



Combating The Workplace Loneliness Epidemic: Research Highlights

What Is Loneliness and Why Does it Matter?

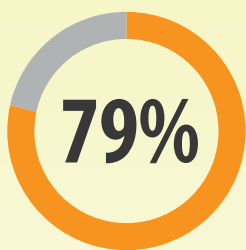
Climbing rates of loneliness and social isolation have created an urgent public health concern, [according to the U.S. Surgeon General](#). Why has chronic loneliness set off alarms? It’s because loneliness can predict and exacerbate a range of mental health conditions, like:

- Social anxiety
- Depression, and
- Suicidal ideation and suicidal action

DEFINING LONELINESS

Loneliness is a distressing feeling of dissatisfaction with our social connectedness, often felt as sadness, shame, self-doubt, or exclusion.

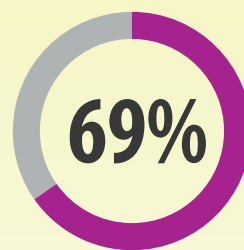
The Loneliness Epidemic Has Spilled Over Into Workplaces



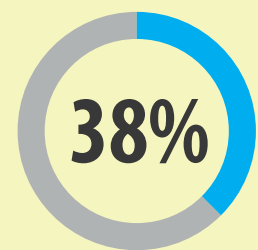
Workers say their job makes them feel isolated (Burleigh, 2024).



Employees say they experienced loneliness “a lot” the prior day (Pendel, 2024).



Employees say they’re unsatisfied with social connections at work (Brower, 2024)



Believe someone at work cares about them (Brower, 2024).



DEFINING WORKPLACE LONELINESS

Distress caused by not having affiliation needs met *at work*. Sources and outcomes of loneliness are tied to the workplace.



Feeling Lonely Among Others

- Loneliness is different from social isolation or aloneness. In fact, loneliness has almost no correlation with actual social contact.
- People can be alone without feeling lonely. And people can feel the loneliest while among others when they feel excluded or left out.

The Distorted Lense of Loneliness Breeds More Loneliness

- Feeling lonely is a very common, normal human experience that functions like a psychological alarm. Typically, people respond to it adaptively by seeking to make (or repair) meaningful social contacts.
- But when people are unable to satisfy their affiliation needs and chronic loneliness sets in, it acts like a cracked filter that distorts perceptions of the social world.
- Chronically lonely people often engage in self-protective behaviors that push others away. They get stuck in a self-fulfilling prophecy that reinforces their loneliness.



SYMPTOMS OF *CHRONIC LONELINESS*

- Hypervigilance to social threat and rejection
- Trouble making friends
- Avoid taking part in groups
- Lower empathy due to preoccupation with themselves
- Respond more slowly to conversation partners
- Ask fewer questions
- Difficulty being friendly
- React hostilely to others' efforts to socially connect
- Increasingly unapproachable

Factors Affecting Workplace Loneliness

- There's no single cause of workplace loneliness. A sampling of factors that can amplify or curb workplace loneliness risk are listed below.

Factors That Amplify and Curb Workplace Loneliness Risk

	CONTRIBUTOR	BUFFER
Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tendency toward negative thoughts and emotions • Sensitivity to rejection • Materialism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-compassion • Psychological capital • Tendency toward positive thoughts and emotions • Approachability • Gratitude • Emotion regulation skills
Job Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work stress • Job/time demands • Work-nonwork conflict • Job dissatisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomy/control
Peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incivility • Interpersonal conflict • Bullying • Ostracism • Social undermining 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional and instrumental support
Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor relationship quality • Poor communication • Lack of input or feedback about difficult work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-quality leader-follower relationships • Recognizing and valuing strengths and contributions
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitive culture • Emotional culture of anger • Unfairness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional culture of care • Collaborative culture • Culture of recognition and gratitude • Psychological safety

The Effects of Workplace Loneliness Can Be Damaging

- Chronic workplace loneliness can trigger a downward spiral in employees' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that affects their well-being and functioning at work.

Effects of Workplace Loneliness

LOWER	HIGHER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological well-being • Job performance • Engagement • Helping behaviors • Job satisfaction • Organizational commitment • Worker-manager relationship quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depression symptoms • Anxiety symptoms • Job stress • Burnout • Insomnia • Alcohol use • Turnover intent

Combatting Workplace Loneliness With Belonging

- Workplace loneliness is nearly the exact flip-side of workplace belonging, which flows from feeling accepted, included, respected in, and contributing at work.
- Because feeling a sense of belonging is a basic human need, feeling invisible or disrespected by individuals and groups that matter to us can damage self-worth and trigger loneliness.
- So, building belonging can combat the damaging effects of chronic loneliness.

**A CENTRAL SOURCE OF
WORKPLACE LONELINESS:
LACK OF BELONGING**

**Feeling unseen, unheard,
insignificant, and not like an
important member of the group**

Combatting Workplace Loneliness With Everyday Kindness

- Everyday acts of kindness are an accessible way for everyone to contribute to boosting belonging and curbing loneliness at work.
- In a workplace loneliness study, nonlonely employees often described meaningful acts of kindness by bosses and colleagues. Examples included:
 - Receiving unsolicited help with a promotion application,
 - Remembering birthdays,
 - Attending a family member’s funeral, and
 - Support during a move to a new city.
- To develop relationships from which such kind acts flow naturally, employees in the study said they liked
 - Communal meals,
 - Happy hours, and
 - Carving out time in meetings for personal connection.
- By contrast, genuine interactions are thwarted when
 - Workload is high,
 - Meetings are discouraged, and
 - Online interactions focus only on work.



How To Ease Lonely Colleagues' Social Anxiety About Socializing

- Because loneliness inhibits lonelier colleagues' motivation and skills to connect, efforts to reduce workplace loneliness require a lot of commitment and follow up. It's not enough to just bring lonelier people together with others.
- For example, persuading chronically lonely people to join social activities can be a challenge. They often fear they won't be truly welcomed and accepted, so opt out. Simply forcing them into more social interaction can backfire if their fears are confirmed by low-quality experiences.
- Remember that it's not the *amount* of social contact but the *quality* of social ties that alleviate workplace loneliness. So, the focus should be on creating meaningful experiences that foster high-quality relationships and group belonging rather than just increasing interactions.

3 ESSENTIALS FOR ENGAGING SOCIALLY ANXIOUS COLLEAGUES

1. Actively, persistently, and sincerely encourage them to join without forcing them to do so.
2. Be sure to structure activities to ensure they don't feel left out and awkward once they do join.
3. Aim for *meaningful* experiences that deepen relationships and belonging.

More Practices to Reduce Workplace Loneliness

- Although the experience of loneliness and its causes are subjective and unique, scholarly literature has identified some promising approaches listed below.

Evidence-Informed Strategies to Alleviate Workplace Loneliness

FOCUSED ON THE INDIVIDUAL	FOCUSED ON THE CONTEXT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop meaningful group memberships • Cognitive-behavioral therapy skills training (to modify maladaptive perceptions about themselves and others) • Mindfulness meditation • Stress management • Self-compassion development • Social skills building • Volunteer • Make friendship goals and plans to achieve them • Cultivate gratitude 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish mentoring programs • Establish affinity groups • Develop leaders' relationship and communication skills • Encourage workplace friendships • Create opportunities for genuine connection • Embed social activities into the rhythm of work (e.g., communal lunches, team-building initiatives) • Offer cross-cultural training • Increase job autonomy and control commensurate with skill level • Promote a culture of appreciation and gratitude to effectively recognize and validate employees' contributions

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