



# Live Well, Work Well

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## OVERCOMING LONELINESS IN THE WORKPLACE

It's easy to feel left out of the loop. For many adults, loneliness is a daily struggle, but while some people might think loneliness only applies to someone's social life, it can also affect their work life, and even their coworkers and company as a whole.

### What Is Loneliness?

While the words may sound alike, loneliness and being alone are not the same thing. Loneliness is a subject that has been studied for a long time in psychological literature.

Loneliness can lead to an increased risk of heart disease, diabetes and dementia. According to the Health Resources & Services Administration, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, loneliness and social isolation can be as damaging as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

According to a study by the Harvard Business Review, lonely employees are observed by colleagues as more distant and less approachable. Those suffering from loneliness may have increased stress levels and tend to feel less committed to their organization as a whole.

So how do you go about knowing if you're suffering from loneliness, and how can you start to overcome it?

### Recognizing Loneliness

One of the first steps to solving a problem is realizing that it exists.

Signs you may be struggling with loneliness include:

- Isolating yourself and feeling disconnected from your organization
- Heavily scrutinizing others, or becoming very sensitive to others' responses toward you
- Forming negatively biased perceptions of how you're viewed by others
- Having difficulty trusting people

### Getting Out There

The hardest step to take when overcoming loneliness can often be the first one, but the rewards of reaching out to your coworkers can be invaluable.

- **Examine your environment**—First of all, don't be hard on yourself. Many work environments simply don't have a culture or atmosphere that encourages coworkers to socialize or speak with one another.
- **Start simple**—One way to take the first step is by simply greeting fellow employees every day. This opens up the possibility for coworkers to reciprocate and can even start to change your workplace's culture as a whole.



- **Join a club**—Does your company have any social clubs? Or perhaps a softball or volleyball team? Getting together with colleagues in an environment that isn't work-related can help everyone relax and be more open. If there isn't a club or team to join, see if your superiors will let you create one.

### Look Past Technology

According to industry experts, the rising problem of loneliness may be due, in part, to our increased use of technology.

- Instead of sending an email to a fellow employee, step away from your desk and pay them a visit.
- If you're working on a project with others, schedule a meeting in an office or conference room instead of hosting a conference call.
- Offer to host periodic meetings or workshops with coworkers so that everyone can share ideas and catch up on company news. These types of gatherings can help make everyone in the workplace, including yourself, feel more in the loop.

### Expand Your Network

Experts believe that loneliness has less to do with how many relationships you have and more to do with the strength of your relationships. But why not have it both ways? A strong relationship or two can help you network within your company and create more bonds.

Try to start by forming a relationship with someone who has been with your organization for a while or seems to be outgoing and social.

- This doesn't have to be someone within your department or who sits near you. For example, people involved in sales are often friendly and outgoing.
- As your relationship with this colleague grows, they can introduce you to more people around the company and may even be able to give you some tips on interacting with them.
- If you're not sure where to start with this process, you can use LinkedIn to find people

within your organization and possibly discover some shared hobbies or interests to break the ice.

### Summary

This is all easier said than done, of course, but overcoming loneliness is very much about escaping your bubble and reaching out in new directions. Take small steps and try not to get discouraged if your initial efforts aren't reciprocated.

The odds are good that you are not the only person in your department, or your company, suffering from loneliness. By greeting your colleagues in the morning, stopping by their desks or forming a club, you can help yourself stop feeling lonely while also helping others.

The old expression says that misery loves company. But, instead of trying to deal with loneliness on your own, wouldn't it be best if you could all escape it together?