Increasing Newcomers' Sense of Belonging

Evidence-Based Strategies from Social Psychology

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Each year, 250,000 newcomers make Canada their home.

One key to successful integration is a strong sense of belonging.

A sense of belonging is the feeling that you are socially connected to other people.[2, 3]

A sense of belonging can come from relationships with many different people, such as friends, family, romantic partners, and the community.

There are many benefits associated with a strong sense of belonging.

The more people feel they belong, the healthier they are, both physically and mentally.[4, 5, 6, 7]

A sense of belonging is especially important for members of minority groups. The more they feel they belong,

- The better they do in school[3, 6, 8, 9, 10]

- The more likely they are to seize work opportunities[11, 12]

Among newcomers to Canada, a sense of belonging is associated with important settlement outcomes such as job satisfaction and satisfaction with life in Canada.[13]

Because increasing a sense of belonging can increase social, economic, and health outcomes, doing so is one pathway to prosperity for newcomers.

No prior social psychological research has studied strategies to increase belonging among newcomers specifically.

However, existing literature on a sense of belonging in other groups provides some insight. We have summarized this scientific evidence below.

What can newcomers do?

Start conversations with people you meet every day. If language is a barrier, sign up for a language class through your local immigrant-serving agency. Daily interactions with acquaintances increase happiness and your sense of belonging. So say hello to your grocer and ask your neighbours if they are having a good day.[14]

Remind yourself of your social connections by writing about how you are connected to your community, friends, or romantic partner.[10]

What can businesses and non-profits do?

When recruiting employees, make sure the wording in job advertisements appeals to various groups. Words can convey a cultural mismatch between a future employee's needs and the work place. Some job advertisements use lots of words associated with independence, such as "leader" and "dominant." These words can signal to members of interdependent or collectivist groups that they may not belong at that job.[11]

Create physical environments that signal acceptance. Objects in public spaces can subtly signal which people do or do not belong.[15, 16] The key is to make sure the workplace has minimal objects usually associated with the majority group and also has objects that make newcomers feel welcome. Instead of displaying only the local flag, for example, some workplaces also display flags from employees' countries of origin.

Encourage communication among all employees. We often have things in common with the people around us. Finding even small connections, such as realizing you share a birthday, can increase feelings of belonging and cooperation among peers.[9]

Include minority and majority groups when providing diversity education and training. When majority group members feel they belong in a multicultural group, they are more supportive of diversity efforts. In turn, this may increase minorities' sense of belonging.[17]

Ensure your organization is numerically diverse and accepting. Numbers alone are not enough. You can show current and future employees that you embrace diversity by hiring people from minority groups *and* creating a positive, accepting work environment.[18]

What can schools do?
To help staff and students feel they belong, schools can follow the strategies for businesses and non-profits. So that students feel they belong, schools can also…

Let students know that they are not alone in their academic struggles and doubts. Share stories about how everyone feels isolated or lonely sometimes. Reminding minority students of this can help them feel they belong at school, and remind them that such feelings will pass. Doing so can also increase their academic motivations and grades.[3]

Provide opportunities for contact between groups. When everyone seems different from you, it can be hard to feel that you belong. This is sometimes true for racial and ethnic minority students at universities where most students are White. Making interracial connections, during their first year of university, such as having a White roommate, helps racial and ethnic minority students feel like they belong at school. This increased sense of belonging also leads to better university grades.[19]

Promote friendliness, pro-sociality, and inclusion. Exclusion at a young age can lead to poor self-control skills. Preschools and elementary schools have a unique opportunity to help prevent these effects by fostering a friendly and inclusive culture.[20] One way to do so is to use the "Jigsaw Classroom"—a cooperative teaching technique that gives each student a unique and important task.[21]

Promote diversity in schools by embracing ethnically-based groups. Sometimes schools have a "colour-blind" mentality, or act as if everyone is the same. In reality, group differences *do* exist. On-campus ethnic group clubs, as well as events that showcase an ethnic group's traditions, show everyone that differences can be celebrated.[22]

Belonging is a pathway to prosperity

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