

Addressing workplace loneliness



This module is designed to equip managers and team leaders with an in-depth understanding of workplace loneliness and actionable strategies to create a more inclusive and supportive work environment.

By the end of the module, you will be able to:

- Define workplace loneliness and recognise its consequences for individuals and organisations.
- Identify common causes and triggers of workplace loneliness.
- Recognise workplace loneliness in yourself and others.
- Understand the effects of loneliness on wellbeing, job satisfaction and overall performance.
- Implement practical strategies to address workplace loneliness and promote inclusivity within your organisation.

LONELINESS EXPLORED


☰ Understanding loneliness

 Loneliness at work

 Causes of workplace loneliness


 Risk factors for workplace loneliness

 Identifying workplace loneliness

 Talking about loneliness at work

 Addressing workplace loneliness


 Taking action on loneliness in your organisation


 Check your understanding

RESOURCES

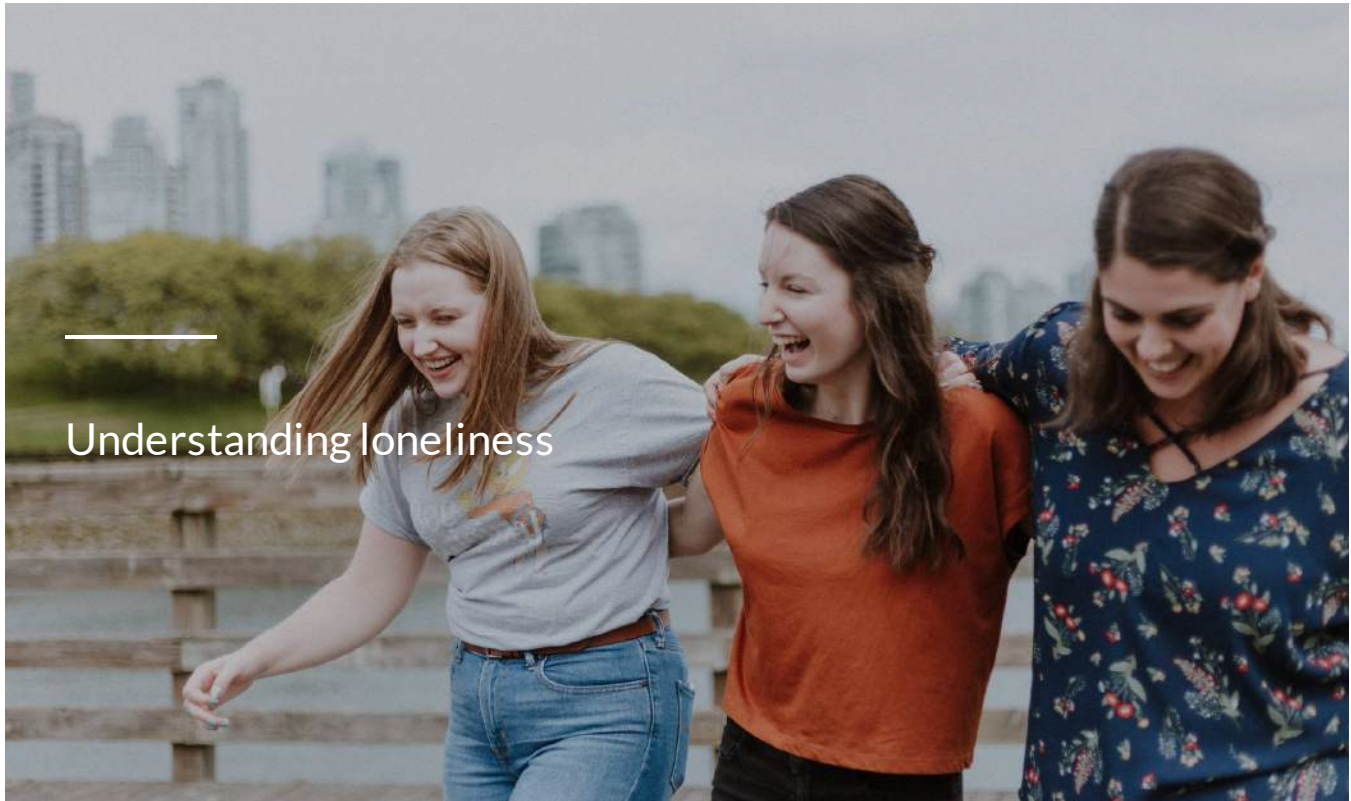
 Further reading and resources

REFLECTIONS

 Share your feedback

 Certificate of completion

Understanding Loneliness



What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a **normal human emotion** and a personal response to an **unwanted situation**.

It is not a personal failing to feel lonely, nor is it something to be embarrassed about. We can all feel lonely at any point in our lives, and the causes and experience of loneliness can vary from person to person.

