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▲ **DR. DIANA UCHIYAMA, JD, PsyD, CAADC**, is the executive director of the Illinois Lawyers’ Assistance Program (LAP).

✉ [duchiyama@illinoislap.org](mailto:duchiyama@illinoislap.org)

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# Battling Cultures of Loneliness

**Strategies for improving social connection, community, and belonging in the workforce.**

*Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty.*

—Mother Teresa

**THE TOPIC OF ISOLATION AND LONELINESS** often comes up during an assessment, consultation, or therapy with a legal professional who seeks out the Lawyers’ Assistance Program (LAP) at some point during their career. These types of feelings have been amplified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which left the structure of people’s lives shattered without warning. Due to ongoing hybrid or remote-work arrangements and the loss of the old structures people relied on for connection, many today still lack the social connections they had before the pandemic.

In May 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Divek Murthy raised the alarm about an epidemic of loneliness and isolation in the U.S., and noted it is “as bad as smoking” and can lead to increased mental health problems; increased risks of heart disease, stroke, and dementia; and early death. He also noted that even before the pandemic approximately half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness, which only increased during and after the pandemic. Loneliness, he reported, “was more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health” and called it a “public health crisis.”

Our drive to connect is embedded in our biology and evolutionary history. It is considered a core psychological need leading to higher levels of life satisfaction and feelings

of happiness. We are biologically built to desire social frameworks in most aspects of our life and to feel part of a group. According to Cornell University, “belonging is the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group.”

In 1943, Abraham Maslow published his book, “Theory of Human Motivation,” which reshaped psychology by creating a classification system mapping out the basic needs and higher aspirations of all human beings. It was the first known article in psychology identifying the need for “belonging.” He described “belongingness” as the human need for interpersonal connection and acceptance in his hierarchy of needs (just above the need for food, clothing, shelter, and physical safety). He stated that humans crave interaction with others, friendship, intimacy, family, and love.

In current times, Brené Brown has stated that belonging “is being part of something bigger but also having the courage to stand alone, and to belong to yourself above all else.” It is the ability to feel connected to a larger group while maintaining your sense of identity and core values—often a difficult task for many of us in the legal field and in society. Lawyers often struggle with the meaning and purpose of their work and adapting to their organization’s or agency’s culture.

## Five pillars of connection

What can legal workforces do to increase a sense of inclusion, belonging, and connection in these challenging times? According to Achievers

Workforce Institute, five pillars of belonging are necessary for increasing employee retention and commitment. The five pillars are that all leaders must ensure that their workforce feels “welcome, known, included, supported, and connected.” During the onboarding stage, new people should be introduced and welcomed to the general population as important and integral members of the workplace. After the onboarding process, management and leaders should give employees the means to express their individual values and needs and participate in problem solving and solution seeking. This increases a worker’s sense of connection and importance within the workforce and may require creative solutions for leaders, including how to retain females, minorities, and diverse populations of workers.

Other remedies may include workforce recognition programs and sharing individual successes and milestones. These can include both personal and professional accomplishments. Leaders also should learn the names of family members, including children, and go out of their way to make employees feel seen and appreciated. The most important piece of the five pillars, by far, is the need


to feel included and vital within the organization. This may mean having access to leadership to share ideas and being able to discuss problems and solutions in a safe environment with no threat of retaliation. Higher levels of feeling valued and integral to the workforce lead to more optimism and less chaos.

For employees to feel supported, thrive, and grow, management and leaders must provide the necessary tools, training, and resources. This includes mentorship programs within the firm where mentors are actively invested in less-senior staff and check in regularly with them to determine what they may need to thrive and prosper. Too often at LAP, we hear that young associates are often disappointed by their firm’s “mentoring programs,” as the senior people assigned to them seem inaccessible, distant, and not remotely invested or interested in their growth. When management focuses on the well-being and growth of all employees, they create a much more resilient and motivated workforce.

It is harder to leave a place where we feel a sense of belonging and feel important and valued. As Abraham Maslow identified in the 1940s, we all

share a primitive and biological need to be connected and part of a larger whole. If we feel a sense of disconnect, isolation, and loneliness despite spending large amounts of time with people, we are more likely to be pessimistic, less resilient, and lack purpose and drive in our work.

We all are motivated by the need to be acknowledged, valued, and supported by the workforce and in our families and communities.

Lang Leav, a New Zealand novelist and poet who explores the theme of loneliness, once wrote, “Shrinking in a corner, pressed into the wall; do they know I’m present, am I here at all ... Slowly I am withering—a flower deprived of sun; longing to belong to somewhere or someone.” Please make it your mission as a human, as a leader, as management, as a coworker to include all those around you. Loneliness is like depriving a person of food, water, and oxygen. We should all be invested in creating a sense of community and belonging whereby all people can thrive and prosper regardless of their diversity or differences. 

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