

# Why Trust Matters – and How to Build More of It

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# EXPERIENCE LIFE

By [Heidi Wachter](#) |



Trust is a strong indicator of personal, professional, and national happiness. Here's how to develop more of it.

For more than 40 years, the founders of the renowned Gottman Institute, John and Julie Gottman, have been studying what makes marriages work. The husband–wife duo has counseled couples from every racial and ethnic group and social class.

They've seen some clients skillfully solve their problems and others get stuck in conflicts. "I've found that we can help 70 to 75 percent of these couples," John Gottman, PhD, reports.

What separates the remaining 25 to 30 percent from the rest? [Trust issues](#).

A measure of the quality of a relationship – between individuals, between groups, and between governments – trust makes life more predictable and working with others easier. "I started to see their conflicts like a fan opening up, and every region of the fan was a different area of

trust,” he explains. “Can I trust you to be there and listen to me when I’m upset? Can I trust you to choose me over your mother, over your friends? To not take drugs? Can I trust you to not cheat on me and be sexually faithful? Can I trust you to respect me?”

Many of these are subtle questions of betrayal, but trust can be eroded by minor acts of betrayal over time.

“Trust is built in very small moments,” says University of Houston social scientist and best-selling author Brené Brown, PhD, LMSW. Research shows that people trust folks who attend funerals, those who ask for help, and bosses who ask how their employees’ family members are doing.

One way to build trust is to make the most of what Gottman refers to as “sliding-door” moments – seemingly inconsequential interactions that build or break relationships. For example, one evening at home he wanted to finish reading a novel. “At one point, I put the novel on my bedside and walked into the bathroom,” Gottman recalls. “As I passed the mirror, I saw my wife’s face in the reflection, and she looked sad, brushing her hair.”

He had a choice: return to his book or talk to his wife. “I took the brush from her hand and asked her what was the matter. And she told me why she was sad.”

Sliding-door moments offer opportunities to practice what Gottman’s former graduate student Dan Yoshimoto calls “attunement.” His acronym ATTUNE means being *aware* of someone’s emotions, *turning* toward the emotion, *tolerating* two different viewpoints, trying to *understand* the individual, and responding in *nondefensive* and *empathetic* ways.

Attunement builds mutual respect and exhibits trustworthiness in any type of relationship. “Trust is the response. Trustworthiness is what we have to judge,” says philosopher and U.K. Parliament member Onora O’Neill in her TED Talk, “What We Don’t Understand About Trust.” She argues that trusting involves judging three things about others:

- Are they competent?
- Are they honest?
- Are they reliable?

“If we find that a person is competent in the relevant matters, and reliable and honest, we’ll have a pretty good reason to trust them, because they’ll be trustworthy,” she says.

## Hardwired to Trust

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Scientists have traced our ability to judge a person’s trustworthiness to particular brain functions. “Experiments around the world have shown that humans are naturally inclined to trust others but don’t always,” says Claremont Graduate University neuroeconomist Paul J. Zak, PhD.

Studies of rodents have found that the neuropeptide oxytocin signals when another animal is safe to approach. This inspired Zak to investigate whether the same was true in humans. His

findings indicated that oxytocin reduces the stress we feel when we interact with others.

“Oxytocin is a social glue that keeps us embedded in communities of humans by motivating us to play nice,” Zak says. The hormone is related to a second human survival mechanism known as the tend-and-befriend response.

In addition to driving us to do things for others, the response compels us to connect with others when we’re going through stressful situations such as an illness or the loss of a job. Oxytocin boosts positive risk-taking behaviors, including trusting others.

When it comes to trust, “the oxytocin response is graded,” he explains. “The more trustworthy someone appears, the more oxytocin the brain produces and the more motivated we are to interact.”

Along with motivating us to engage with and trust people, oxytocin makes it feel good to be trustworthy. “However, there is high variability in oxytocin production across people,” Zak adds. People with some psychiatric and neurological disorders – such as autism, schizophrenia, and social anxiety disorder – may not experience the feeling of reward that the rest of us get from connections with others.

Studies suggest that giving synthetic oxytocin supplements to individuals with autism, for example, helps them pick up on social cues a little bit more, and those with schizophrenia become more trusting, thereby increasing social support in both groups. (For more on oxytocin and additional tips on making friends with stress, read “[Making Friends With Stress: Kelly McGonigal](#).”)

## Safety First

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Building trust and trustworthiness goes beyond our brains. “It requires the work of the community,” says Ashanti Branch, MEd, founder and executive director of the Ever Forward Club in Oakland, Calif. “Trust means that someone recognizes that your truth and your story matter and that you have something to say.”

The former civil engineer and educator founded the organization in 2004 to improve his teaching and to mentor the young men of color he was instructing. “It’s a space where young men can get real and learn that their truth is OK,” Branch says. (The group is prominently featured in the documentary *The Mask You Live In*, which highlights stories of boys and men struggling for authenticity while negotiating narrow definitions of masculinity.)

