



LONELINESS

AN E-BOOK BY
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CONTEXT

“For our health and our work, it is imperative that we address the loneliness epidemic quickly.”

- DR. VIVEK H. MURTHY, FORMER US SURGEON GENERAL



What are the Effects of Loneliness?

The worrying rise in those experiencing loneliness is causing alarm, particularly as the deleterious effects of loneliness on our mental, emotional, and physical health are becoming more fully understood. These negative impacts, for example, include:

- » Loneliness, living alone, and poor social connections are as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.
- » Loneliness is worse for you than obesity.
- » Lonely people are more likely to suffer from dementia, heart disease and depression.
- » Loneliness may increase your risk of death by 29%.



What is Loneliness?

Loneliness may be defined as the subjective feeling that you lack meaningful relationships or a solid support system. It can be distinguished from being alone, which isn't necessarily unwelcome for us, depending upon the context. Also, loneliness is not necessarily caused by isolation or exclusion. However, while precise, in some ways these definitions and distinctions don't aid the general practitioner or layperson seeking to address loneliness. In that sense, we might find it helpful to consider that loneliness is an emotional state of feeling apart from others.

WHY NOW?



Loneliness Historically

As long as humans have formed communities and societies, we have also encountered loneliness. It has been talked about in other eras, although the language and cultural context may not align with what we encounter today. Professor Amelia S. Worsley at Amherst has written about this and suggests that in the 16th and 17th Centuries loneliness related more to spatial concepts, being away from other people and civilization and instead in the wilderness. Worsley arrestingly observes that modern loneliness has moved inwards and that “*the wilderness is now inside of us.*”



Modern Trends

Modernity manifests a different kind of spatial concept wrought through technology. We struggle with this at a human level. How we connect as people and cohere as societies has not kept pace with the capabilities afforded by technology. It has fulfilled its promise to enable connectivity, but has not delivered on its promise to amplify connection at a meaningfully human level.

We face the pressure to be authentic and empowered, yet most of us are unable to cope with the demands that such perfection requires all the while trying to give the appearance of perfection. Then there are the contemporary forces – politics, mainstream and social media, socio-economic inequality, racism, bias, and so on – that are widening rifts between communities.

Working and the workplace, too, have transformed. Not only are employees available 24/7, but remote or distant working structures diminish our social relationships. The gig economy also has mitigated the depth and duration of our work-based social connection

More positively, we are de-stigmatizing conversations relating to our mental health and wellbeing, which is a welcome shift in our cultural discourse.

BUSINESS & HR

“... if you look at the workplace, you’ll also find [loneliness is] associated with reductions in task performance. It limits creativity. It impairs other aspects of executive function, such as decision-making.”

- DR. VIVEK H. MURTHY, FORMER US SURGEON GENERAL



Why Should Business Be Concerned About Loneliness?

The experience of loneliness and the consequent effects are not bounded by our private, public, or professional roles and identities, wherever it is we feel most lonely. Our quality of life is diminished broadly, hindering our ability to perform or contribute. Besides the ethical imperative to tend to the wellbeing of its employees, every business has a vested interest in enabling their people to fully show up in all their potential. A failure to address loneliness may lead to dysfunctional teams, silos, mediocre creativity, diminished productivity, high turnover and low engagement.



What Role for HR?

Human resources professionals are at the forefront of cultivating talent, nurturing a culture of high performance in a meaningful environment. These are workplaces characterized by high engagement and wellbeing.

Moreover, loneliness can affect anyone, whether a junior new hire or the CEO. HR professionals are well positioned to identify loneliness and to support efforts to alleviate it.

IDENTIFYING LONELINESS



Start at the Top

Check in with your CEO and senior executives. A 2012 study found over half of CEOs reported feeling lovely in their role. The benefit of beginning at the top in tackling loneliness is that there may be more focused resources for HR to utilize and it opens the door to a broader de-stigmatizing conversation about loneliness across the organization.



Measurement Tools

Most organizations do not have a specific tool or approach for evaluating loneliness, although engagement surveys may offer initial insights. Gallup's Q12 Employee Engagement Survey contains the question: "Do you have a best friend at work?" Gallup asserts that this question has proven to be the wording best able to discriminate between groups in which friendships are sufficiently supportive and those that have only surface relationships that are unable to withstand adversity.

It should be remembered, of course, that measuring isn't curing. Measuring is just data, not analysis or wisdom, nor a plan to alleviate the causes of loneliness and its effects.