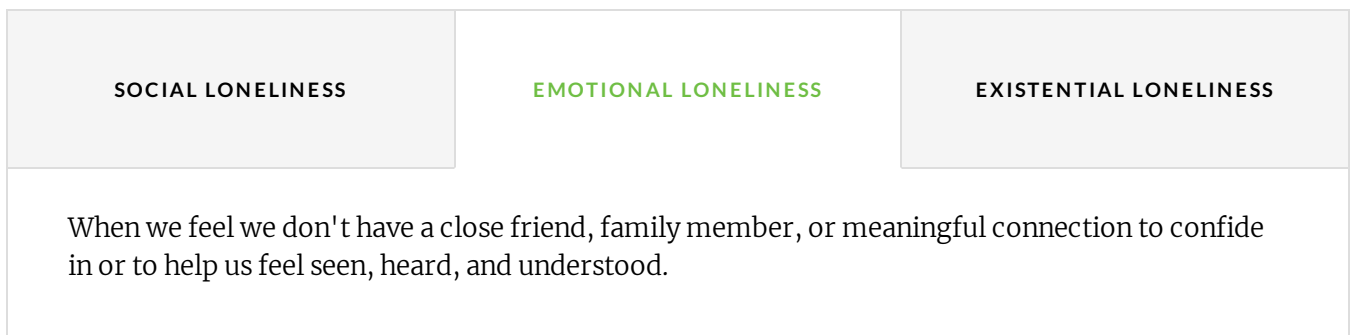
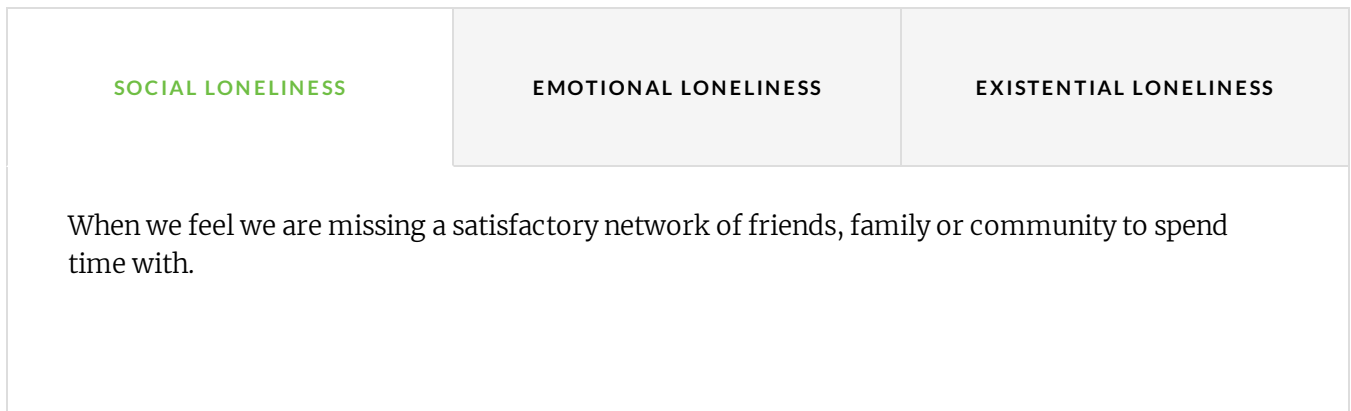
“Loneliness is a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship, which happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have, and those that we want.”

- (Perlman and Peplau, 1981)

What are the types of loneliness?

There are different types of loneliness: social, emotional, and existential.

These types of loneliness can overlap and can be experienced to different extents at different times:





SOCIAL LONELINESS	EMOTIONAL LONELINESS	EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS
When we feel entirely separate from other people, often when we experience a traumatic or life changing event, such as bereavement.		

What is chronic loneliness?

There are differences in frequency, **duration** and **intensity** of loneliness.

Loneliness may be an occasional, passing feeling that we can manage. In fact, a short-lived feeling of loneliness may helpfully motivate us to reconnect with other people.

When we feel lonely often or always, this is defined as **chronic loneliness**. This long standing nature of loneliness can inhibit our social connections and cause harm to our physical and mental health.

Our recent report, [The State of Loneliness 2023: ONS data on loneliness in Britain](#), revealed that there are now 3.83 million people who are chronically lonely:

- People under the age of 30 are the most lonely age group, with 16-29 year olds twice as likely to be chronically lonely than over 70s.
- Women are significantly more likely to be chronically lonely than men, with 7.67% of women chronically lonely and 6.33% of men chronically lonely.

- People with a physical or mental health diagnosis are over three times more likely to be lonely than people without a diagnosis.

How does loneliness affect people?

Loneliness can have negative effects on our feelings, mental health, physical health, and our social interactions and behaviour.

These effects might not be experienced all at once. They can occur to varying degrees and in varying combinations:





Feelings

Loneliness can evoke distressing and negative feelings, such as fear, sadness, emptiness, and helplessness.

We can also feel abandoned and not understood by others.



