

Is Loneliness a Health Risk In the Workplace?



Of all the health risks that HR teams are watching these days, how many are analyzing the rising levels of loneliness in the workplace? We live in the most technologically connected age in human history – with open plan offices and devices that allow us to communicate with each other in manifold ways in an instant. Yet loneliness is on the rise.

An Emerging Epidemic of Loneliness

In September 2017, Vice Admiral Vivek H. Murthy wrote a riveting cover story for Harvard Business Review titled "[Work](#)

[and the Loneliness Epidemic.](#)” Murthy, who served as the 19th Surgeon General of the United States from 2014 to 2017, argues that loneliness is one of the most pressing health risks of our time. “During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes,” he writes. “It was loneliness.”

He cites conditions such as the gig economy, the rise of telecommuting, social media, and the fact that communities are becoming increasingly geographically displaced, contributing to loneliness levels doubling since the 1980s. This is having a very real impact on people’s health. One [study](#) showed that people with stronger social relationships had a 50 percent increased likelihood of a long life than those with weaker social bonds: the researchers concluded that a lack of social relationships has a greater impact on shortening life spans than obesity and a lack of physical exercise.

Workplaces Can Pioneer Solutions

Murthy argues that institutions that can play an essential role in weaving back together the threads of our communities and sense of connection. It’s not just an initiative that is good for people; it’s good for business and the bottom line. “Companies in particular have the power to drive change at a societal level not only by strengthening connections among employees, partners, and clients,” he argues. “But also by serving as an innovation hub that can inspire other organizations to address loneliness.”

An engaged and strongly connected team boosts productivity. Research in 2011 by California State University and the Wharton School of Business [found](#) that a person who feels lonely at work will not just suffer themselves, but their loneliness will negatively impact the effectiveness of the wider ecosystem.

When surveying 672 employees and 114 supervisors across 143

work team units, the researchers found that “an employee’s work loneliness triggers emotional withdrawal from their organization, as reflected their increased surface acting and reduced affective commitment. The results also show that co-workers can recognize this loneliness and see it hindering team member effectiveness.”

Their conclusion is that management “should not treat work loneliness as a private problem that needs to be individually resolved by employees who experience this emotion; but rather should consider it as an organizational problem that needs to be addressed both for the employees’ sake and that of the organization.”

How to Address Loneliness in the Workplace

There are many ways you can start to build more social connection into the workplace. Here are a few:

- **Build Trust:** Make sure that your leadership team is modeling the kind of relationship-building that you want to see happen throughout the organization. As Murphy writes in HBR, “Having senior members of an organization invest in building strong connections with other team members can set a powerful example, especially when leaders are willing to demonstrate that vulnerability can be a source of strength, not weakness.”
- **Encourage Diverse Friendships Across Departments:** The British job site Totaljobs did research into [“work spouses”](#), a phenomenon where two people will form very close relationships with each other at work. While these friendships are very healthy, there is one drawback: 23 percent of people said they would consider quitting if their “spouse” left. Companies can offset the isolation people may feel if their work buddy leaves, by helping people build bonds across departments. Building more

friendships into the fabric of the organization will make it more resilient. It'll also make it more innovative. O.C. Tanner showed that [72 percent of great work projects](#) involved people talking to people outside their inner circle.

- **Encourage Conversations:** With all the efficiencies of modern life, many of us have lost touch with the [simple art of having a conversation](#). Weave genuine conversations back into the workplace by setting up regular lunches or social gatherings where people can connect in an intentional way. Even things like [adding five minutes of personal talk](#) into the start of a conference call can make an enormous difference for remote workers. These small touches go a long way in making someone feel included and part of the team – and that feeling of inclusion is good for everyone.