might want to stand out, we also want to fit in because we assume that will lead to us feeling like we belong. In Chapter 3 I’ll share what actually *does* lead to belonging—if not just being around people who are similar to us—but first let’s understand why it matters so much.

Belonging is one of the, if not the most, basic human needs we share. One of the foremost authorities in the world on the study of

social neuroscience, Dr. Matthew Liberman, goes so far as to say, “Maslow had it wrong.” In his reference to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which traditionally puts things like food, water, and shelter as the foundation of basic human needs, Dr. Liberman says in his book, *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*, that to get it right we have to move social needs to the bottom of the pyramid because an infant actually cannot get food, water, and shelter without being in a caring relationship. He says, “Love and belonging might seem like a convenience we can live without, but our biology is built to thirst for connection because it is linked to our most basic survival needs.” In his study of the brain, he concludes that every other need we have is built on the bedrock of our relationships.

Unfortunately, too many of us lack that bedrock.

## WHAT IS LONELINESS?

Despite the stigma, loneliness is not about being a recluse or hermit, has nothing to do with social skills, and isn’t a reflection of whether someone is liked or admired. It is not the same thing as being alone, living alone, or preferring alone time. It doesn’t even have to do with how many friends someone reports having. Loneliness is the perception that we are not known, supported, or loved as much as we want to be. It’s wanting more belonging than we currently are experiencing.

Loneliness can occur from *lack of interaction*, but for most of us, especially those of us in the workforce, our loneliness stems more from *lack of intimacy*. In fact, most of us know plenty of people, are more networked than we’ve ever been, and can spend most of our time serving people or being around them—and yet we’re still reporting loneliness because those interactions don’t feel meaningful. It’s often less about needing to know more people and more about wanting to feel known by the ones we’ve already met. That’s why we can sometimes feel the loneliest at our company holiday party or come home peopled-out after a long day of customer service but still be dying from loneliness.

But loneliness isn't inherently bad. The feeling of loneliness is simply our body's way of telling us that we have more capacity in our lives for more connection. It's only bad if we ignore it. I love how Dr. John T. Cacioppo—one of the leading neuroscientists in the world, who studied and wrote on loneliness before his recent death and is the author of the book so aptly titled *Loneliness*—likens the experience of loneliness to hunger, thirst, or exhaustion. Just as hunger pangs inform us that we need to fuel our bodies, a dry mouth reminds us to hydrate, and yawns can motivate us to get the sleep we need, feeling lonely means our body is working well as it informs us that we function best when we feel seen and supported.<sup>1</sup>

Our goal then isn't to never feel lonely, just as we don't need to avoid ever feeling hungry, but rather it is to more quickly identify what that loneliness means and how we can go about getting that need met in healthy ways.

But before we can get the need met, we have to realize we have the need.

## WHO'S LONELY?

So, if loneliness is the feeling of not having the relationships, or interactions, that we want, we can clearly see that all of us are prone to feel it at times. The bigger question then is how many of us are feeling this absence more regularly without being able to respond to that hunger with meaningful connection when we need it. While it's a hard feeling to admit or measure, researchers have been diligent in recent years to help quantify an experience that can feel somewhat subjective.

One of the leading voices in giving numbers to this feeling has become Cigna, who surveyed more than twenty thousand U.S. adults two years ago and concluded then (using the UCLA Loneliness scale, which is the highest standard in the industry) that, indeed, “most Americans are considered lonely.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this year they followed up with a report revealing that our numbers have only gone up

## HOW WE BENEFIT FROM FRIENDSHIPS AT WORK

in that short time—we’re now at 61 percent of us scoring as lonely, compared to 54 percent just two years ago.<sup>3</sup>

More specifically, that translates to almost 40 percent of us not feeling like we have close personal relationships with other people, more than 50 percent of us feeling alone or left out often, and nearly 60 percent of us not feeling like anyone knows us well. More extreme, about a quarter of us report that we rarely, or never, feel close to anyone and believe that no one understands us.

