

Its time to talk about loneliness

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The pandemic has affected each of us in different ways, but I think many of us can agree that we've experienced feelings of loneliness at some point or another.

Is it a subject we feel comfortable talking about? Coronavirus has certainly drawn attention to the issue, but it remains largely invisible. The government itself has acknowledged the ongoing stigma, appointing a Minister for Loneliness who last year launched a campaign to encourage people to open up about these feelings.

At a significant cost of £2.5 billion a year to employers, according to [research by the New Economics Foundation](#) — and that's a 'conservative' estimate — it's another crisis organisations cannot afford to ignore.

How does loneliness affect us?

Interpersonal relationships give us emotional health: we can share our problems or issues, we can laugh and have a good time, we can learn more about ourselves and others. But when those relationships or interactions are absent, we feel lonely.

While related, there's an important distinction to be made between feeling lonely and being alone. It's possible to be isolated and not feel lonely — we all need time to ourselves occasionally — but we could also be surrounded by people yet still feel lonely. Isolation can lead to loneliness and vice versa, and people may experience both.

In the week after the clocks went back, 8% of adults — 4.2 million — reported feeling 'always or often lonely', up from 5% or 2.6 million before coronavirus, according to [BBC analysis of data from the Office for National Statistics](#). The winter season and Christmas have always been a particularly challenging time, but this year we have the added difficulty of ongoing restrictions.

We all have a legitimate need to belong that should not be ignored or taken lightly. There is substantial evidence highlighted by the [Campaign to End Loneliness](#) of the serious impact loneliness can have on our health and wellbeing, including a significant 26% increased risk of premature death.

How can employers help?

Maintaining quality social connections is crucial for our wellbeing, and for many, the workplace might be their only source of interaction. Numerous surveys have shown how much we have been missing our colleagues over the last few months. And as working from home becomes a longer-term feature of many people's lives, feelings of disconnection could be at risk of increasing.

Organisations have a critical role in supporting employees' social wellbeing to develop positive and meaningful relationships at work, and to build a sense of belonging where both individuals and the business can flourish.

Here are some starting points.

Raise awareness of loneliness

Talk openly and recognise the shared responsibility for positive wellbeing between employers, managers and individuals — take a look at our [framework for positive mental health at work](#).

Agree ways to keep in touch

Relying on emails alone are unlikely to be enough to prevent feelings of loneliness and isolation. If people are working from home, managers will need to work that bit harder to spot signs and symptoms. At the same time, be mindful of 'Zoom fatigue' and overloading employees with too many communication tools.

Do not let previous successes slide

We were all quick to arrange virtual catch-ups initially, but reports suggest that these have been trailing off due to increasing work demands. Discuss ideas with employees for social activities, make time for them and make sure everyone feels included, no matter where they are working.

Help new starters settle in

Starting a new job can be a daunting experience, particularly if the process is being carried out remotely. Putting together short welcome messages from team members and management can help, as well as setting up appointments to meet colleagues virtually.

Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach

Many organisations are thinking about making homeworking permanent post-pandemic, but keep in mind that this might not suit everyone. Talk and listen to employees, involving representatives where you have them, to find ways of working that suit both the individual and the business.

If you're in the workplace, think carefully about the layout

Interactions will of course look different with social distancing in place, but that does not mean we cannot have them. A [blog by The Conversation](#) suggests that ease of access and making movement easier can partly compensate for distance.

The crisis presents us with the opportunity to normalise the conversation around loneliness. If we don't, we risk another pandemic on our hands, and a hidden one at that.

See [Acas's new guidance on working from home during coronavirus](#), including how to keep in touch and look after your health and wellbeing.