Behaviour

Loneliness can affect the way we interact with other people. For example, we may withdraw from others and avoid social situations, which can in turn increase our feelings of loneliness.

Daily routines and self-care can also become harder to maintain when we don't have the social support around us.

The psychological and behavioural effects of loneliness are closely linked.



Psychological

Loneliness can affect how we think and feel about ourselves and the world around us.

The psychological effects of loneliness can include a loss of self confidence and self-esteem, increased sensitivity to social rejection, and an increased risk of stress, depression and anxiety.

Although loneliness is not a mental health problem in itself, feeling lonely can affect our mental health, and having a mental health problem can increase our likelihood of experiencing loneliness.



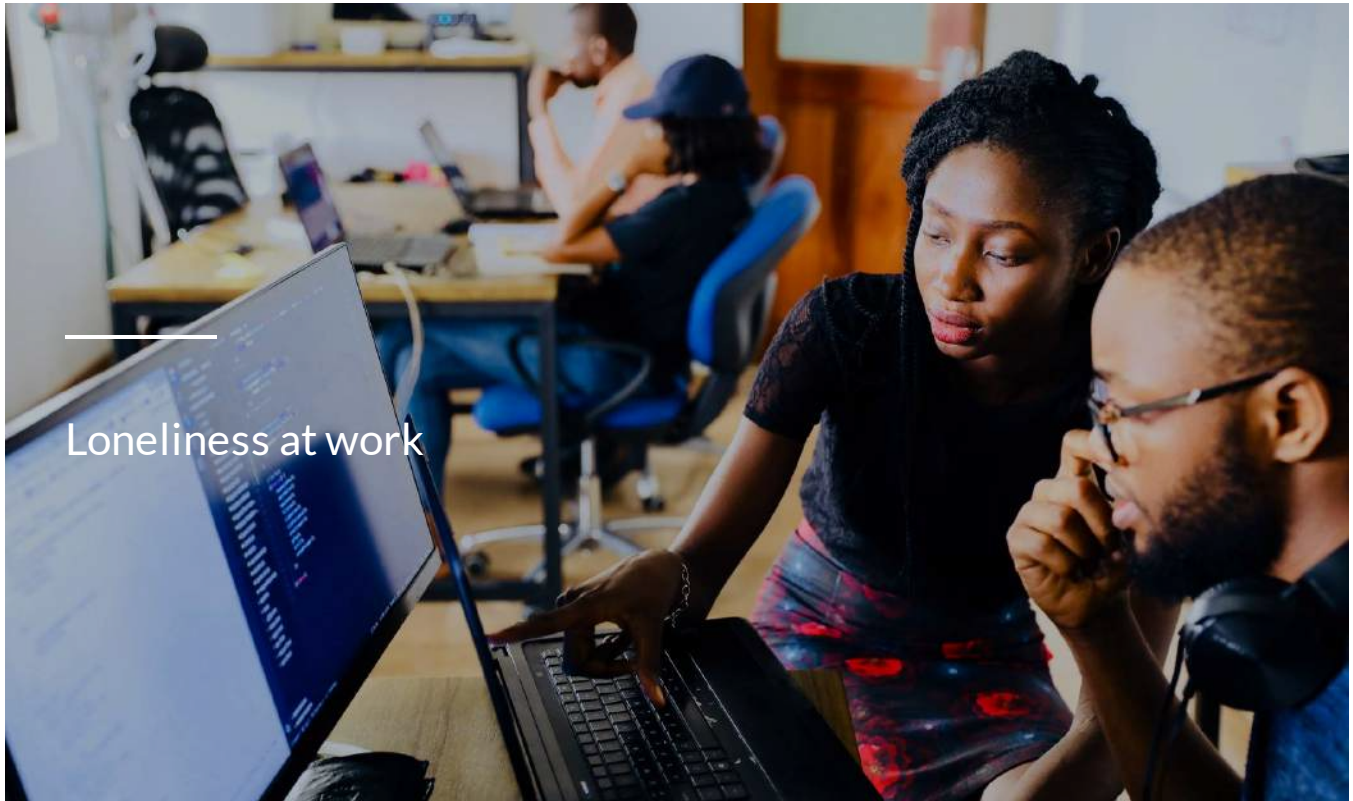
Physical health

The impact of chronic loneliness on physical health includes:

- Poor cardiovascular function, such as high blood pressure
- Increased risk of coronary heart disease
- Impaired immune system
- Decreased memory and learning
- Struggle in fighting off smaller illnesses (due to increased stress levels)

[Continue](#)

Loneliness at work



Loneliness at work

What do we mean by workplace loneliness?

Workplace loneliness is essentially how someone feels about the **quality of their relationships at work**, and the **perception** that they do not have fulfilling or meaningful connections with their colleagues.

At its core, workplace loneliness can make us feel **disconnected from our colleagues**, or feel that our **contributions are not valued**.

Why does addressing workplace loneliness matter?