If we indeed need connections with others like we need food and water, then roughly half of us are socially malnourished, and a quarter of us are starving. Add to that number all of us who are just hungry for more nourishing relationships with the people we call friends, and the vast majority of us could do with greater social health. The human need to be seen, to be understood, to be known—by at least *someone*—isn’t being met in the way we’re now living our lives.

Unfortunately, that loneliness doesn’t automatically disappear when we get to work. While the Cigna report shows that the majority of us are satisfied with our relationships at work and tend to be less lonely if we’re in the workforce, nearly one in three of us nonetheless reports feeling disconnected from others while at work or the need to “hide our true self” at work. By another count, Imperative, a peer-coaching platform, reports that 49 percent of us feel we lack meaningful relationships at work.<sup>4</sup> And when I asked, “Do you ever feel lonely at work?” while only about 20 percent of us feel it frequently, nearly 60 percent of us admit to feeling it at least half the time.

|                    | Never | Sometimes | About Half<br>the Time | Often | Always |
|--------------------|-------|-----------|------------------------|-------|--------|
| Overall<br>Average | 12%   | 27%       | 40%                    | 18%   | 3%     |

This lack of social health in our workplaces isn’t just in the United States either. Research out of the UK shows 60 percent of employees

there suffering from loneliness at work,<sup>5</sup> and a recent report in Australia puts them at 40 percent.<sup>6</sup> Those aren't small numbers. In fact, the World Health Organization now lists "social support networks" as a determinant of health because of how many countries are seeing the impact of loneliness among their people. Unsurprisingly, certain industries and professions lend themselves to an increased chance of loneliness: entertainment (including sports, music, film, and publishing), personal care, agriculture/industry (including automotive and food and beverage), research, clinical workers, and those who are focused on out-of-office sales. Further, we're more likely to be lonely if we rely on the "gig economy," work remotely, own our own business, or are at a publicly traded company. Digging deeper in the data, it's important to note that while loneliness is affecting us all, there are certain demographics that report higher numbers:<sup>7</sup>

- **Men**, who tend to feel they have to hide more of who they are at work, are about 10 percent more likely than women to feel "alienated from their coworkers," "abandoned" by others when under pressure, and report feeling a "general sense of emptiness when at work."
- **New hires** and **entry-level workers** are lonelier than those with more experience or long tenure. Unsurprisingly, nearly two-thirds of those who have worked somewhere less than six months report experiencing isolation.
- **Hispanic and African American workers** are more likely (37 percent and 30 percent, respectively, versus 25 percent of whites) to feel "abandoned by coworkers when under pressure at work" and are more likely to feel alienated.
- **Those with poor or fair physical or mental health** are lonelier than those in good health. Compared to those in good health, we are about 8 points lonelier if we have fair or poor physical health, and 12 points lonelier if we have fair or poor mental health. Further, we're less likely to be lonely if we feel we're getting "just the right amount" of sleep and physical activity.

- **Senior leaders** are lonelier than their direct reports. Nearly 56 percent of leaders feel like there's no one they can talk to, and up to 69 percent feel like no one really knows them well.
- **Our youngest generations** are lonelier than our oldest. The ones who will be making up the majority of our workforce in the not-too-distant future—Generation Z (born mostly in the mid-1990s and the early 2000s) and Millennials (born mostly in the mid-1980s and 1990s)—rated themselves the loneliest. Close to 70 percent of them report feeling shy and feeling like no one really knows them well. The term FOMO—fear of missing out—is not only a Millennial cliché; it's also their experience. Loneliness is the number one fear of young people today—ranking ahead of losing a home or a job.<sup>8</sup> One survey showed that 42 percent of Millennial women were more afraid, by double digits compared to other generations, of loneliness than a cancer diagnosis.<sup>9</sup>

And while that might sound extreme to some of us, it's not without good reason.