Recent studies at Google and other companies indicate that “psychological safety” – a shared belief that it’s safe to take interpersonal risks – may be a critical factor in building team effectiveness. These are workspaces featuring a high degree of respect and interpersonal trust; people are comfortable being and expressing themselves.

“A climate of psychological safety makes it easier for people to speak up with their tentative thoughts,” writes Amy Edmondson, PhD, Harvard Business School’s Novartis Professor of

Leadership and Management, who coined the term after discovering that successful teams not only made mistakes but also discussed them.

“As team members share their ideas, respond respectfully to others’ views, and engage in healthy debate, they establish vital shared expectations about appropriate ways to behave,” she explains.

To build a culture of psychological safety, Branch begins each meeting at the Ever Forward Club with a check-in to help members get present with others in the room, as well as “circle time,” when members can share something they are struggling with in their lives and get support from other members.

“The goal is to get young men to see that truths don’t have to match and that when they don’t it doesn’t mean someone is wrong,” he says. “It’s also a method for helping them learn to hold space for one another even when there are conflicting viewpoints.”

Approaching conflict as collaboration and replacing blame with curiosity increase the brain’s ability to calm the fight-or-flight response and mitigate conflict. When cooler heads prevail, the individual can access the “broaden-and-build mode of positive emotion,” explains University of North Carolina psychology professor Barbara Fredrickson, PhD, author of *Positivity*.

She notes that positive emotions, such as love, hope, and gratitude, broaden our automatic responses and create opportunities for new ways of thinking and acting. That helps us build resources – including resiliency and resourcefulness – that improve our well-being. Positive emotions also foster trust, compassion, and greater social connectedness.

The Ever Forward Club boasts a 100 percent high school graduation rate, and a high percentage of its members have gone on to college, trade school, or the military – outcomes that offer convincing evidence that safe and empathetic environments are breeding grounds for building not just trust but tangible success in life.

## Community Trust

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Do you think most people can be trusted? How you answer this question depends, in part, on where you live.

Levels of “social” or “generalized” trust – a belief in the honesty, integrity, and reliability of others – have been measured since the 1950s. Recent data shows that fewer than 10 percent of Brazilians say they trust others, while in Norway that number exceeds 70 percent. The United States trends in the 30 to 40 percent range. “If trust in others is below about 30 percent in a country, then living standards will fail to grow,” says Zak.

“Trust is a stronger predictor of a nation’s happiness than any other factor except for gross domestic product,” says Dan Buettner, author of *The Blue Zones of Happiness: Lessons From the World’s Happiest People*.

A 2015 study of adults in more than 80 countries found that agreeing with the statement

“Most people can be trusted” was linked to greater life satisfaction, while mistrust was connected to distress and poor health. That means living where you think most people aren’t trustworthy isn’t fun or good for you.

“Low trust implies a society where you have to keep an eye over your shoulder; where deals need lawyers instead of handshakes; where you don’t see the point of paying your tax or recycling your rubbish (since you doubt your neighbor will do so); and where you employ your cousin or your brother-in-law to work for you rather than a stranger who would probably be much better at the job,” explains University of Cambridge lecturer David Halpern, author of *Social Capital*.

One simple measure of social trust is counting the numbers stored in people’s phones, which indicates the size of their social network. Halpern argues that having a larger list increases your social capital because social networks help us get through difficult situations and affect our economic status. For example, the more people you know, the more money you’re likely to earn, he says.

Social networks also provide indirect collective benefits. “Communities that have high levels of social capital benefit in many ways,” explains Harvard University public-policy professor Robert Putnam, PhD, author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. “Their kids do better in school. They have lower crime rates.”

Both Halpern and Putnam differentiate between “bonding social capital” (the closeness you feel to your friends and loved ones) and “bridging social capital” (the trust you have in your neighbors; those of a different race, religion, or socioeconomic class; and members of your larger community). “What worries me most about trends in America is the decline in bridging social capital,” Putnam says.

## Bridging the Gaps

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Policy changes can be made to close the discrepancies in bridging social capital and improve social trust.

One thing governments can do is design communities differently, says Buettner. “Cities with well-lit streets, slow speed limits, bike lanes, wide sidewalks lined with trees, and green spaces create opportunities for human interaction, which helps build trust,” he says. “One study showed that simply cleaning up graffiti raised the level of trust and feeling of security in a city.”

Buettner continues: “Governments can also pay police officers more so they draw from a higher-quality, more educated pool of applicants and spend more money and time on training them.”

At the same time, elected officials and those in positions of power need to be held accountable. “There have to be strict laws against corruption,” he adds.

“Democratic governments depend on trust,” explains Zak. “We trust politicians when other people around us trust them. That is the essence of democracy – crowdsourcing trust.”

Running for school board, joining city leadership committees, and attending business and police forums are great ways to engage with fellow community members while holding elected officials and business leaders responsible. When it comes to making our neighborhoods healthier and happier, a little trust can go a long way.

*This originally appeared as “A Matter of Trust” in the December 2018 print issue of Experience Life.*

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By Experience Life Staff

Top-tier research confirms that being compassionate is good for us, altering our physiology to boost not just happiness but well-being.