Good quality and meaningful connections at work are linked with a reduced risk of loneliness and higher wellbeing, greater engagement, improved performance.

Being in work can also be a protective factor against loneliness though the connections and sense of purpose we can gain through work:

- 5% of people who are employed saying they are lonely often or always, compared with 15% of people who are unemployed.
(Community Life Survey, 2019)
- Supportive and meaningful working relationships may buffer against feelings of loneliness we may feel elsewhere in our life.
(Jansson et al. 2018)
- Staff with a positive relationship with their manager are less lonely.
(Arslan et al. 2020 | Lam & Lau 2012)

If an employee experiences workplace loneliness, it can lead to:

- Social withdrawal and appearing less approachable to their colleagues.
- Higher rates of burnout, depression and anxiety.
- Lower overall life satisfaction, work engagement and productivity.

- Greater absenteeism and staff turnover.

Not only can this be a distressing experience for employees, and affect their mental and physical health, it can also have wider knock-on effects on the organisation due to loss of productivity. Research from the [Co-Op and New Economics Foundation](#) found that loneliness at work costs employers £2.5 billion a year in the UK alone.

“The psychological pain of perceived relational deficiencies in the workplace”

- Wright and Silard, 2021

CONTINUE

Causes of workplace loneliness



What causes workplace loneliness?

Loneliness at work is a complex issue influenced by a combination of organisational, interpersonal, individual and contextual factors.

Research undertaken for the APPG on Tackling Loneliness and Connected Communities (2023) identified the following factors which can play a role in causing workplace loneliness:

Organisational culture —

Studies reveal that an organisation's culture significantly impacts workplace loneliness. Cultures that prioritise individualism, competition, and are focused on performance are associated with increased levels of loneliness.

Similarly, bullying and cultures of fear negatively impact feelings of belonging and increase loneliness.

Organisations that cultivate a positive culture and actively support positive relationships among employees tend to promote greater wellbeing and reduce loneliness.

Management and leadership styles —

The relationship between employees and their managers play a significant role in their experiences of loneliness at work. Some studies have found that employees who have high-quantity relationships with their managers, may still experience loneliness.

Simply increasing the frequency of contact with leaders doesn't guarantee a reduction of loneliness.

The qualities and leadership styles of managers can also have a significant impact on loneliness levels. Studies have shown that leaders who possess qualities such as a sense of humour, compassion and consideration for others tend to have teams with lower loneliness levels.

Relationships at work —

Even when employees have regular contact with colleagues, they can still struggle to develop meaningful and supportive relationships.

Employees who feel close to their colleagues and have a sense of support are less likely to experience loneliness.

Remote working —

Remote work spans a wide spectrum of industries and professions. Prior to and during the pandemic, numerous studies aimed to investigate the experiences of individuals engaged in remote work. Research indicates that some people were initially hesitant to work from home due to concerns about loneliness and limited social interaction.

However, for those who received robust support from their supervisors, colleagues and organisations, remote work often translated into higher job satisfaction and reduced feelings of social isolation.

Control at work —

An employee's sense of control over their work plays a significant role in their feelings of loneliness.

When individuals believe that their job doesn't align with their skills and abilities, or that they lack decision-making freedom, they are more likely to experience loneliness.

Contract type and working arrangements —

While there is limited research in this area, one study among private sector employees found that those on temporary contracts tend to experience more loneliness at work and lower job satisfaction compared to their counterparts on permanent contracts. This highlights the potential impact of job insecurity on employees' wellbeing and loneliness.

Onsite workers often report feeling closer to their colleagues, possibly due to more face-to-face interaction. However, this preference may vary among individuals and some remote workers may actually socialise more with colleagues.

No one size fits all and the key is understanding employees' preferences for social interaction and finding ways to accommodate those preferences.

Organisation and team size —

Employees in smaller organisations may report having closer personal relationships in the workplace, possibly due to the smaller team sizes and more intimate working environments. They may also feel closer to their managers.

However, these findings aren't uniform and some employees in smaller organisations may still feel that their managers are distant or unfamiliar to them.

Similarly, studies suggest that those working in teams may be more likely to report feelings of loneliness at work compared to those who mainly work alone.

The dynamics of team interactions and the quality of relationships within teams are crucial factors in determining loneliness levels.

Risk factors for workplace loneliness



Risk factors for workplace loneliness

Who is most at risk of workplace loneliness?

The research undertaken for the APPG on Tackling Loneliness and Connected Communities (2023) found that around **one in ten workers** often feel lonely at work, with around **45% of workers** experiencing workplace loneliness some of the time.

Workplace loneliness can affect us at any age or stage in our career, however the research indicated that some workers are at an **increased risk**:

- Disabled workers and those with long-term health conditions affecting their day-to-day lives are more likely to report general loneliness than those without (24% compared to 9%)
- Workers from minoritised ethnic groups are more likely to feel that they often or always have no one to talk to at work than white workers (13% compared to 9%). They also feel that their colleagues are like strangers to them (37% compared to 27%)
- Senior managers report higher levels of general loneliness. 32% of senior managers are often or always lonely, and are more likely to feel that their colleagues are like strangers.