## WE'RE DYING OF LONELINESS

While loneliness isn't yet listed as a cause of death by the World Health Organization, our former US Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, recently wrote in an aptly titled article "Work and the Loneliness Epidemic" that "during my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness."<sup>10</sup> With heart disease and diabetes currently ranking number one and number five, respectively, for deaths around the world, his comparison is no small statement. In fact, loneliness increases your risk of heart disease by 30 percent.<sup>11</sup>

Results from a huge study published in the journal *PLOS Medicine* show that lonely people are 50 percent more likely to die prematurely

than those with healthy relationships. The researchers analyzed data from 148 previously published longitudinal studies that measured frequency of human interaction and tracked health outcomes for a period of seven and a half years on average, and they concluded that if we feel disconnected, unsupported, or lonely, the damage done by the lack of those relationships is:

- equivalent to smoking fifteen cigarettes a day,
- equivalent to being a lifelong alcoholic,
- more harmful than not exercising, and
- twice as harmful as obesity.<sup>12</sup>

Loneliness has also been associated with weaker bone density, worsened cognitive function, lower immune strength, more depression and anxiety, longer recoveries from surgery, increased risk of suicide, and the list goes on. Diseases such as cancer, stroke, and respiratory disease are correlated to the health of our relationships more than to any other factor in our lives, including such things as our diet, exercise, or even genetics.

To that point, another world-renowned physician and author, Dr. Dean Ornish, studied all the data on how significant relationships are to our health, and he concluded in his book *Love and Survival*:

This association between social and community ties and premature death was found to be independent of and a more powerful predictor of health and longevity than age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, self-reported physical health status, and health practices such as smoking, alcoholic beverage consumption, overeating, physical activity, and utilization of preventative health services as well as a cumulative index of health practices.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, he noted that while someone who practices healthy lifestyle habits *and* interacts in meaningful relationships will live longer, on average, than someone who does only one or the other, what might

surprise a few of us is that those with *unhealthy* lifestyles but strong social ties were two to three times less likely to die, during their follow-up almost twenty years later, than those who ate healthy and exercised but felt lonely.<sup>14</sup>

We have for too long put an emphasis on treadmills over telephone calls and kale smoothies over connecting. Our health magazines and most fitness gurus haven't quite caught up to this truth—they still seem to focus on toned muscles and losing weight—but the research is becoming more and more irrefutable that our relationships, or lack of them, are playing a starring role in our health. We're going to dive deeper into understanding what about our relationships impacts our health in a moment, but let's first make sure that we know what we're talking about when we use the word *lonely*.

## FRIENDSHIPS AT WORK FOR OUR HEALTH

Why does our loneliness impact our health so much? The short answer is that healthy relationships put our bodies in a more relaxed mode; as we feel supported and loved, our bodies move out of stress and into repair and recovery.

But I want to share with you the long answer, too, because these reports and studies better reinforce this truth in our minds when we can understand *exactly* how our relationships function in this healing way.

### *Relationships Decrease Worry and Increase Resiliency*

The first example of how relationships bolster our health is the well-known psychology study that reveals how we assess life differently when a friend is nearby. Students, some standing alone and others standing with a friend next to them, all wear a heavy backpack at the bottom of a hill and are asked to estimate the steepness of the incline. The results are reliable: those standing alone conclude the hill to be steeper than those standing with friends.<sup>15</sup>



Perhaps the outcome sounds simple and obvious, but let the truth of that one sink in for a moment. How many of us feel exhausted or weary by life or work? How many of us feel overwhelmed? How many of us feel like the metaphorical hill in front of us looks too steep? If there was a way to face life so our perception was radically changed to see our situations as easier, less intimidating, and more doable, wouldn't you want it? Interestingly, the research also showed that the more intimate and meaningful the friendship, the less steep the hill was perceived; and that conversely, when subjects were asked to think of a neutral or disliked person, they estimated the hill to be even steeper.

