

# The Loneliness of Leadership

April 30, 2025

Lori Dillon MPA, Chief People Officer @ Therapeutic Associates



Join at [menti.com](https://menti.com) | use code **5776 8317**

Mentimeter

On a scale of 1-5 (where 5 is very often), How often do you wish you could go back to a time where your work and decision making was simpler?



LD

Menti

Peer2Peer Presentation 1



Choose a slide to present



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Mentimeter

What emoji best describes how you feel when business is tough and your team is looking to you for guidance?

0

0

0

0

0

🙄

😬

😓

😄

🤔

👍

👤

Menti

Peer2Peer Presentation...

Choose a slide to present





Join at [menti.com](#) | use code **1278 6890**

Mentimeter

Ask the person next to you...What is your primary reason for being part of Peer2Peer?

All responses to your question will be shown here

Each response can be up to 200 characters long

Turn on voting to let participants vote for their favorites

LD

Menti

Peer2Peer Presentation...

Choose a slide to present

👍

👤



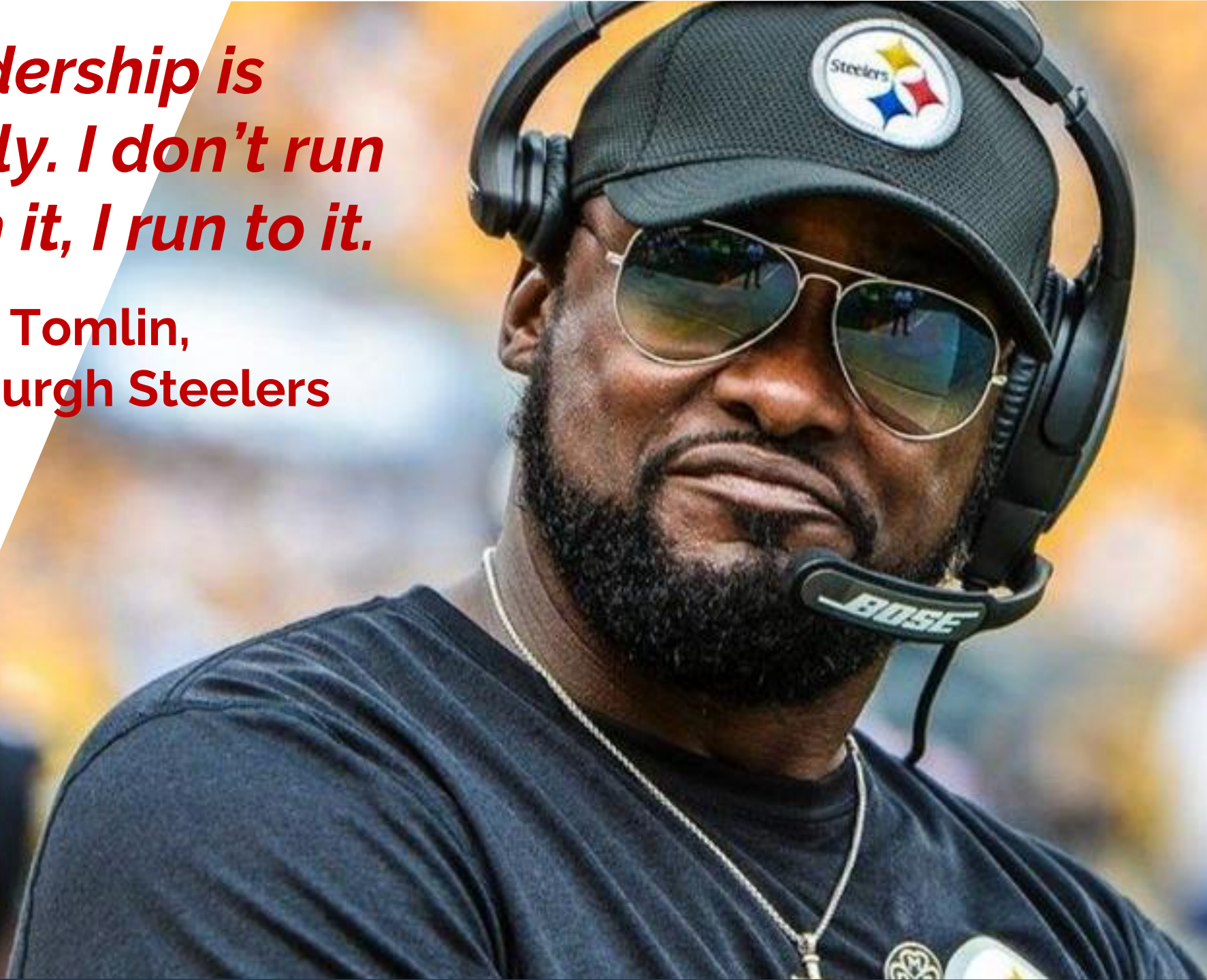


Loneliness is a required  
course for leadership.

Elisabeth Elliot

***Leadership is  
lonely. I don't run  
from it, I run to it.***

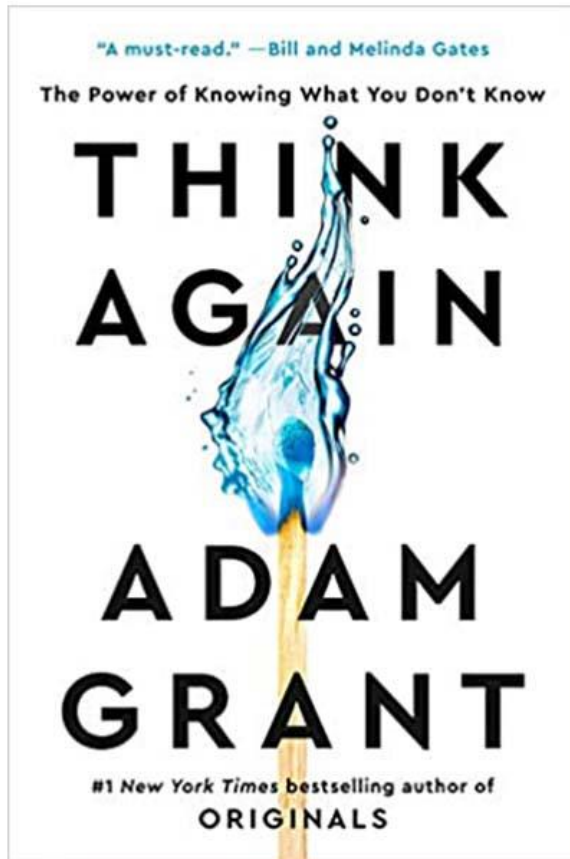
**-Mike Tomlin,  
Pittsburgh Steelers**





Loneliness: A subjective feeling state of being alone, separated or apart from others, and has been conceptualized as an imbalance between desired social contacts and actual social contacts





**Adam Grant** ✓  
@AdamMGrant

Don't mistake solitude for loneliness.  
Deciding to be alone is different from being isolated.

New evidence: When people think it's harmful to be by themselves, time alone is more likely to make them lonely.

Isolation is unpleasant seclusion. Solitude is often a peaceful choice.





# Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation



2023

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the  
Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community



*...People began to tell me they felt isolated, invisible, and insignificant. Even when they couldn't put their finger on the word "lonely," time and time again, people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, from every corner of the country, would tell me, "I have to shoulder all of life's burdens by myself," or "if I disappear tomorrow, no one will even notice."*

*In the scientific literature, I found confirmation of what I was hearing. In recent years, about **one-in-two adults in America reported experiencing loneliness**. And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic...*

