

Building Social Connection at Work

A guide to designing meal breaks with intention



This guide was informed by the Communal Meal Break research project at the Oregon Healthy Workforce Center.





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Social connectedness is the feeling of closeness, support, trust, and belonging with the people in our life.

At work, our social networks typically include our coworkers and supervisors who play a large role in how connected we feel.

In this document, we use the words connection and connectedness interchangeably.

Social connection is essential for our health and wellbeing.

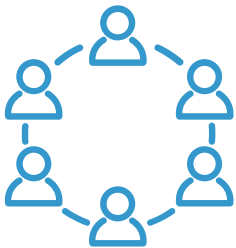
Why is social connection important?

Social connections keep us healthy

Positive social connections are vital for our wellbeing, and without them, we become lonely, which has shown to increase our risk for many physical illnesses and mental health concerns. Our social community is one of five key determinants of wellbeing.



Learn more about the social determinates of health ➤



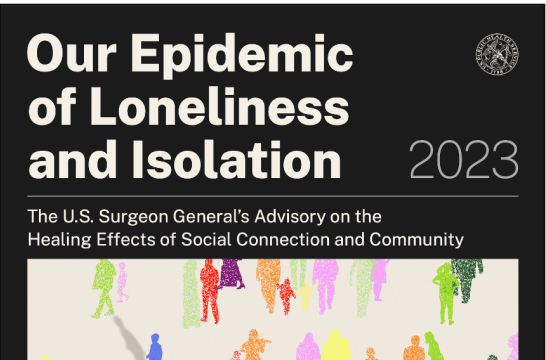
Work helps us build social connections

We spend much of our adult life working, so work can be an important contributor to our health and social network, and workplace leaders can play a major role in facilitating opportunities for social connection. Research shows that having positive connections at work can help reduce stress, promote belonging, and improve job performance.* Whether one’s work is physical or emotionally strenuous, having positive social connections can help workers deal with stress and protect them from its impact on physical and mental health, while building social support networks, which can be further empowering.

Social connection is good for people and for business

There is a loneliness epidemic in the US that costs employers \$154 billion/year* – employees who are lonely are more likely to call out sick or leave their job. Social wellbeing is not only good for people, it makes good business sense too.

Learn more about the loneliness epidemic ➤



* <https://doi.org/10.1177/08901171241255204b>
*<https://newsroom.cigna.com/business-case-addressing-loneliness-workforce>

What is the Communal Meal Break (CMB)?

CMB is a standing opportunity during the daily work shift when multiple workers can take their meal break at the same time to gather, rest, and have their meal together.



This guide is informed by the Communal Meal Break research project with Environmental Health Service (EVS) workers (i.e., those who perform hygiene services in hospitals), in which we gathered perspectives of EVS leaders and staff on the importance of social connections at work, solicited input on implementing CMB, and conducted a 3-month trial of CMB. Some insights from research participants and a few quotes are included here (some quotes are truncated for brevity).

There are several ways to promote social connectedness at work. These may include team outings, office gatherings, and holiday parties. However, while such occasional events may help, they are less likely to provide the consistent touch points we need to build deep human connections.

In this guide, we highlight a simple and readily available work structure that can be intentionally turned into a consistent mechanism for building connection – the communal meal break – and offer steps and strategies for organizational leaders, managers, and workers, all of whom have a role to play in fostering positive social connection and belonging at work.

Why is CMB important?

Regardless of the type of work we’re engaged in, the meal break is a readily available part of daily work. However, it is often overlooked and underutilized as an opportunity for social connection. Instead, we often skip this break, eat at our desk as we continue to work, or sit down to lunch with our phone.

Intentionally converting this meal break into a CMB allows us to truly break away from our work, interact with others in our work network, and utilize the daily meal break as a consistent platform to build meaningful connections.

Because it is embedded into the daily work structure, it isn’t a separate standalone program that needs expensive resources, just some intentional planning.

Why employees like CMB

CMB provides a consistent opportunity to connect.

Existing opportunities for social connection may be periodic (e.g., celebrations, catered lunches) and inconsistent. Integrating CMB into the daily lunch break is a convenient and reliable opportunity for social connection.



CMB helps employees learn from each other.

Employees desire more connection with their coworkers and opportunities to learn “tricks of the trade” from each other.

“I feel that sharing lunch is a great way to meet with other coworkers. It makes work easier ... if you can put a little bit of joy into the day of being able to talk with someone, joke with someone, it helps your day along, I think, and gives you better spirits when you’re around people.”

“I think it kind of helps build a teamwork thing... If we know each other, understand each other, have a really good communication base. I feel like it makes it easier.”

