

## STRONGER TOGETHER

### The power of connection

Where were you on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2019? I was watching eighty minutes of sporting history unfold with the Springboks vanquishing a truly formidable English rugby team. Eighteen months earlier, the Springboks were ranked a dismal seventh in the world and now were number one off the back of very astute coaching, humble leadership and the rallying cry of “Stronger together.” And isn’t that part of the beauty of sport? That day we had thirty-five close family and friends connecting and creating memories together.



For 11.5 years I had the privilege of working in an exceptional asset manager, Allan Gray, before transitioning to independent consulting. In reflecting on what I miss most, it is NOT the monthly salary, generous share dividends or free lunches. It was the daily interactions with incredible people, solving complex problems that were driven by a desire to do the right thing. Relationships provide the “spice of life”, they elevate us from a bland, monochrome existence into technicolor. If you think I am waxing too lyrical, then what is the most prolific genre in the multi-billion dollar entertainment industry - LOVE (the ultimate stronger together connection).

We are inherently community-orientated beings that need and thrive on social interaction. Our elevation to apex predator status, despite our puny physical attributes (the Rock aside) is as result of our collaboration capabilities. Human connection, especially where complexity resides drives our rate of creativity and innovation in society. Connection that is prosocial, like helping others, leaves people feeling less anxious and more secure. We are physiologically wired to connect, through the release of oxytocin that supports bonding, endorphins which are which are released when we touch, and dopamine that are key players in the brains reward system that push us to seek companionship. Everyone needs meaningful relationships, but the preferred frequency and intensity of engagement vary depending on where you fall on the extroversion-introversion spectrum. Introverts and extroverts alike can get lonely, just not in the same way. Extroverts may feel lonely if physically isolated for too long, while an introvert is more likely to feel lonely in a sea of strangers.

Conversely, loneliness and addiction (e.g. opioids, gambling, gaming, food, and alcoholism) are often linked, and hence the therapeutic role of community in keeping people from relapsing. Anthropologists estimate that early hunter gatherers spent roughly equal amounts

hunting, socializing and sleeping. Strikes me that they were more advanced than we give them credit for in terms of living an integrated life! What is your ratio now, and what are the implications?

The Big Disconnect has led to us to being simultaneously the most connected (technology wise) but isolated generation, [with almost half of people feeling phubbed](#) (people snubbing each other in favour of their phone). Not surprisingly, the phubbed parties experience more fights and less relationship satisfaction than the less frequent phubbers. Unfortunately, we often take for granted those that are closest to us once the initial honeymoon glow has waned. The falling in love part is easy, it is the staying together part that is hard and needs constant attending, like a vigilant gardener.

If we look at the racial tensions around the world, not to mention COVID-19 isolation, it's clear the impact it's having on our mental health. Social distancing to curb the pandemics spread is recommended, but we will need to ramp up our bridge building capability to harness the richness of human interactions, not disconnect out of fear or rejection. Stephen Covey identified three stages of maturity that people move through: dependence, to independence and then inter-dependence. I believe there is a 4<sup>th</sup> stage: intra-dependence characterised not by tall walls but the realization that our nations fates are inextricably linked to one another. High impact, global solutions will only be discovered and supported if we use our collective genius built on connection.

### **But how does socio-emotional fitness build resilience?**

[According to a 30-plus year longitudinal study Harvard study](#), our wellbeing is dependent on our entire network. They found that your odds of being happy increase by 15% if a direct connection in your social network is happy. Interestingly, if a friend of a friend is happy, the odds of you being happy increase by 10%, even if you do not know them. We know that happy people tend to be more proactive and have stronger and deeper relationships. This contagious effect works both ways, with [bad relationship habits](#) undermining our health as well.

[Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad](#) and her collaborators conducted a meta-study, incorporating 148 studies on 300 000 people from around the world. They examined whether social relationships reduced people's risk of dying prematurely. They found that people with strong social relationships are 50% less likely to die prematurely than people with weak social relationships. *To put this into context, low social connection is the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and its greater than the risk associated with obesity, excess alcohol consumption, and lack of*

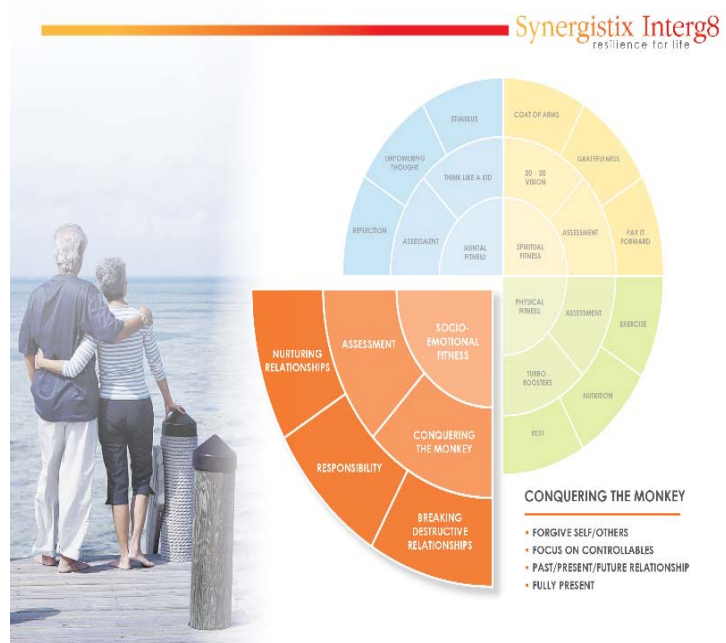
*exercise!!* In interpreting the results, they considered age, gender, initial health status and cause of death...but these results still held true.