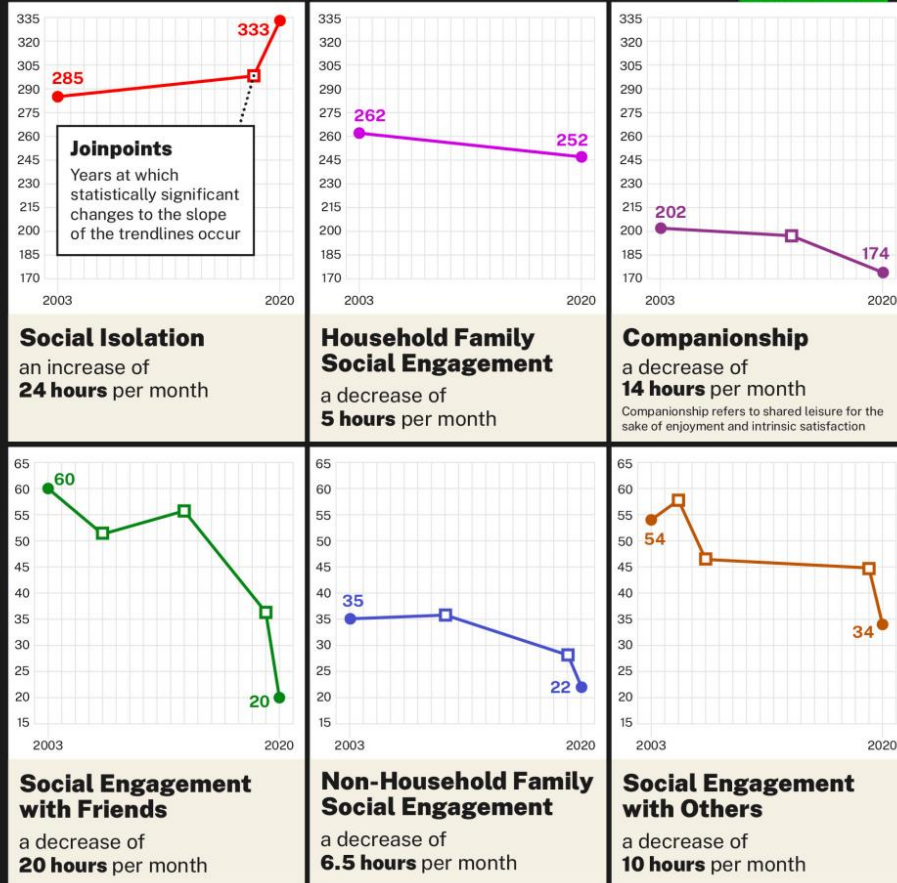


# National Trends for Social Connection

From 2003 to 2020, time spent alone increased, while time spent on in-person social engagement decreased.

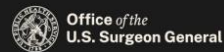


ANNUAL DAILY AVERAGE IN MINUTES

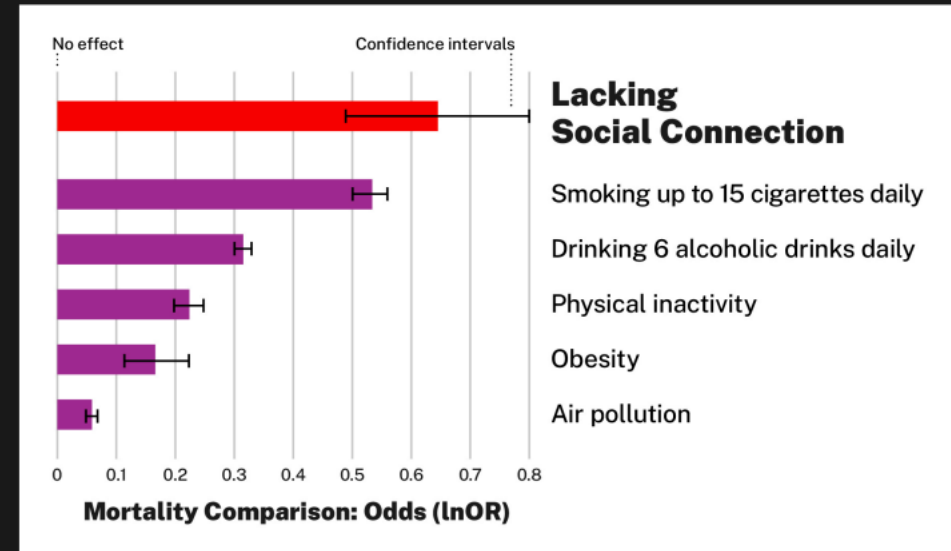


YEAR

Source: Adapted from Viji Diane Kannan, Peter J. Veazie, US Trends in Social Isolation, Social Engagement, and Companionship: Nationally and by Age, Sex, Race/ethnicity, Family Income, and Work Hours, 2003-2020, SSM - Population Health, Volume 21, 2023. The joinpoints are visual approximations.

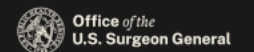


## Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.