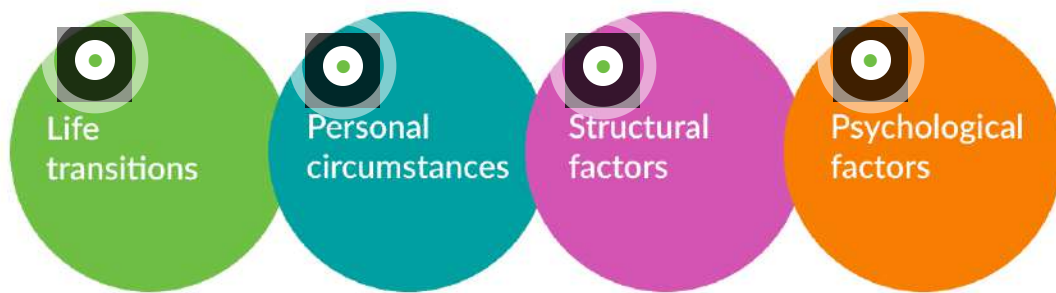
We also know that key transitions in the employee life cycle can act as a trigger for workplace loneliness given the change in ways and patterns of working.

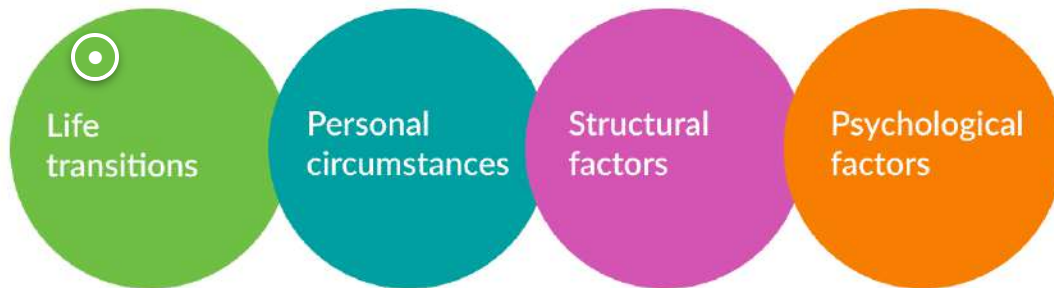
Attention and support should be provided to help mitigate and address the risk of loneliness for these colleagues:

- New starters or entry level employees.
- Employees returning from a long period of absence, such as sick leave or parental leave.
- Employees promoted to a senior management position.
- Employees approaching retirement.

What are the risk factors for loneliness more broadly?

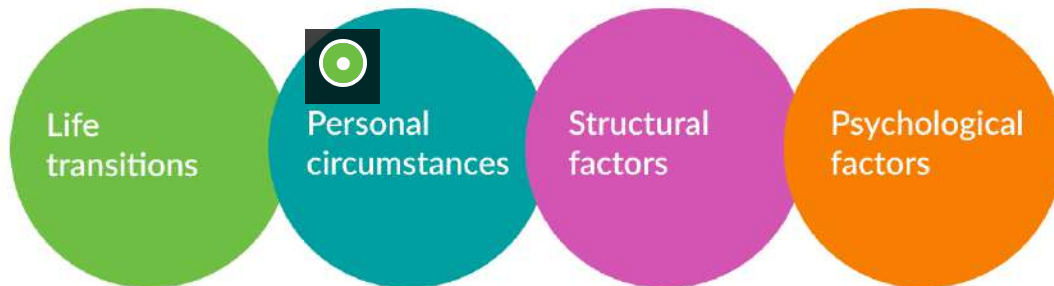
When we place the workplace loneliness figures in context with the [risk factors for loneliness](#) more broadly, it helps us to have a much deeper understanding of the drivers of loneliness.





Life transitions

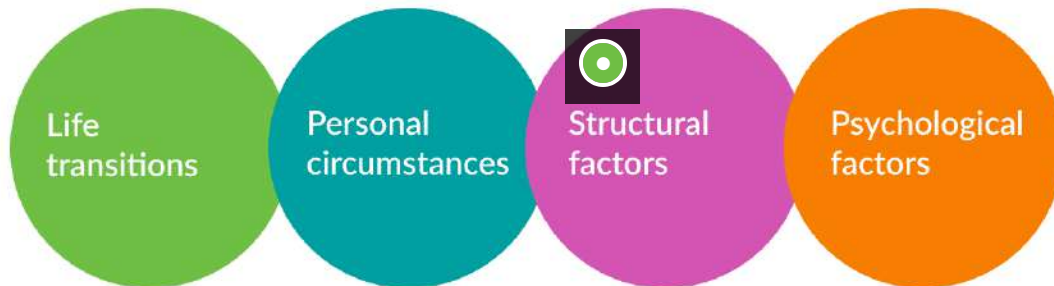
Life transitions such as moving for work or education, experiencing an illness or bereavement, or a change in family living situations can pose a significant risk for loneliness.