CMB is a way for leaders to show staff that they are valued.

A leadership commitment to prioritize and facilitate CMB is a way for leaders to show that they care about the wellbeing of workers.

“... as people, we work every day ... to support them in the work, but I think that we could do a whole lot more to support them as people...”

“I think it’s (social connection) got a really positive impact on our team to have that sense of community and camaraderie...and it helps build that teamwork...”

“I think I could say that there is a little bit more of a team spirit comradery that we were to a degree attempting to foster.”

“I think it would make them feel more valued too...”

CMB can help foster empathy and belonging.

When employees have a chance to connect with each other in a relaxed way, such as sharing a meal, it can facilitate meaningful conversations, which can foster empathy and sense of bonding and belonging with each other.

“If we’re able to communicate and understand each other, we kind of know ...and (can ask) Okay, I know you need help If we know each other, understand each other, have a really good communication base. I feel like it makes it easier.”

“I think this study improved my relationship with my other co-workers. We were able to just take out some time to discuss our problems and experiences for a little while during each session. Also gives everyone a perspective of the things other people are going through.”

The content and quotes on this page emerged from the CMB research project.

Implementing CMB: 4 key steps

Here, we recommend some key steps to implement CMB into your daily work. You can tailor it to your daily work flow but remember that consistency is key here. For the CMB to be successful, i.e., become embedded as a practice and part of the culture, it must be offered daily or most days of the week.

Identify a “CMB time”

Identifying a standing time as a meal break for rest and connection, i.e., CMB can help convey its importance and anchor this time for all workers.



Design work flow around CMB



It is vital to plan day-to-day work tasks around CMB for all teams. For essential tasks (e.g. patient care, manufacturing) where coverage is needed round-the-clock, proactively plan the flow of work, using staggered break times, for example, to facilitate overlap between workers.

Identify a dedicated CMB space



A physical space, such as a dedicated break room or lunch area, is paramount to CMB - it conveys an organizational priority on rest and wellbeing. This space can also serve as a “social space” — one that is welcoming and offers the opportunity to socialize with co-workers. Ensure that this space is central and accessible, spacious, well lit, comfortable, clean, allows for deep and meaningful conversation, and is well equipped with furniture and amenities such as silverware, dishes, refrigerator, and sink. For hybrid workers, see note on page 10.

Make it part of your organization’s mission, policies, work practices, and culture



CMB can only be as successful as the conditions that support it. Prioritize CMB through organizational policies for all workers, daily practices, and a culture of breaks for rest and socialization.



Overarching considerations

The 4 elements are solidified through two foundational efforts — one, **leadership commitment** to initiate CMB, sustain it operationally, and prioritize it as part of the organizational mission (e.g., discuss the importance of CMB during meetings, clearly designate signs to the break room, send out reminders about CMB time). Two, **engage workers** in the process of designing CMB, seeking out their perspectives, and committing to a CMB that is informed by them.

Troubleshooting common barriers when implementing CMB

CMB conflicts with work

Often, it can feel like there's not enough time for a break, especially when there are project deadlines.

SOLUTION

It's important to protect and prioritize CMB at all levels of the organization.

- Protect CMB time by not holding meetings or other work tasks during this time.
- Identify lengthy tasks proactively that could interfere with CMB participation and plan accordingly (e.g., split the task into portions that can be accomplished before and after CMB). Make this a consistent practice across teams.
- Allow for group discussions on designing work flow around CMB, brainstorm solutions, and share what works.
- Sometimes work can bleed over into CMB time which can shorten the break. In the CMB study, five minutes were added to the meal break to facilitate more CMB participation, which appeared to alleviate the time crunch.

Accommodating varying working conditions, such as hybrid and remote work.

Hybrid and remote work are common in the post-COVID work era. It is important to ensure that the opportunity for CMB is equitable and includes all workers.

SOLUTION

Here's how you can tailor CMB for your hybrid or remote workforce.

- Address the importance of CMB for all workers, consistently and frequently in team communications.
- Add an "online CMB" option that is held at the same time as the in-person CMB time.
- Utilize a dedicated technology tool or a fixed online meeting link for CMB.
- Solicit input from workers on how best to offer CMB. In our study, workers provided invaluable guidance on kicking off and sustaining CMB. After all, workers have the most direct knowledge of their day-to-day work.

It feels like "I'm not doing my job" if I go to CMB.

It's common to feel like prioritizing CMB means slacking on the job.

SOLUTION

Clearly communicate the importance of CMB and set the norm for prioritizing rest and social connection.

