

# LONELINESS AND WORK

## BUILDING EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS

Now more than ever, we are connected virtually on a global scale, but feelings of loneliness within society were and continue to be an important issue. Even before the era of required social isolation, loneliness was gathering increased attention, and with good reason. The pandemic and resulting social distancing practices are expected to only escalate the problem further.<sup>1</sup> Yet with this comes an opportunity for employers to rise to the challenge of nurturing meaningful employee connections, despite the restrictions.

### Defining loneliness

The terms loneliness and social isolation are often used interchangeably, although there is a difference. Loneliness is defined as a distressing emotion caused by the perception that emotional needs are not being met by the number of, and specifically the quality of, connections and social relationships. Social isolation, on the other hand, is the measurable shortage of an individual's social connections. It can be quantified in terms of social network size, scope, or contact frequency.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Lustig confirmed the personal aspect of the emotion: **“You can be in a room full of people and still be lonely. Or you can be by yourself and be perfectly happy with your solitude.”**



### The age paradox

When people think about the “lonely” in society, many tend to assume older people are those most affected. Indeed this demographic is more likely to be subject to conditions that would potentially increase loneliness: living alone; a greater likelihood of having lost their spouse and other loved ones, and generally being less technologically connected. Yet older people actually report feeling the least lonely. Loneliness and isolation are in fact incrementally greater in younger people. Generation Z (age 18-22 years) are the loneliest demographic; and people reportedly get progressively less lonely as they age.<sup>3-6</sup>

### Wellbeing Insights Forum

The quarterly event organised by the Wellbeing team brings together Cigna's Medical Directors from different global regions to look at the latest research around current health topics. **Dr. Stuart Lustig**, National Medical Executive for Behavioral Health, recently joined the Forum as an expert speaker to present on loneliness and share with attendees the results of Cigna's **2018 U.S. Loneliness Index** and **2020 Loneliness in the Workplace**. Fellow co-author **Dr. Doug Nemecek**, Chief Medical Officer, also joined the Forum, as a guest attendee.

## Why loneliness matters to employers

Dr. Lustig summarised a key finding of the Cigna research: “There’s a very robust finding that there is a decrease in loneliness as age increases.” Therefore, it is actually people of working age who report feeling most lonely. Indeed, Cigna research has also found that over 60% of employees stated that they feel lonely.<sup>4</sup>

***Lonely workers say they are less engaged and less productive, and report lower retention rates.***

## Loneliness is bad for business

Cigna research on Loneliness and the Workplace 2020 discovered that loneliness amongst employees is actually very bad for business. Lonely workers say they are less engaged and less productive, and report lower retention rates. They are twice as likely to miss a day of work due to illness or family commitments, and five times more likely to miss work due to stress. When asked about quality of work, 12% of lonely workers said they believe their work is lower quality than it should be compared to just 4% of non-lonely workers. Furthermore, it was found that loneliness may also result in attrition issues; lonely workers say they think about quitting their job more than twice as often as non-lonely workers.<sup>4</sup> As Dr. Lustig commented “**People tell us in this survey that if they’re lonely they tend to miss more days of work per year, and there’s a real dollar cost to that. It matters to the organisation if people are missing work, and it certainly has an impact on productivity too.**”

## Impact of COVID-19 employee protection measures

New procedures in the workplace such as social distancing, long-term working from home, and restrictions on socialising are vital to limit the risk of further outbreaks of COVID-19. Yet the enforced estrangement, by its very nature, damages many of the previous workplace rituals that created the fabric of social connections amongst employees. Dr. Lustig emphasised some of these issues, commenting: “**In COVID times, we are dealing with other things. Social distancing being a big one, particularly for people living alone, who are already isolated, are working remotely, who don’t get the chance to out and interact.**” Loneliness is often thought about in terms of separation from family and loved ones, yet employees often spend more time with their colleagues than anyone else. Changes to the workplace can therefore have a significant effect on an individual’s support network, and consequently their wellbeing.