**Comparison groups:** Complex measures of social integration: high v. low; not smoking v. smoking < 15 cigarettes daily; alcohol abstinence v. drinking > 6 alcoholic drinks daily; physical activity v. inactivity; low BMI v. high BMI; low air pollution v. high air pollution.

**Source:** Holt-Lunstad J, Robles TF, Sbarra DA. Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States. *American Psychology*. 2017;72(6):517-530. doi:10.1037/amp0000103. This graph is a visual approximation.





# Feeling lonely? Your brain may process the world differently

DECEMBER 8, 2023 · 3:00 AM ET

By [Rachel Carlson](#), [Regina G. Barber](#), [Berly McCoy](#), [Rebecca Ramirez](#)



[News](#) > [News Releases](#) > [Lonely People's Divergent Thought Processes May Contribute to Feeli](#)






## Lonely People’s Divergent Thought Processes May Contribute to Feeling “Alone in a Crowded Room”

March 29, 2023  
TAGS: [LONELINESS](#) | [NEURAL NETWORKS](#) | [NEUROIMAGING](#) | [PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE](#) | [SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY](#)

### Lonely Individuals Process the World in Idiosyncratic Ways

[Elisa C. Baek](#)  , [Ryan Hyon](#), [L...](#), and [Carolyn Parkinson](#)   [View all authors and affiliations](#)

[Volume 34, Issue 6](#) | <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976221145316>

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### Abstract

Loneliness is detrimental to well-being and is often accompanied by self-reported feelings of not being understood by other people. What contributes to such feelings in lonely people? We used functional MRI of 66 first-year university students to unobtrusively measure the relative alignment of people’s mental processing of naturalistic stimuli and tested whether lonely people actually process the world in idiosyncratic ways. We found evidence for such idiosyncrasy: Lonely individuals’ neural responses were dissimilar to those of their peers, particularly in regions of the default-mode network in which similar responses have been associated with shared perspectives and subjective understanding. These relationships persisted when we controlled for demographic similarities, objective social isolation, and individuals’ friendships with each other. Our findings raise the possibility that being surrounded by people who see the world differently from oneself, even if one is friends with them, may be a risk factor for loneliness.

Humans have a fundamental need to belong and connect socially ([Baumeister & Leary, 1995](#)). When this need to belong is not met, there can be devastating consequences. It is well-established that loneliness (i.e., the distressing feeling that often accompanies subjective perceptions of social disconnection) has detrimental effects on the well-being of individuals, including an increased risk of mortality that persists even after controlling for comorbidities ([Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010](#); [Shankar et al., 2011](#)).





There is no  
permanent cure for  
leadership loneliness,  
only regular  
treatments.





# CEOs Often Feel Lonely. Here's How They Can Cope.

by Alaric Bourgoïn, Sarah L. Wright, Jean-François Harvey and  
Saouré Kouamé

December 23, 2024

The answer is that while CEOs have plenty of social connections, leadership weighs heavily on their shoulders — and theirs alone. The impacts of their decisions ripple out through the organization, rewriting everyone's future from day to day. Many CEOs are privy to knowledge and insight that simply can't be shared, whether to protect strategies or preserve morale. And since CEOs outrank all others, by definition, their relationships can easily become hierarchical and instrumental — seeing coworkers as merely a means to an end.

If CEOs were lonely all the time, we might fear for their mental health, just as we would if they were constantly anxious or sad. In reality, CEOs' loneliness is episodic, not constant. While 25% of the CEOs we surveyed reported frequent loneliness, 55% acknowledge experiencing moderate yet significant bouts of loneliness. One in five consistently downplayed the significance of their loneliness, which speaks to the pressure that leaders feel to look calm and in control.





# CEOs Often Feel Lonely. Here's How They Can Cope.

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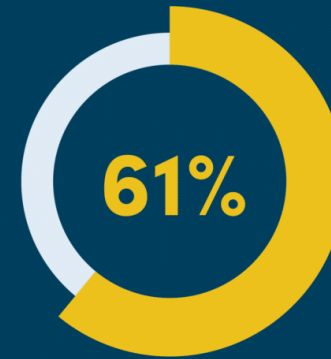
December 23, 2024

“When things go well, everyone’s a happy family,” confirms one CEO.  
“But when business performance is not there, and things start going  
south, that’s when you start feeling very lonely as a CEO.”