For a new effort such as CMB to become established as "normal", leaders are key in setting the norm for communal break-taking. Thus, it is important that leaders provide frequent, clear, and consistent messaging to employees:

- (a) Emphasize that it is ok and highly encouraged to take CMB for health and wellbeing.
- (b) Pair this encouragement with instrumental guidance on how to manage work tasks without sacrificing CMB.



(c) Acknowledge explicitly that CMB is not mandatory, and employees may not prefer a social setting on their break. However, CMB is an opportunity for social connection that is available to them.

(d) Encourage questions and promptly address any concerns regarding CMB.

WHY IS THIS LEADERSHIP MESSAGING IMPORTANT?

- (a) Repeating these messages initially will help establish CMB long-term.
- (b) New employees will become oriented to CMB as well.
- (c) The importance of rest and social health at work would become more recognized and accepted as part of the organizational culture and mission.
- (d) It conveys to staff that EVS leaders care about their wellbeing.
- (e) Employees feel empowered to discuss this with their managers if they are unable to participate in CMB.

General considerations

Implementing CMB effectively to the point that it becomes embedded in daily work and organizational culture takes **time** and **consistency**.

Here are some points to keep in mind:



It takes a village.

Leaders commit to making the space and time for CMB and setting the norm to protect it, managers design work flow around it, and workers actively engage in CMB by sharing input and participating in CMB. The success of CMB is everyone's responsibility.



Regularly evaluate CMB.

Periodically examine whether CMB is being implemented effectively, whether it's working, and what can be done to improve it. Be patient - an effort like CMB needs time to take shape and become embedded into the daily workplace culture and work flow.



Maintain a psychologically safe work environment to tackle emerging issues with CMB.

Providing opportunities for social connections can result in positive or negative exchanges, which is normal for any human social exchange. Make space for challenging conversations when they emerge and encourage collaboratively working through them. Meaningful connections result when workers can connect in authentic ways.



Don't force it.

Human connection cannot and should not be forced, including at work. It impinges on the autonomy of workers and risks creating negative attitudes about CMB. The important thing is to offer CMB equitably while creating daily working conditions to support it. This can also increase participation and buy in for CMB.

CMB and more: Other practices for social connection

Adopt 5-minute check-ins.

Dedicate a 5-min check-in every day where employees can check in with each other. As an alternative, allocate the first 5 minutes of a work meeting for this check-in. As a leader, you can kick start this by sharing how your day is going or how your weekend was. Facilitate a genuine interest in getting to know employees, their likes, dislikes, and unique qualities, and provide a safe, confidential, and non-judgmental space to share their life's ups and downs.

Recognize social health and wellbeing openly.

Include a standing agenda item during all-team meetings and periodic communications to acknowledge the importance of social connection at work. Hearing this from leaders consistently indicates that social health and wellbeing are important within the organization. Invite staff to provide suggestions for connection opportunities at work and act on them.

Add a few extra minutes to breaks at work.

Offering this buffer time was successful in the CMB project, allowing time for staff to transition from work to their break and back, and is especially useful within large workplaces where workers may need to walk to the CMB space.

Maintain a culture of connection.

Creating such a culture can be simple – check in with each other and allow a few seconds for them to respond rather than just walk by as you pass each other in the hallway; share an upcoming event that might interest them; ask about family members and loved ones, and allow them to ask you in return. These are social connection practices that are small but practical, powerful, and sustainable, and make workers feel valued.



LEARN MORE

Why social health is important ▶

<https://odphp.health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health>

The loneliness epidemic in the United States ▶

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

Oregon Healthy Workforce Center ▶

<https://www.ohsu.edu/oregon-healthy-workforce-center>

Plan your own CMB

This is your space to plan a CMB within your organization. Use these prompts below to envision what a CMB would look like and make a concrete plan for it. Make sure to tailor it to your team’s daily work flow and make it practical. Above all, ensure that the CMB can be implemented consistently and that the opportunity for CMB is available to everyone in your organization.



Identify “CMB time”

Identify a dedicated CMB space

Insert location or multiple locations as needed:

Specify plan for furnishing CMB room:

Specify dedicated technology tool or a fixed online meeting link for virtual CMB:



Design work flow around CMB

Include strategies for how you would manage work flow around CMB.



Make it part of your organization’s mission, policies, work practices, and culture

Specify steps at the leadership, employee, and organizational culture level to initiate and sustain CMB.

Leadership commitment to CMB:_____

Manager commitment to CMB:_____

Employer commitment to CMB:_____

Troubleshooting CMB issues

Challenge #1: _____

Solution(s): _____

Challenge #2: _____

Solution(s): _____





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