TRACY BROWER, PhD

Critical Connections

Build Relationships and Harness
the Power of Community
in Work and Life

WILEY

Praise for *Critical Connections*

"At a time when many feel isolated and overwhelmed, Tracy Brower's *Critical Connections* offers both hope and direction. Drawing on the science of relationships, she provides practical tools and fresh insight into how intentional connection can help us thrive at work and in life."

—Byron Johnson, Ph.D.,
Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences, Baylor University,
and Co-Director of the Global Flourishing Study

"*Critical Connections* arrives as both a manifesto and a road map. With compelling insight and practical wisdom, Tracy Brower reveals what we've always known intuitively but often forget in practice. Whether you're leading a team, facilitating a community, or simply looking for deeper meaning in your work, this book will change how you think about what's possible when we stop going at it alone."

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University of Michigan, and bestselling author of
For the Culture

"*Critical Connections* offers an invaluable antidote to loneliness and disconnection, with research-based insights into how we can strengthen our bonds and foster meaningful personal growth. Tracy Brower provides practical, accessible guidance for cultivating deeper connections and community, making this a vital resource for anyone seeking greater fulfillment in their relationships at work and in life."

—Sara Armbruster,
Former President and Chief Executive Officer, Steelcase Inc.

"Half of our happiness comes from our social connections and conversely loneliness is literally a killer. This important book shows the absolute necessity of human connection and how to strengthen connections of all types. Everyone who wants a longer, happier, and healthier life needs this book."

—Paul J. Zak, Ph.D.,
Author of *The Little Book of Happiness* and *The Trust Factor*

"At a moment when so many of us feel disconnected, *Critical Connections* is a guide back to one another. Tracy Brower illuminates the science and the soul of friendship, reminding us that belonging is not just nice to have—it's essential."

—Ingrid Fetell Lee,
Bestselling Author of *Joyful* and Founder of The Aesthetics of Joy

"*Critical Connections* is a timely guide for business leaders navigating the brain economy. Tracy Brower shows how intentional relationships and community are not just human needs, but strategic assets—fueling brain capital, resilience, and long-term competitiveness."

—Harris Eyre, MD, Ph.D.,
Pioneer of the Brain Economy Transition and Professor,
Rice University and The University of Texas Medical Branch

"*Critical Connections* reminds us that effective leadership is ultimately about relationships. Tracy Brower brings clear insight and practical guidance to help leaders strengthen trust, communication, and influence—skills every executive and aspiring leader need to succeed."

—Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.,
SHRM-SC, President and Chief Executive Officer, SHRM

"At a time when employees are struggling with anxiety and loneliness at work, Tracy Brower's *Critical Connections* offers a much-needed road map for creating a better life at work through building stronger relationships and communities."

—Shalene Gupta,
Staff Editor, *Fast Company* and author of
The Power of Trust and *The Cycle*

"In a world of ever-increasing social isolation, Tracy Brower has written an important book to teach, guide, and inspire anyone to build connections to achieve a more rewarding and meaningful life. Anyone looking to increase connections (and that should be all of us!) will gain valuable insights and tools from this book."

—Scott Sonenshein, Ph.D.,
NYT Bestselling Author of *Joy at Work* and *Stretch*, and
Professor of Management at Rice University

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Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is Available:

ISBN: 9781394362264 (cloth)
ISBN: 9781394362271 (ePub)
ISBN: 9781394362288 (ePDF)

Cover Design: Jon Boylan
Cover Image: © killykoon/stock.adobe.com
Author Photo: Courtesy of Steelcase

To my family, who are my best friends. And to my friends who are like family to me.

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Introduction

We're All in This Together

It's tough these days, and many of us have struggled with uncertainty, overwhelm, disconnection, and loneliness. In fact, over 50% of people[1] say they're lonely and lack a sense of belonging. We are disengaged and dissatisfied; adrift. Levels of depression and anxiety are at record high levels, globally, and people say their quality of life isn't what they wish it were. Within this reality, connections, community, and friendship are more important than ever, both in work and in life.

A popular bumper sticker says, "If you're not terrified, you're not paying attention." And it's true. With so many people feeling disheartened and downtrodden, it's hard to believe in a positive future or to feel any level of optimism.

But connections are cause for hope. They can be deeply rewarding and also beneficial to our health. Our brains are wired for attachments, and from the earliest ages, we demonstrate empathy toward others. If we're betrayed or left out, we feel pain in the same area of our brains where we feel physical pain. We crave a sense of belonging. This is true whether we're introverts or extroverts. We need each other, we need our people, and we feel a greater sense of meaning and mental health when we're connected.

I've been studying happiness and connections in work and life for decades, and these topics are both critical and compelling. My research began with my exploration of work and life, and I looked deeply at how work is part of a full life. In *Bring Work to Life by Bringing Life to Work*, I explored how to reimagine work-life for better outcomes for people and organizations.