If you are thinking these insights are ground-breaking, think again. Way back in the late 1980's [House, Landis and Umberson](#) meta-study research also suggested isolation was as strong a risk factor for morbidity and mortality as sedentary lifestyle, high blood pressure and [smoking or obesity](#). At the time they did not understand why this was happening, but subsequent [studies](#) have shown that loneliness leads to changes in gene expression in white blood cells, which results in increased inflammation and reduced defences against viruses. Loneliness also creates mental and physical exhaustion as quality of [sleep](#) is impacted, leaving people fatigued and irritable.

Why were we so slow to react to these important studies? It may be that people would need to awkwardly reveal they have a deficit of close friendships, which awakens painful feelings of inadequacy or maladjustment. It could be an unanticipated consequence of the focus on rugged individualism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century which has diminished the importance of community and relationships. Or maybe time-pressured doctors find it quicker to diagnose physical health conditions than unpack people's personal circumstances. [Dr. Vivek Murthy](#), a medical doctor and the 19<sup>th</sup> Surgeon General of USA has placed it at the very centre of the wellbeing debate. He noted: "Loneliness ran like a dark thread through addiction, violence, anxiety, and depression." He goes on to say: "Building a more connected world holds the key to solving these and many more of the personal and societal problems confronting us today."

**So, what is Socio-Emotional Fitness?** Its deep connections built through prosocial behaviours (nurturing relationships), underpinned by taking responsibility for one's own baggage (responsibility), so that ours/others toxic behaviours (breaking destructive relationships) are neutralised.

For us to apply the micro-behaviours listed above we need to have a relationship mindset that supports this. Conquering the monkey is that mindset. It is the proverbial monkey that sits on



our back. Depending on which monkey we feed we are either weighted down or liberated through relationships characterised by mistrust, recrimination and retribution OR trust, goodwill, and forgiveness.

The underlying question we are actually asking ourselves in Conquering the monkey is: "Are we good enough?" This destructively plays out when we retreat from the inherent potential for pain in relationships that leads to severe loneliness; or over-compensating through the relentless pursuit of perfectionism and/or workaholism that leads to burnout. But surely, we should all be seeking perfection and putting in the hard yards? Striving for high standards and excellence is to be lauded. Extreme perfectionism however leaves a person perpetually dissatisfied as result of unattainable standards/goals. It even plays out in obsessive internet cruising, which is a powerful deterrent to relationship commitment as you are always just one swipe away from perfection. Workaholism can be crudely described as an over-compensation for a deficiency elsewhere in one's life (unhappy relationships, poor health, and/or spiritual morass). Perfectionism and workaholism often ride together in unhappy unison, driving us to burnout. So how do we conquer this monkey of inadequacy that undermines our relationships? We need to practise forgiveness and build healthy self-esteem and communities.

### **Forgiveness and self-compassion:**

We are often our own harshest critics. To increase your ability to forgive yourself, you need to recognize what this behaviour involves. Use a mind-mapping technique with the word self-forgiveness in the centre of the page, and the answers to the questions below can be the branches: What do you mean by "self-forgiveness"? Have you ever forgiven yourself before? How did it feel? What beliefs block your ability to forgive yourself? What would be necessary to change these beliefs? What new behaviours do you need to develop to increase your ability to forgive yourself? For what do you need to forgive yourself?

The Serenity Prayer neatly captures how we should approach our unhealthy obsession with perfectionism: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

### **Healthy self-esteem:**

Strengths come in both [virtues](#) and [talents](#). Identify two strengths from each of these categories, and then establish how you will apply them each day, in such a way that both the organisation and you win. If only the organisation benefits then you are martyring yourself, and if only you benefit then you are being self-centred. Look for a true win-win. By tangibly contributing, experiencing the joy of success we build a healthy self-esteem rooted in reality, not whimsical affirmations.

### Building community:

Remote work is a hot topic and the pandemic has forcibly unshackled our myopia to its benefits. A hybrid model that allows more choice whilst safeguarding connection will be the way of the future. The number one characteristic of high performing teams is [psychological safety](#) (willingness to take inter-personal risk without fear of retribution from a teammate). Isolation can ferment distrust as people erroneously connect phantom dots. Even with the array of high tech at our finger-tips, we still need high touch to build trust.

We need to deliberately create communities. As an external consultant looking into organisations I don't belong to a tribe and it can be lonely at times. I have constituted two small group communities that meet and discuss matters of personal interest each month. This stokes my connection whilst broadening my thinking. Interestingly, no one has ever turned my invite down to join these groups.

I suspect the traditional business school offering will increasingly come under pressure as people seek a deeper, more intimate level of connection. The pace of change and the need for safe spaces where complex issues can be authentically discussed is on the rise. We know real learning works best when its: **Relevant + real time + bit-sized + collaborative + sustained**. Leadership development in the future should provide all of the above through small groups that connect on a regular basis, addressing REAL issues. Do community groups work? Consider the UK [Mens Shed Association](#) where participants reported a 75% decrease in anxiety, 89% reduction in depression, along with a marked drop in loneliness.

In closing, Dr Parker J. Palmer sums it up best: "The bottom line is we all long to connect. There are two basic human yearnings: 1) to feel at home in one's own skin and 2) to feel at home on this wonderful earth. To only connect with your own ego is to be in a very lonely place. We are created for community, without community, we struggle. Its as if we did not have oxygen to breathe. "