

Affiliation Equals Safety

“loneliness kills. It’s as powerful as smoking or alcoholism.”

The dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC) is a small strip of the brain located deep within the frontal cortex and is part of the complex alarm system that was known primarily for picking up the distress of physical pain. Surprisingly, the dACC also lights up in response to social pain and isolation, even to simply being ‘left out’ of a game.

The more emotionally distressing the social pain or isolation is to someone, the more the dACC is activated. To our brains, the pain of being socially isolated is the same as the pain from a physical injury or illness. That the dACC reacts so strongly to both physical pain and social pain is a measure of how important it is to be included/ accepted, and how damaging it is to feel left out.

Repeated social exclusion draws on painful experiences as a model for future social interactions and relationships. The dACC becomes more sensitized and reactive as the person anticipates more exclusion and then interprets each social encounter according to that expectation. The more times that someone is left out or rejected, the more the experience of being left out is knitted into neural pathways.

A competitive, judgmental, unaccepting environment increases the reactivity of the dACC, creating and reinforcing exclusion. An overactive dACC is the result and the cause of social exclusion.

In a world that isolates many adults struggling with various challenges, the 40 people in MeMoves are always compassionate and safe. Countless therapists have told us that for some of their clients, the people that they see on MeMoves each day are often the only people who look at them with unconditional acceptance, making absolutely no requests or demands. MeMoves provides a significant emotional and global connection through a varied group of people of all ages, helping others to connect with the real world.

Loneliness is painful. Professor Robert Waldinger, Director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, one of the world’s longest studies of adult life, wrote that “loneliness kills. It’s as powerful as smoking or alcoholism.”