# VISTAGE



**Half of CEOs experience feelings of loneliness in their careers, and of this group, 61 percent find it hinders their performance.**

Source: RHR International



# Why?

- The problems you need to solve aren't solvable by most people at work (or in general)
- The problems (and possible pathways forward) tend to be complex







# Why?

- The problems you need to solve aren't solvable by most people at work (or in general)
- The problems (and possible pathways forward) tend to be complex
- The fewer immediate peers you have – for help with decision making, or for camaraderie in general
- When business is tough, the weight is (or feels like it is) on your shoulders
- You feel like you need to be the “brave” face or the “strongest” one







# What People Want from Leaders



## Hope

The need to feel positive about the future and for leaders to provide a clear direction



## Trust

The need for honesty, respect and integrity



## Compassion

The need to feel cared about and listened to

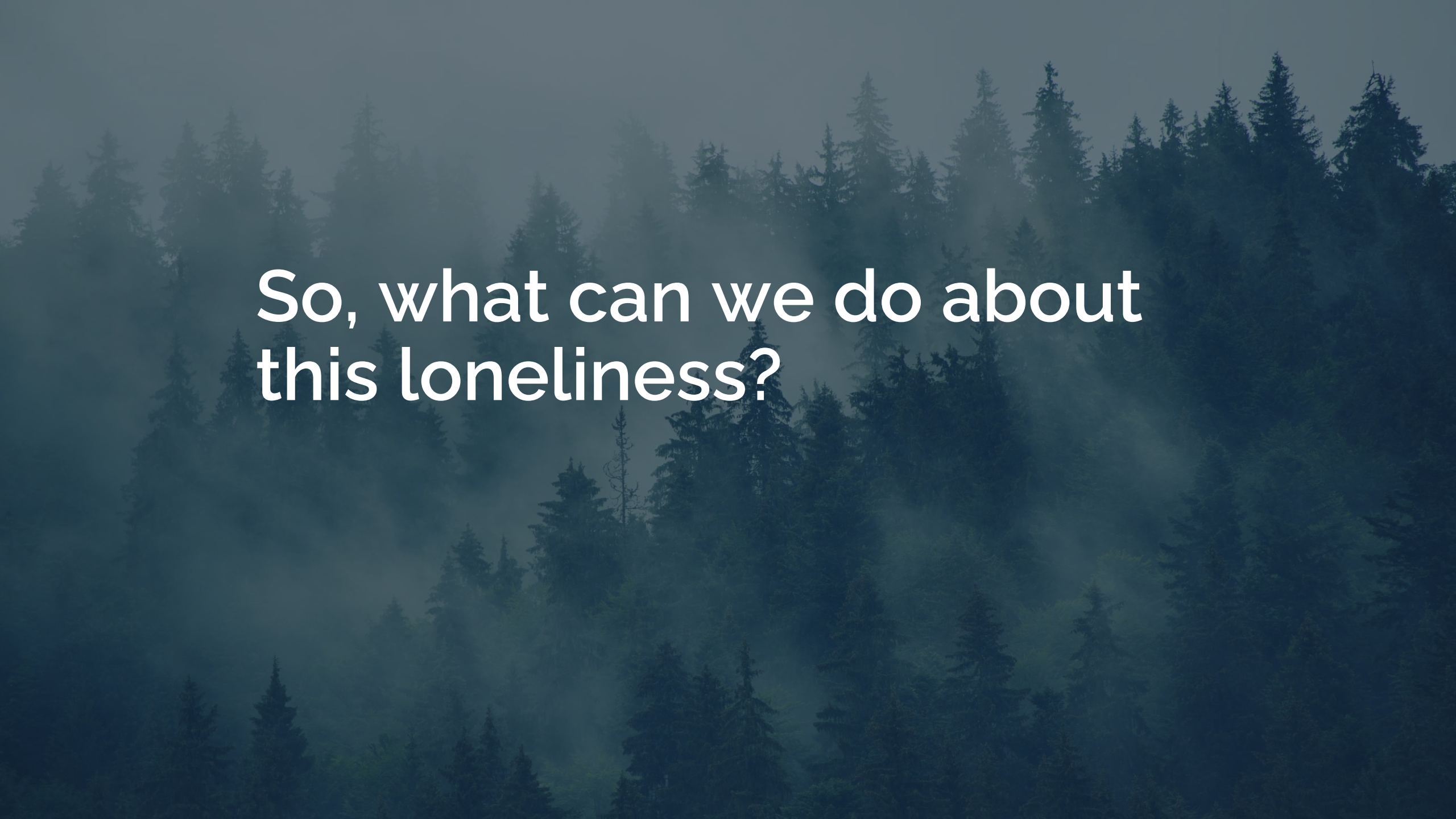


## Stability

The need for psychological safety and secure foundations during times of uncertainty