Similarly, taking it to the workplace, a study published by O.C. Tanner found that 75 percent of us who have a best friend at work say we feel we're able to "take anything on" compared to only 58 percent of those who don't have a best friend at work.<sup>16</sup> That relationship translates to almost a 20 percentage point increase in our belief that we can take on big challenges!

### *Relationships Protect Our Bodies from Stress*

The next study I want to share is similar but shows us what that "less steep hill" actually looks like in our brain. In this one, subjects were placed in an MRI machine where they received intermittent mild electrical shocks. Not knowing when the shocks were going to occur, this test showed the brain's response to our anticipatory anxiety, the type of stress so many of us live with as we worry about all the things that are uncertain. As cortisol, the stress chemical, shot into the brain, several splotches of red lit up the MRI brain image scan where stress was being processed. But contrast that with those subjects who were invited to hold the hand of someone they loved sitting outside the MRI machine. This time, instead of red splotches popping up all over the scan, only three small dots of brain activity lit up—which was less than a third of what was triggered when they were alone.<sup>17</sup>

In this case, like that of the hill, the stressors don't change: the hill is still as steep, and they are still being mildly shocked with electricity,

whether they have a friend nearby or not. The only thing that changes is their experience of that stress. In one case, their friendship prompts them to feel less worried and more hopeful; in the other, their relationship serves as a protective barrier to feeling the stress of life. Dr. James Coan, the lead researcher in this study and a neuroscientist at the University of Virginia, talked in an interview about the burden of coping with life's stressors: "When you have to deal with them all by yourself, it not only feels more exhausting, it literally creates more wear on your body."<sup>18</sup>

"It literally creates more wear on your body." In other words, feeling supported acts as a buffer that protects our bodies from the impact and damage that we know results from stress. Interestingly, even holding the hand of a stranger helped the participants feel calmer, though the deeper the relationship, the less unpleasant the shocks were perceived.

Do you have stress in your work? Mild shocks that are silently and slowly draining energy in your life? Would you feel hopeful knowing there was a way to protect your body from that breakdown? Wish you had a hand to hold that could alleviate some of the anxiety and mental pressure?

Having friendships in our lives doesn't eliminate our stress, but it does prevent us from absorbing the destruction that often comes with it.

### *Relationships Reduce Disease and Strengthen Immune Function*

My first illustration of the steep hill was about how relationships hinder or help us perceive stress in our lives, and my second was about how those relationships change the chemicals in our brain. The last point I want to provide on the health front is to look inside our bodies through the microscope and showcase just how impactful our loneliness is, even when it comes to germs and infectious disease, cancer, or coronary heart disease. Because most of our practice of medicine in the last couple hundred years has functioned from our understanding of

germs, it's hard for us to fathom how our relationships might make a difference to diseases that seem to require surgeries, pharmaceuticals, and even chemotherapy.

But because of the amazing work of researchers and social epidemiologists, we're starting to see just how significant our societal factors are in determining not only whether we'll recover from certain diseases but whether they can be prevented in the first place! For example, something like cholesterol, which we so often think is simply a diet and exercise issue, is affected by our relationships in that how our body metabolizes our cholesterol is shaped, in part, by how much stress our body is under and how supported we feel.<sup>19</sup> In fact, in one study of 2,300 men who had survived a heart attack, those who had low stress and high connection were less than four times likely to die than those who were high stress and low connection. Social isolation adds stress on our bodies and makes them more fertile for disease.<sup>20</sup>

One study of women with metastatic breast cancer tracked all the varietal factors (including smoking, diet, exercise, marriage) to determine the difference between those who survived the diagnosis versus those who didn't. You know where this is going . . . the only factor that doubled their life expectancy was having a consistent circle of support.<sup>21</sup>

Even something like defending against the common cold comes down to our relationships—and in this case the diversity of our relationships. In one study in which everyone was infected with the virus, it mattered more how many of the twelve different types of relationships people had (that is, work, family, neighbors, schoolmates) than the overall number of relationships. Those with only one to three types of relationships were four times more likely of developing the cold than those who reported six or more types of relationships. Diversity in our relationships makes a difference—our work friends contribute to our health.<sup>22</sup>

Our relationships build up our immune system and strengthen our body's ability to fight diseases that we once thought were simply

cut-and-dry, cause-and-effect issues. The medical community is now seeing loneliness as a predictor for diseases—diabetes, coronary heart disease, and influenza, to name a few—and as a determining factor for our chances of recovery.