I was moved by the negative narrative about how bad work is. And I examined the alternative: how work can contribute to fulfillment and belonging, even when it is imperfect or difficult. You're likely familiar with the trend toward quiet quitting and the belief that the less work you do, the happier you get. There's an old saying that going to work is like going to the salt mines, so I visited the salt mines of Salzberg, Austria. With all that additional research in mind, I wrote *The Secrets to Happiness at Work,* which describes how we can empower ourselves to create the conditions for joyful experiences, happiness, and well-being in work and life.

Through my research, I gained a comprehensive understanding of not only what it takes to be happy, but also what happiness feels like beyond immediate gratification or superficial experiences. Friendship, community, and belonging are foundational and pivotal to the experience of joy. People are our lifeblood, and our connections make or break our health and happiness.

But in the face of this critical priority for friendship, it's a rare day that goes by without a new study or another headline about how people are lonely, depressed, and anxious. As a senior contributor for *Forbes* and a contributor to *Fast Company* and other publications, I've written many of those headlines myself. But today's most pressing issues require us to collaborate in new ways and come to solutions that we can only reach through mutual effort, so our relationships are fundamental.

Early in my career, I saw examples of mutual effort when I facilitated team building activities. One of my favorites was called Five

Square. Groups of five people were seated at tables. Each person received an envelope with puzzle pieces, and the goal was for each person in the five-person group to have a perfect square in front of them at the end of the time. Participants had to reach the outcome without speaking.

The trick in the activity was that no one had the necessary puzzle pieces in their individual packet, and group members had to exchange pieces to create five squares. For the whole team to succeed, at least one person in the group had to see everyone's problem. Once that occurred, the sharing of pieces and collaboration could begin in earnest. Mutual effort requires us to see, empathize, connect, and collaborate. And the more intense the challenge, the more necessary the community effort.

Or consider the cartoon with four people in a canoe. There's a hole in one end of the canoe and two members of the group are bailing water furiously. In the other end of the canoe, one guy says to the other, "I'm glad the hole is in their end!"

These are trivial examples, but sometimes it's easier to see big things through smaller lenses. And life can be represented in microcosms. We're in this together, and we all need to see each other's challenges and recognize that our success will be based on coming together and working toward shared solutions.

Paving the Way to Connections

This book is intended to make the case for our collective experience, pave the way for us to create and sustain connections, and to inspire us to move forward.

Part I of this book will look at the power of connecting. If you're going on a hike, you must know the terrain, the elevation, the distance, the temperature, and the weather conditions so you know which boots to wear and how much water to take along. Understanding

the problem is like this, because when we understand what we face, we empower ourselves to deal with it most effectively. So in Chapter 1, we'll start by exploring the scope of the problem and the scale of the challenges we face. We'll look at the research about just how bad things are, and the ways that we are struggling. From how many friends people have (or don't) to which groups suffer the most with a lack of friends, we'll unpack the problem. We'll also look at how loneliness and mental health are related and understand factors that have driven the declines in mental health. We'll address the role of work in loneliness, as well as the generational differences in the experience of loneliness. We'll also explore the deterioration of social skills and the concept of social jetlag.

After we understand the scope of the problem, and its terrain, Chapter 2 will investigate our disconnected reality. We'll look at the ways convenience has overshadowed connection and how social media creates barriers to healthy relationships. We'll talk about the reality of overwhelm and the unhelpful stories about work that exacerbate the issues we face. We'll also address how we spend our time, and the issues of time scarcity that contribute to our malaise. And we'll explore the differences between being alone and being lonely.

Chapter 3 will cover the positive impact of community and connections, and even how our brains contribute to our decisions about others. We'll look at fascinating research on the power of presence and its effects on health, happiness, and performance. We'll dig into the compelling impact of being in proximity with others, and effects not only on individuals, but also on groups. We'll explore how connections at work matter and offer some caveats about density and the number of friends we have.

In Chapter 4, we'll look at how community and connections operate. We'll explore what we need from our communities as well as the rules that sustainable communities require. We'll talk about

social capital and the dynamics of social contagion as we influence each other through relationships.

In Chapter 5, we'll explore the ways obligation and responsibility contribute positively to our experience. We'll also look at how relationships influence our identities. This chapter will examine our preferences for people who are more like us, balanced with the benefits of diversity in our networks. And we'll look at cognitive biases and how they shape both our perceptions and our relationships.

Part II of this book will shift to an action orientation with the practice of connecting. In Chapter 6, we'll address how to be a good friend, including consideration for our own thinking, framing, and perception, and how these shape our experiences of friendship. From self-awareness and expectations to time alone, we'll start with ourselves.

In Chapter 7, we'll continue exploring how to be a good friend in terms of our choices and actions. We'll look at initiative, openness, and humility as well as consistency, legibility, and the time it takes to make a friend. We'll address both gratitude and optimism and their role in relationships.