A dense forest of evergreen trees, likely spruce or fir, is shrouded in a thick, low-lying mist or fog. The trees are dark green and silhouetted against a lighter, hazy background. The overall atmosphere is quiet and somewhat somber, with the mist creating a sense of depth and isolation.

So, what can we do about  
this loneliness?





# What can we do about it?

Step back and see the  
~~forest~~ gorilla through  
~~the trees~~ basketball  
players



## Hope

The need to feel positive about the future and for leaders to provide a clear direction



## Trust

The need for honesty, respect and integrity



## Compassion

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**Idea Lab**

# What can we do about it?

## Humble ourselves to vulnerability



### Hope

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### Compassion

The need to feel cared about and listened to



### Stability

The need for psychological safety and secure foundations during times of uncertainty







# What can we do about it?

Build, and rely upon,  
your trusted circle



## Hope

The need to feel positive about the future and for leaders to provide a clear direction



## Trust

The need for honesty, respect and integrity



## Compassion

The need to feel cared about and listened to



## Stability

The need for psychological safety and secure foundations during times of uncertainty



# #TRUSTs are Functional and Foundational.

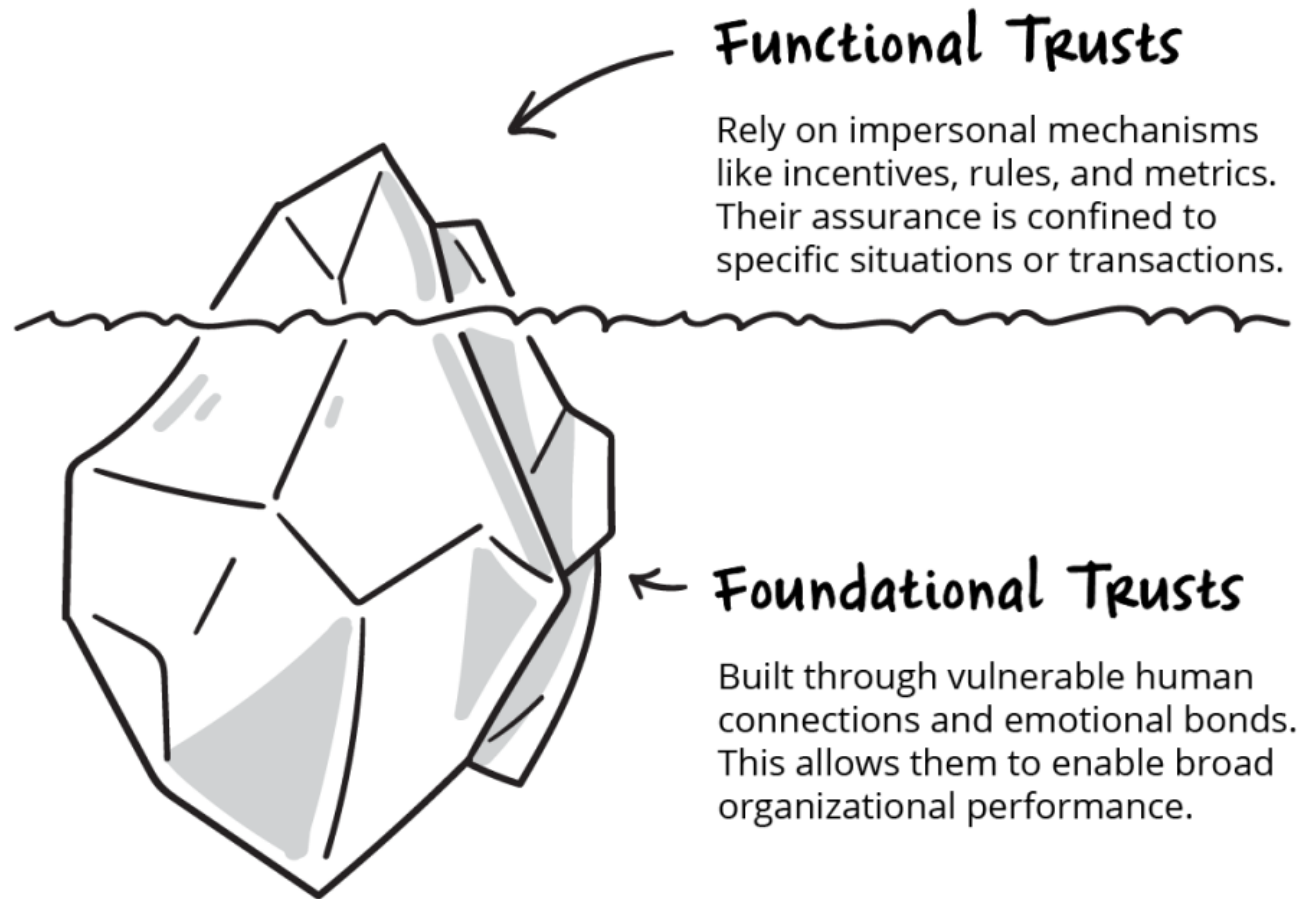


Illustration: Eugene Yoon.



# To Fall in Love With Anyone, Do This

JAN. 9, 2015



Brian Rea

**Modern Love** we had hung out one-on-one.

**Updated, Feb. 13, 2015** | *To try the 36 questions described below, [download our free app](#) for your phone, tablet or other device.*

More than 20 years ago, the psychologist Arthur Aron succeeded in making two strangers fall in love in his laboratory. Last summer, I applied his technique in my own life, which is how I found myself standing on a bridge at midnight, staring into a man's eyes for exactly four minutes.

Let me explain. Earlier in the evening, that man had said: "I suspect, given a few commonalities, you could fall in love with anyone. If so, how do you choose someone?"

He was a university acquaintance I occasionally ran into at the climbing gym and had thought, "What if?" I had gotten a glimpse into his days on Instagram. But this was the first time

## Overly Shallow?: Miscalibrated Expectations Create a Barrier to Deeper Conversation

Michael Kardas<sup>1</sup>, Amit Kumar<sup>2</sup>, and Nicholas Epley<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University