In short, whether our stress shows up as a steep hill that looks hopeless and overwhelming, as intermittent electrical shocks that cause worry and anxiety, or as our bodies being fertile soil ripe for diseases such as coronary heart disease or breast cancer is determined, first and foremost, in how we answer the question “How loved and supported do I feel?”

And while I hope you can look at your neighbors, friends, and family and say a convincing “very supported,” the truth is that we’re 78 percent more likely to spend more time with our colleagues than our nonwork friends,<sup>23</sup> so if we can’t say that about where we work, then chances are high that our health is taking a huge hit.

## RELATIONSHIPS BOOST HAPPINESS

But we don’t only want to be healthy, we also want to be happy.

Think for a moment about all the things you want to achieve, experience, or own (for example, cars, promotions, big bank accounts, specific body weights, more square footage) and then remember this: that entire list adds up to less than a third of your overall happiness.

The truth is that if you want to make a substantial difference to your happiness, invest your energy and resources where it truly matters most: your relationships. David Niven was in the basement of the library at Ohio State University looking across mountains of research reports that would never reach the people who most needed them when he decided to start compiling and translating all the research into practical advice. In his book *The 100 Simple Secrets of Happy People: What Scientists Have Learned and How You Can Use It*, he summarizes, “Contrary to the belief that happiness is hard to explain, or that it depends on having great wealth, researchers have identified the core

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factors in a happy life. The primary components are number of friends, closeness of friends, closeness of family, and relationships with co-workers and neighbors. Together these features explain about 70 percent of personal happiness.”<sup>24</sup>

Seventy percent of our happiness comes down to our relationships—including our coworkers. In fact, see what a specific difference we admit a best friend at work can make:

| Are you happy at work? |              |              |                     |       |               |
|------------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------------|-------|---------------|
|                        | Almost Never | Occasionally | About Half the Time | Often | Almost Always |
| Have Best Friend       | 3%           | 6%           | 12%                 | 31%   | 48%           |
| No Best Friend         | 2%           | 19%          | 27%                 | 30%   | 22%           |

Look at that last column—that’s more than a 100 percent increase in happiness for having a best friend at work. If we have a best friend at work, we report an 80 percent chance of being happy often or almost always.

But we’ve known this for a long time. In a landmark book, American political scientist Robert D. Putnam published *Bowling Alone* in 2000, which highlighted the decline of our social culture. He said even back then, “Many studies have shown that social connections with coworkers are a strong predictor—some would say the strongest single predictor—of job satisfaction.” And he concluded, “People with friends at work are happier at work.”<sup>25</sup>

## FRIENDSHIP FOR OUR WORK SATISFACTION

Happier at work, indeed. If we're lonely, two-thirds of us feel it's negatively impacting our mental health and over a third of us feel it affects our ability to do our jobs.<sup>26</sup> How we feel about the people we work with is directly correlated to how much we enjoy our job and life.

In the book *Wellbeing: The 5 Essential Elements*, Tom Rath and Jim Harter share the results of a study of people in more than 150 countries and conclude that the "single best predictor" for well-being is enjoying how we spend our days, and more to the point is it depends on "not *what* people are doing—but *who* they are with."<sup>27</sup>

Read that line again. More important than *what* we are doing all day long is *who* is with us in the doing of it. Our self-reporting for what brings us joy matches completely with what the medical community is saying matters most, too: our relationships.

