

Being Ignored Hurts, Even by a Stranger

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Feeling like you're part of the gang is crucial to the human experience. All people get stressed out when we're left out. A new study published in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), finds that a feeling of inclusion can come from something as simple as eye contact from a stranger.

Psychologists already know that humans have to feel connected to each other to be happy. A knitting circle, a church choir, or a friendly neighbor can all feed that need for connection. Eric D. Wesselmann of Purdue University wanted to know just how small a cue could help someone feel connected. He cowrote the study with Florencia D. Cardoso of the Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata in Argentina, Samantha Slater of Ohio University, and Kipling D. Williams of Purdue. "Some of my coauthors have found, for example, that people have reported that they felt bothered sometimes even when a stranger hasn't acknowledged them," Wesselmann says. He and his authors came up with an experiment to test that.

The study was carried out with the cooperation of people on campus at Purdue University. A research assistant walked along a well-populated path, picked a subject, and either met that person's eyes, met their eyes and smiled, or looked in the direction of the person's eyes, but past them—past an ear, for example, "looking at them as if they were air," Wesselmann says. When the assistant had passed the person, he or she gave a thumbs-up behind the back to indicate that another experimenter should stop that person. The second experimenter asked, "Within the last minute, how disconnected do you feel from others?"

People who had gotten eye contact from the research assistant, with or without a smile, felt less disconnected than people who had been looked at as if they weren't there.

"These are people that you don't know, just walking by you, but them looking at you or giving you the air gaze—looking through you—seemed to have at least momentary effect," Wesselmann says. Other research has found that even being ostracized by a group you want nothing to do with, like the Ku Klux Klan, can make people feel left out, so it's not surprising that being pointedly ignored can have the same effect. "What we find so interesting about this is that now we can further speak to the power of human social connection," Wesselmann says. "It seems to be a very strong phenomenon."