Personal circumstances and characteristics

There is an extensive range of individual characteristics, living situations and circumstances that can predispose people to loneliness and/or intensify feelings of loneliness when it occurs.

This can include factors such as age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, and caring responsibilities.

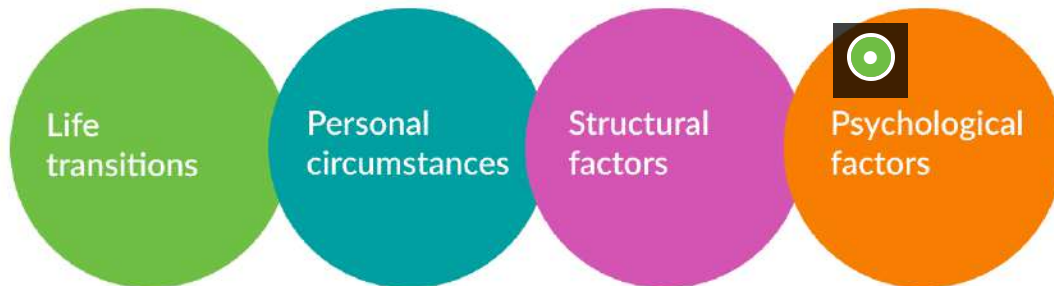


Structural factors

The environment in which we live, including economic and social contexts, can increase or intensify feelings of loneliness. This is what we mean by structural risk factors.

Structural risk factors include:

- A lack of local services, including public transport.
- Poor physical or isolating environments, such as the spatial layout of buildings and streets where we live.
- Social and cultural norms, attitudes and perceptions, which can predispose people against social connections with others. This also includes the stigma of loneliness and people perceiving it as embarrassing or somehow their own fault



Psychological factors

This describes how someone understands the reason for their loneliness and how they explain it to themselves.

People experiencing loneliness are more likely to believe the cause of their loneliness is internal (to do with themselves) rather than external (to do with the situation they are in).

This can affect confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy, making it harder for us to reach out and get the help we need to address loneliness.

CONTINUE

Identifying workplace loneliness



How can I tell if a colleague is feeling lonely?

Loneliness can be difficult to spot as feelings of loneliness are personal and subjective, and people who are experiencing loneliness often don't want to say how they are feeling out of embarrassment or fear of how they will be perceived.

The best and only way to know if someone is experiencing loneliness at work is to talk about it and bring it up sensitively with a team member as part of your regular one-to-one meetings.

We should never assume that people are lonely, but some common signs to look out for include:

- They are frequently unwell.
 - They get stuck on the negatives.
 - They are spending more time alone, or appear distant from their colleagues.
 - They are less productive at work.
-

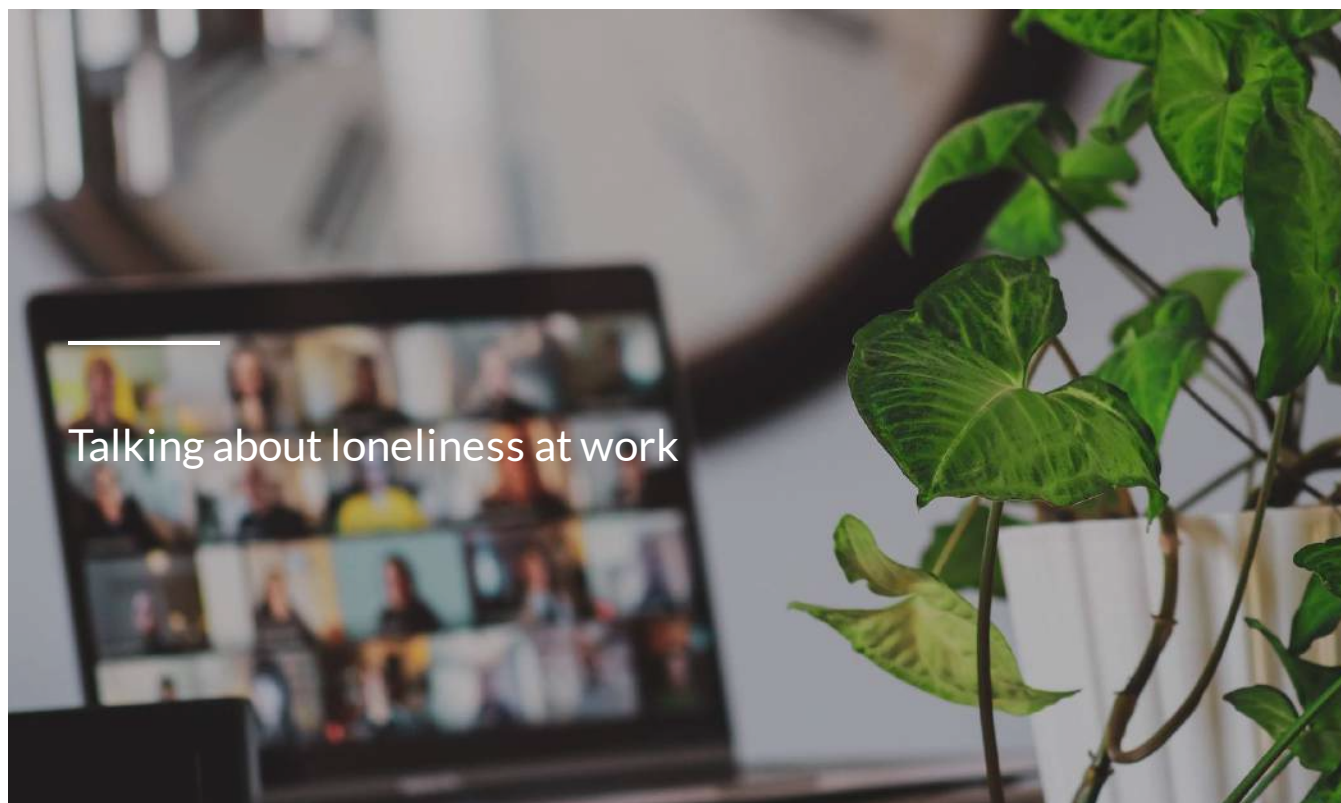
How can I measure and monitor loneliness levels across my team?

