LONELINESS

Overcoming workplace loneliness during COVID-19 and beyond with Dr. Doug Nemecek and Dr. Stuart Lustig

It is no surprise that recent lockdown and social isolation measures have led to loneliness.[1] We have pressed pause on a constantly connected world, in which we could move about, travel quickly and easily, and socialise freely. Instead, over the last few months, we have found ourselves navigating various degrees of lockdowns, social distancing practices, and isolation; spending time alone, canceling previously made plans, and communicating virtually.

Loneliness was an important topic long before coronavirus came onto the scene. In 2018, a study of over 20,000 individuals across the US found that the majority of them felt lonely.[2] Meanwhile in the United Kingdom, almost a quarter of respondents (23%) reported loneliness either "often" or "always".[3]

Dr. Stuart Lustig, National Medical Executive for Behavioral Health and co-author of the Cigna 2018 Loneliness Index, was an expert guest speaker at the recent Wellbeing Insights Forum. He gave attendees some insight into the nuances of loneliness: "You can be in a room full of people and still be lonely, or you can be by yourself and be lonely," he explained. "Or, you can be by yourself and be perfectly happy with your solitude."

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"There's definitely a personalization to this," agreed Dr. Doug Nemecek, Chief Medical Officer and co-author of the 2018 Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index, who was also in attendance at the event. "Stuart talked about defining stress and loneliness as this delta that we have between what we really have and what we think we need. Some of us need to have 100 close friends, while others are content to have three or five really good friends or neighbours who we talk to or count on all the time. I do think there is some individual impact on when we may potentially feel lonely and notice that disconnect."

The social distancing and isolation measures implemented as a response to the COVID-19 outbreak have understandably affected people in various ways. In addition to pre-existing loneliness levels, living situations, employment conditions, and outlook of individuals have all played a part. A recent study of adults undergoing lockdown in Spain found that being female and in a lower age bracket, spending more time hearing COVID-19 news updates, and having less contact with family members also had an impact on loneliness levels. Inferior sleep quality, poorer positive emotions, and reduced ability to entertain oneself contributed as well.[4]

Loneliness has been identified as a risk factor for chronic stress, depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disorders, obesity, and autoimmune problems, among others.[1] In a work setting, it has been found to be connected to lower productivity, higher absence rates, inferior quality of work, and an increased desire to quit.[2] "We know that people who are connected with their friends and have meaningful relationships at work are more likely to stay and are less likely to be lonely." confirmed Dr. Lustig.

Where you work, how you work, your position, and how long you have worked for a company can all influence how lonely you might feel as an employee. It is generally thought that those who have worked in one place for longer are more connected; while those who telecommute are more likely to feel lonely; something that is more relevant in today's climate than ever before.

So what can companies do to support workers and help prevent them feeling lonely, during the pandemic and beyond? A healthy work-life balance, connections with colleagues, and a sense of accomplishment can be key, depending on the priorities of the individual. "For many people, you get a sense of fulfilment if you're doing work you care about, or maybe it's prestige, or intellectual enjoyment. For some people it's simply the money." Dr. Lustig explained. "There are ways to succeed at work that mitigate the impact of loneliness."

Bringing people together – through meetings, social events, and coffee breaks – may have been easier before the global pandemic broke out. Now, it's up to leadership teams and managers to be innovative; to find new ways of identifying employees who may be at risk, and to incorporate new communication channels and initiatives to encourage connection and interaction. The use of videos during calls can help create a link between colleagues, and enable employees to identify with senior members – as they see into their homes and realise that they too are balancing home and work in unexpected circumstances.

Open dialogues and conversations are also key. "Promoting work-life balance and having candid conversations with your team members about what can be expected – and it may be a little bit different now that we have more things to juggle – in a transparent way can be helpful." commented Dr. Lustig.

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It is up to leadership teams to begin the relevant conversations. "I think with the social distancing and so on, a lot has changed, and it has made it easier to raise an issue that you might not typically have talked about before." commented Dr. Nemecek. "But I think it also highlights the importance for managers to have those conversations; to ask people how they're doing. If you're talking with an employee or a team member, rather than jumping right in to talk about the project, ask them how they are, how they're feeling, what's new, and take the time to learn something about them. This helps make those connections and helps everybody feel more connected to each other, as well as ultimately to their work."

Let's make sure these aren't temporary measures that are forgotten once the pandemic is over. As Dr. Nemecek says: "Help build connections and help people build relationships. And make sure that as you make business decisions – like making employees remote – be thoughtful about what you're going to do to make sure they still have opportunities to be connected and ensure that we don't make people more isolated and lonely and less productive at the same time."

Written by: **Cigna Wellbeing**

With special thanks to:

Dr. Stuart Lustig, National Medical Executive for Behavioral Health

Dr. Doug Nemecek, Chief Medical Officer

Sources:

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