The most stressful and high-responsibility job can be rewarding *if* one feels supported, part of a team, engaged, believed in, cheered for, and appreciated. And the least stressful and low-responsibility jobs can slowly seep our energy if we don't get enough social interaction or have to navigate mostly negative interactions. No job description can be perfect enough to make up for a critical or negligent boss, exhausting coworkers, a chilly social atmosphere, complaining customers, or nonexpressed appreciation. We know this to be true in our own lives: we will be miserable at our "dream job" if we can't stand who we work with, and conversely, we'll stay in a role we don't like all that much if we love our coworkers and boss.

As I've been working with teams to help them improve their relationships with each other, I've continued to find on the *Healthy Team Relationship Assessment* that those who have friends score the health of their team higher than their teammates who have no friends. They have the same leader and same coworkers, yet their experience of their team differs by more than twelve points.

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| <i>Number of Friends on Team</i> | <i>Average Overall Satisfaction on Team</i> |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 0                                | 65.8  |
| 1                                | 68.5  |
| 2                                | 77.1  |
| 3+                               | 78.2  |

You want to enjoy your work more, in general, and your team more, specifically? Make a few friends.

### *Relationships Lead to Job Engagement*

And it's not just friends, in general, but "best friends" that matter most. We are up to seven times more likely to feel engaged in our work if we have at least one "best friend at work," reports Gallup. In contrast, without a best friend, we only have a 1 in 12 chance of feeling engaged.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, our companies care about our engagement, as it is directly linked to our performance, but from our vantage point, it also translates to fewer sick days, more confidence to express our ideas and suggestions, and more positive energy in the office.

Now here, when the word *best* shows up, is where most of us have the biggest objections.

And while this book isn't specifically about making *best friends* at work (though the last chapter is devoted to that), this is as good a time as any to remind us all that *best* isn't about a *quantity* that only one friend in our entire lives can be called; it's about a *quality* of relationship that we can build with several. We can, and should, have a handful of healthy, good as it gets, friends. And, ideally, at least one at work.

Look how much our chances go down of feeling lonely at work if we have that best friend:

## HOW WE BENEFIT FROM FRIENDSHIPS AT WORK

|                  | Never Lonely | Sometimes Lonely | About Half the Time | Often Lonely | Always Lonely |
|------------------|--------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Have Best Friend | 25%          | 33%              | 35%                 | 6%           | 0%            |
| No Best Friend   | 5%           | 20%              | 38%                 | 30%          | 7%            |

Obviously, loneliness is more than just one best friend, but without a best friend, we have a 37 percent chance of being often or always lonely; whereas just one friend drops that number to 6 percent.

Jackson, a twenty-something, who answered my *Friendship in the Workplace Survey*, summed it up when he said, “Having a best friend at work is not only more fun [because I] have someone to goof off with a bit and share stories with, but he basically leaves me feeling like someone has my back.” He followed that up with examples of what helped him feel supported: “If I miss a meeting, feel discouraged, or can’t think of a solution to a problem . . . I know I can rely on him.” Certainly, in an ideal world, our managers and coworkers could offer that same feeling, but unfortunately, too many of us feel like our bosses are the ones we most need protecting from, and nearly every person I know has a story of a coworker that does anything but support.

To that point, Rochelle, who works in the public library system, says, “At my current workplace, cross-team collaboration and communication are awful. It’s every department for themselves, and it feels like we’re all in competition with each other, vying for praise from our director. I don’t feel respected by my colleagues because they’re all so busy trying to throw me (and others) under the bus to make themselves look good. I’m exhausted.” She’s quick to point out that while this would be disheartening for her in any environment, she has been shocked that it’s this blatant at a nonprofit, whose mission isn’t even to make money but simply to serve.

Feeling connected, or not, to those with whom we work regularly shows up as the number one factor for our job satisfaction, as you’ll see



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in the next chapter. But so far, the data is clear: if you want to like your job, feel better physically, increase your mental and emotional health, and report greater happiness and energy, then make a close friend at work.

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