Using staff surveys to measure job quality and wellbeing in the workplace is an effective way of understanding how colleagues feel about their work relationships.

Surveys should not be used as a replacement for conversations with colleagues, but the level of anonymity can encourage people to be more open and honest about their concerns.

Surveys also allow for systematic data collection which can help you to track changes in wellbeing over time and assess the effectiveness of strategies to improve relationships and alleviate loneliness at work.

Talking about loneliness at work



Talking about loneliness at work

There is no single best way of having a conversation about loneliness, and bringing up the topic at work may feel challenging.

People or teams that you manage may also be reluctant to share with you how they are truly feeling out of embarrassment or fear that it could harm their career.

By encouraging your colleagues to talk, and reassuring them that your one-to-ones are a **safe space**, you are helping to build an **inclusive culture** where people feel comfortable to share with you how they are feeling.

This helps to create a good groundwork for ensuring the **psychological safety and wellbeing** of your team, and creating a safe space to talk about loneliness.

Conversation starters

Loneliness is not something to be embarrassed about and we want to **normalise the conversation**.

To talk with someone about their feelings of loneliness at work, you could ask a variation of the following questions and really listen to the response:

- How are you finding your role?
- How are you getting on with the rest of the team?
- Are there any areas where you feel you would benefit from more support?
- Is there anything you think could be improved about our ways of working as a team?
- I've noticed you seem a bit withdrawn / quieter in meetings / etc - how are you?

The small and friendly interactions we have on a daily basis with our colleagues can be really important. In any conversation, we can make a person feel valued, heard, empathised with, and respected, and in **taking the time to listen** to someone, we can help to alleviate loneliness.

People might be feeling lonely due to reasons happening outside of work. In this instance, work can be a really **helpful support network**.

Without being too invasive into someone's personal life, to show you are there to support someone, you could ask questions such as:

- How are you feeling?
- Is there anything we can do at work to support you / make this a little easier for you / take some of the pressure off?
- Is there someone you can talk to?

Sometimes, people might share with you that they would like to make changes to increase or improve their social relationships. You can reassure them and help them to take the first steps to reconnecting to the support they need by signposting them to support.


Approaching the conversation

The sense of anxiety we might feel when asking someone about their feelings of loneliness, and not knowing how they might respond, is a very natural response.

Some tips to help navigate these anxious feelings and approach the conversation include:

1

Keep an open mind: reframing the conversation in our minds as an everyday chat, rather than something more daunting, can help the conversation flow more easily.



2

Breathe: the calmer you are, the better equipped you'll be able to respond to what the person is telling you in a calm and professional manner.

3

Slow down and listen: be comfortable with any silences and allow people the opportunity to share what they're feeling.

4

Be empathetic and respond non-judgmentally: it can be daunting for a person to say they are feeling lonely, so acknowledge their feelings and reassure them that you are listening and hear what they are telling you.

5

Signpost: listening to someone and making them feel heard and seen is crucial. If a person is experiencing loneliness due to reasons outside of work, you are not there to 'fix' the challenges they are experiencing, but you can signpost them to support both within and outside of the organisation. If the loneliness is occurring because of work, there are further steps you can take to support the individual. We'll look at these in the next section.

6

Look after your own mental health: make sure there is someone else in your organisation you can talk with if the conversation is particularly challenging. Depending on what was disclosed to you, you may also need to follow the safeguarding policy for your workplace and follow support through more official routes.