Loneliness Surveys

Including loneliness questions or statements in an organization's current engagement assessments may offer a way to benchmark organizational loneliness. With expert guidance, customized questions or statements might be sourced from existing loneliness surveys such as the UCLA Loneliness Scale. This 20 question survey was developed in the 1970s and revised in the 1990s. A short form three question scale was developed in 2004.

The UK's Campaign to End Loneliness Measurement Tool contains three statements. Although primarily aimed at older citizens, advantages include its ease of use, brevity, and statements framed in positive language. Scored on a five-point scale the statements are:

1. I am content with my friendships and relationships
2. I have enough people I feel comfortable asking for help at any time
3. My relationships are as satisfying as I would want them to be

WHAT CAN HR DO?

“What's striking about the workplace is people spend a significant amount of their time there... your place of employment can sometimes be your primary social circle. This is why the workplace is so important.”

- DR. VIVEK H. MURTHY, FORMER US SURGEON GENERAL



Five Pathways to Tackle Loneliness

Without prescribing what might be the best strategy or appropriate set of tactics to identify and address loneliness in your organization, the following five pathways offer HR leaders direction on ways forward.

1 | ENGAGE CEOS AND LEADERS

As mentioned above, candid conversations with your CEO and senior leaders is a good place to explore. Aside from the honest discussion necessary, tactics may include an executive coach or, perhaps better, a life coach. Also, a formally structured or informal group of external like-situated peers to act as a sounding board may be beneficial.

2 | CULTIVATE CONVERSATIONAL CONNECTION

Authentic conversation is an art that we all have the capacity for encounter others and to be encountered. This is not the same as mandated “fun” or forced socialization. Rather, it is a culture where the key principles and practices of conversation are modeled and encouraged. These principles include curiosity, chance, empathy, silence, and courage. Embedding them in the organization’s norms and daily practices is an essential cultural factor for strong, connected relationships among staff.

3 | INSTITUTE PRACTICES OF CONNECTION

As a complement to a culture that embodies conversational connection are programs, systems and practices that support people building meaningful relationships. HR can develop these kinds of support practices. For those that are chronically lonely, a perverse outcome is a heightened anxiety in social situations that makes connecting with others even harder. Tactics that may help are buddy programs and mentoring opportunities. Being mindful of virtual or remote engagement, HR might encourage more face-to-face interactions whenever possible and train managers on developing these practices among their teams.

4 | FIND PROJECTS WITH MEANING

Involvement in endeavors that have a bigger meaning beyond ourselves, that align with a more human and aspirational values, has been shown to alleviate loneliness. In your organization, what is the vision or the “Why?” behind which your employees can rally? How might HR invite people, especially the lonely ones, to see themselves in your organization’s vision? Moreover, in what way might HR uncover the communal hopes of employees regardless of alignment with the organization’s mission? One example are those organizations that allow staff to direct the philanthropic focus or activity of the organization or permit 10% time that people can dedicate to an initiative not directly within their work responsibility.

5 | SUPPORT VOLUNTEERING AND CARING FOR OTHERS

Aligned to projects of meaning and with similar prosocial benefits are opportunities to do something for others. Volunteering to help people around us focuses us outwardly and stimulates our own gratitude and positive feelings. Organizational policies and mechanisms that support caregiving should be as considerate and generous as possible. Other programs might include allowing teams one paid day a year to volunteer in the community with a local nonprofit, perhaps one that is aligned to organizational and staff vision and values.

Sources

The following is a non-exhaustive list of references for you to consider this topic further.

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About the Author



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Born in sight of England’s Canterbury Cathedral, Stuart has called Omaha home since 2004. Formerly a London-based lawyer and a brand consultant, he founded the conversation catalyst Squishtalks in 2010 working with companies, nonprofits, and communities to build strong human relationships.

Believing in conversation’s power to connect, in 2015 Stuart undertook the community project “a couple of 830 mile long conversations,” (<https://830nebraska.com/>) adventuring in an RV for four weeks along side roads and among small towns to talk with Nebraskans, discovering the lives, cultures and stories of people he met. Currently Stuart is engaged in “Stories from the Redline” (<https://www.u-ca.org/stories-from-the-redline>) in collaboration with The Union for Contemporary Art’s exhibition exploring the pernicious human impact of redline housing policies. He also hosts a community radio talk show and podcast, Lives (<http://livesradioshow.com/>).

In addition, Stuart cofounded the creativity agency Gilbert+Chittenden in 2017, collaborating with creativity expert Dan Gilbert using design thinking to help individuals and organizations creatively realize their best futures.

Stuart is a member of the UK’s Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development, has spoken at three TEDx events, and is a published poet.