## Loneliness is bad for health

There is a growing body of evidence that having a lack of social connections has a negative impact on health. It is not surprising to find that loneliness is associated with inferior mental health outcomes.<sup>7</sup> In the UK, people living on their own report lower levels of happiness and higher levels of anxiety than those living with a partner.<sup>8</sup>

***Physical conditions that can be exacerbated by loneliness include heart disease, stroke, and dementia.<sup>7,11</sup>***

Loneliness is also cited as a significant factor in depression.<sup>9</sup>

More unexpectedly, the risk to mortality that loneliness can bring is similar to the risks associated with other known factors; such as obesity, smoking, or physical inactivity, which currently garner greater attention and extensive health resources.<sup>10</sup> Physical conditions that can be exacerbated by loneliness include heart disease, stroke, and dementia.<sup>7,11</sup> The ways in which loneliness can affect health are multifaceted, and are thought to be a combination of physiological and behavioural impacts.<sup>12</sup>

## Lack of “social buffering”

It has been suggested that social support can create a “social buffering” that can limit the effects of stress on health. Loneliness can have the opposite effect of “social aggravating”, thereby worsening the physiological impact of stress.<sup>13</sup>

## Effect on behaviour

Feeling lonely has been associated with an increased incidence of unhealthy behaviours such as low fruit and vegetable intake, smoking, and being physically inactive.<sup>14</sup> A recent study of heart failure patients found that lonely people were less likely to follow therapeutic recommendations, such as taking exercise.<sup>15</sup> There is also a link between loneliness and poor sleep quality and insomnia.<sup>16</sup> Over time, impaired sleep increases the risk of developing serious medical conditions, such as obesity, heart disease and diabetes, and can even shorten life expectancy.<sup>17</sup>

## Biochemical pathways

Research has not yet identified all the physiological pathways affected by loneliness, although possible mechanisms for the increased risk of ill health do include the disruption of the regulation of stress-related hormones, such as cortisol.<sup>18</sup> Designed to help the body deal with immediate stressors, cortisol can increase heart rate, blood pressure,

and blood glucose, while shutting down other functions. High cortisol levels can be linked to anxiety and depression.<sup>19</sup> Another hormone that may be affected by loneliness is oxytocin.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes known as the 'love hormone' due to its involvement in attachment and social functioning, oxytocin also has a role in metabolic regulation and feeding behaviours.<sup>20</sup> Dr. Nemecek highlighted the significance of touch in human connections, **"We're social distancing now, and it impacts our ability to actually be in the same room as people. And not just seeing – but also touching people – is important. The importance that handshakes have played over the years; and how giving your friend a hug when you see them has an incredible emotional connection."**

***Following a strategy to reduce loneliness could help to foster meaningful connections despite coronavirus-related restrictions.***

## What can an employer do to reduce loneliness?

To combat loneliness in the workplace, an organisation should make employee connections a priority. As Dr. Nemecek summarised, **"You have to be aware of loneliness as an employer, and leverage what you are already doing. Help build connections and help people build relationships. As you make business decisions, like making people remote, be thoughtful about what you're going to do to make sure they still have opportunities to be connected."** Following a strategy to reduce loneliness could help to foster meaningful connections despite coronavirus-related restrictions:

### 1. Assess the situation and analyse who may be lonely

Remote workers, single parents, those in lower socioeconomic groups, and gig economy workers in particular are more likely to be lonely.<sup>4,6</sup>

### 2. Identify aspects of company culture that may be making loneliness worse

How are employees using technology? Those who use phone, video calls, and instant messaging more or less than they would like to may be lonelier.<sup>4</sup> Consulting with teams could reveal preferred patterns of technology use.

### 3. Prioritise social connections, at all levels

Loneliness is most prevalent at the senior executive and entry levels.<sup>4</sup> Adults are incrementally lonelier the younger they are.<sup>3-6</sup> This may be partially related with how long they have been at the company.

### 4. Facilitate opportunities for people to get to know each other better

Explore "buddy systems", sports teams and other occasions for people to get together. Helping colleagues find common interests, experiences, and goals can foster meaningful connections. If space for social distancing allows, coffee breaks and lunch gatherings could be organised, or alternatives such as virtual quizzes may be an option.

### 5. Encourage a healthy work and wellness balance

Those who reported working, sleeping, and exercising the right amount were also less lonely.<sup>4</sup> Benefits such as discounted gym membership and office fruit baskets could help to endorse a culture of wellbeing and healthy work-life balance, which can be beneficial for employee productivity.



## Conclusion

It's clear that loneliness is a concern for the employer, especially during these times of social restrictions. Not only does loneliness have a negative effect on employee health, it is also associated with an impact on absence rates and quality of work. The consequences include a less healthy workforce, and ultimately an adverse effect on the bottom line. To negate this, organisations can benefit from truly appreciating the value of social connections; not just as a "soft" benefit but as an essential part of a productive workplace.

***Not only does loneliness have a negative effect on employee health, it is also associated with an impact on absence rates and quality of work.***



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