In Chapter 8, we'll also look at interactions, and how they shape friendship. We'll address empathy, inquiry, listening, generosity, reciprocity, and the art of conversation, and activities to create common experiences, shared language, and enhanced friendships.

Next, in Chapter 9, we'll look at where to find friends and the special circumstances of friendships at work. And we'll wrestle with how we nurture friendships in a digital age.

In Chapter 10, we'll explore challenges with friendship including how to avoid bad friends and how to deal with conflict. We'll also look at how to maintain friendships even when lives change. And we'll discuss how to reconnect with old friends and why you should. We'll dig into how you can build a network and start a friend group as well as how to make friends with yourself.

Chapter 11 will provide perspectives on how we move forward, build resilience, and foster perseverance to thrive in a hopeful future of connections, community, and friendship.

In this book, you'll gain an understanding of the dynamics of community and how it works. You'll also take away a wide variety of strategies you can put into action to find fulfillment and happiness through friendship. But this book isn't a self-help guide, and you won't find quick fixes or easy recipes. Instead, you'll want to marinate in the information, reflect on all that's here, and personalize for yourself. You'll enhance community and friendships by making the information your own and continuously acting with intention and seeking to grow over time.

There's an old saying, "Beauty is as beauty does," but I think we can adjust it to "Friendship is as friendship does." We can understand the challenges and the dynamics of friendship and behave in ways that foster, nurture, and enhance connections. Through these actions, we'll be able to create connections and enhance our bonds and belonging in ways that will enrich and sustain us as individuals and in community with our people.

You'll notice that I use the word "we" throughout this book. I've taken this approach not because we're all the same, but because we share experiences. We'll talk a lot about social dynamics and discuss the nuances of connectedness, so "we" feels apt. And I believe it makes the concepts and research feel more accessible. "We" also reinforces our mutuality, and the similarity of some of our experiences can catalyze lessons learned and clarify implications for the future.

You'll also notice that I've mixed personal examples of struggles, challenges, and community with examples in a work context. This is because work is such a central part of life for so many of us. It's a

place where we make contributions, feel seen, and form relationships. It's for this reason that it feels right to talk not only about the personal, but also the vocational in considering our connections. And all the names are pseudonyms except one, where I've identified Abigail with her first and last name.

And it must also be said that this book was written by me, a human, with no portion written by AI.

Part I

The Power of Connecting

Chapter 1

Connecting in the World Today

"We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth."

~George Bernard Shaw, The Devil's Disciple

Only the Lonely

If you're lonely, you're not alone. In fact, fully 50% of U.S. adults feel lonely.[1] And loneliness is terrible for our physical, mental, and emotional health. We are increasingly disconnected, dissatisfied, and disengaged, and this manifests itself in record-breaking levels of depression, anxiety, and suicide at all ages.

The stats about our discontent are sobering, but we must start with a clear-eyed look at our peril and our challenges, so we can understand them fully enough to develop solutions and get through to the other side. As the saying goes, "If you're walking through a swamp, it's best to just keep going." Things are tough, but we're wise to look around, accept reality, and determine how we can improve it and persevere.

And while the pandemic seems very much in our rear-view mirror, the residual impacts remain. In particular, the pandemic has been blamed for increasing loneliness, based on the collapse of social connections. Research[2] found that 30% of people were lonely during the pandemic, which was an increase compared to pre-pandemic experiences.

But loneliness and mental health issues reach far beyond the pandemic. Multiple additional studies find that loneliness is alarmingly high. One national survey[3] of almost 10,500 adults found that 61% said they felt lonely. This was a 7% increase compared with 2018.

In addition, another study[4] found 36% of people said they felt lonely frequently or almost all the time, and the number was even higher, 61%, for those ages 18–25. In addition, 51% of mothers with young children said they were lonely frequently or almost all the time. Loneliness was exacerbated during the pandemic when social connections dissolved, but this data shows that loneliness has increased substantially in recent years as well.

Broad swaths of people suffer with loneliness, and while it is widespread, it is also concentrated in key groups. In fact, the issue of loneliness is especially concerning among college students. A comprehensive survey of 33,000 students[5] found that about 67% of students said they were lonely or felt isolated. This is an all-time high. Students in the study aren't just lonely, they are also *more lonely* than they've ever been. And we can see the tie between loneliness and mental health with 83% of students who reported their mental health had a negative effect on their academic performance during the past month. Loneliness is affecting students substantially, and isolation is a regular part of their lives.

Older adults are also struggling. A 2024 study[6] found similarly concerning results. In particular, 33% of older adults ages 50–80 were lonely. While this was the average rate among all respondents, there were factors that exacerbated loneliness. For example, this study showed a link between mental health and loneliness. When respondents said their mental health was only fair or poor, 75% of them also said they were lonely.

In addition, there was a link with physical health. Specifically, 53% of those who said their physical health was fair or poor were also