<sup>2</sup> McCombs School of Business, University of Texas at Austin

<sup>3</sup> Booth School of Business, University of Chicago


People may want deep and meaningful relationships with others, but may also be reluctant to engage in the deep and meaningful conversations with strangers that could create those relationships. We hypothesized that people systematically underestimate how caring and interested distant strangers are in one's own intimate revelations and that these miscalibrated expectations create a psychological barrier to deeper conversations. As predicted, conversations between strangers felt less awkward, and created more connectedness and happiness, than the participants themselves expected (Experiments 1a–5). Participants were especially prone to overestimate how awkward deep conversations would be compared with shallow conversations (Experiments 2–5). Notably, they also felt more connected to deep conversation partners than shallow conversation partners after having both types of conversations (Experiments 6a–b). Systematic differences between expectations and experiences arose because participants expected others to care less about their disclosures in conversation than others actually did (Experiments 1a, 1b, 4a, 4b, 5, and 6a). As a result, participants more accurately predicted the outcomes of their conversations when speaking with close friends, family, or partners whose care and interest is more clearly known (Experiment 5). Miscalibrated expectations about others matter because they guide decisions about which topics to discuss in conversation, such that more calibrated expectations encourage deeper conversation (Experiments 7a–7b). Misunderstanding others can encourage overly shallow interactions.

**Keywords:** self-disclosure, intimacy, social connection, accuracy, social cognition

**Supplemental materials:** <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000281.supp>



“...human beings are deeply social and tend to reciprocate in conversation. If you share something meaningful and important, you are likely to get something meaningful and important exchanged in return...”

- 
- What would constitute a “perfect” day for you?
  - Is there something that you’ve dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven’t you done it?
  - If you were going to become a close friend with your partner, please share what would be important for them to know.