CONTINUE

Addressing workplace loneliness



Addressing workplace loneliness

Addressing loneliness at work requires a **proactive and multifaceted approach** based on the needs of our organisation and the people working there.

Increasing the amount of in-person contact with colleagues is not enough to mitigate the risk of loneliness occurring.

This means we need to think about the support and opportunities that will foster a greater sense of belonging among colleagues, such as opportunities to work collaboratively with others and make valued contributions, or access to buddy systems and wider peer support networks.

The [Loneliness at work](#) report outlined several recommendations to address workplace loneliness:

- Help employers better understand how loneliness affects their workers and take meaningful action. This could be through increased awareness raising across the organisation about why addressing workplace loneliness matters and what to do about it.
- Address loneliness among managers and support them to build connections with and among their teams. This could involve setting up manager peer support groups or buddy systems between managers at different stages in their career.
- Support minoritised communities to feel a greater sense of belonging at work. For some organisations, this may mean promoting and delivering [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion](#) training to ensure managers understand how to take an intersectional approach to inclusion.
- Ensure home, onsite, and hybrid workers are supported to develop and maintain work relationships. This will look differently for different staff and teams, so the starting point should be to ask the people what works best for them.

These recommendations build on the 2021 [Employers and Loneliness Guidance](#) which identified five key areas for addressing loneliness in the workplace:

Culture and infrastructure —

- Embed loneliness awareness as part of a broader wellbeing strategy.
- Take organisation-wide approaches to improve job quality and wellbeing, and ask for input from colleagues
- Help to facilitate meaningful social connections at work, whether through social activities, cross-collaborative working groups, or training.
- Proactively ask employees about loneliness. This can help to gain a better understanding of how big an issue loneliness is, and also helps to open up a conversation about it, thereby challenging the stigma of loneliness.
- Establish workplace loneliness champions who are trained about workplace loneliness.

Management —

- Ensure managers are equipped with the skills and training to talk about and identify loneliness in an understanding and empathetic way.
- Ensure managers know where to signpost people for support and guidance within the organisation (such as occupational health or an Employee Assistance Programme).

People and networks —

- Set up support networks for colleagues who match those groups most at risk of loneliness, such as colleagues with caring responsibilities, or approaching retirement.
- Set up personal and professional networking opportunities for colleagues to connect, share and learn from each other.

Workplace and workplace design —

- Have a space for one-to-one interaction and group discussion.
- Ensure channels of communication and support, including for colleagues working remotely.

Role in the wider community —

- Your connection within the wider community, and how you play a role in addressing loneliness.
- Taking part in volunteering through work, thereby helping to come together whilst feeling good about giving your time.

Browse the practice examples below to see the work being done across organisations to address loneliness.

PRACTICE EXAMPLE: WILTSHIRE COUNCIL

PRACTICE EXAMPLE: KIRKLEES COUNCIL

To support the health of the workforce in Wiltshire, Public Health have published information on their workplace health webpages relating to the important topic of loneliness at work - [Spotlight: Loneliness at work - The Enterprise Network](#).

The webpage is freely available to all businesses in Wiltshire and provides a spotlight on this significant issue. The resource was developed to give both employers and employees information on the impact of loneliness at work and the benefits of investing in employee wellbeing. The

webpage provides signposting opportunities to both local and national offers of support, resources, toolkits and learning and development opportunities.

Alongside the publication of the spotlight page and to correspond with Loneliness Awareness Week, Wiltshire Council used its communication channels to promote the campaign both internally and externally. Various communications messages were distributed via the Council's social media accounts, general newsletter and via the Business Newsletter, sent to over 5,000 registered businesses in Wiltshire.

Wiltshire Council



PRACTICE EXAMPLE: WILTSHIRE COUNCIL

PRACTICE EXAMPLE: KIRKLEES COUNCIL

Within [Kirklees Council](#), how to combat loneliness and isolation is high on the wellbeing agenda. Here are examples of what is being done within the Council.

- Wellbeing Champions Network – awareness of loneliness and activities to support people.
- Banter Bus – MS Teams platform for staff working from home to interact and chat – set up to combat isolation from home working.
- Communities of interest groups e.g., Thyroid Support group – now has 45 members with feedback “now feel less alone with condition at work thanks to group”.

The Wellbeing Champions Network, supported by Employee Healthcare Unit, is open to any employee of the council to join, and champions are asked as a minimum to share health campaigns, events, and generally spread wellbeing messages within their team.

However, one champion has gone above and beyond the remit of the champions to help bring council employees together and make important connections with people and to help those who may be feeling socially isolated. One of our Wellbeing Champions has set up 5 WhatsApp groups each covering a different topic for people to connect with; WEREAD, WELISTEN, WEMOVE, FANTASYWEFOOTBALL, WEWATCH and due to the success of these groups are in the process of setting up WE-COOK. These groups are open to anyone within the council to join.

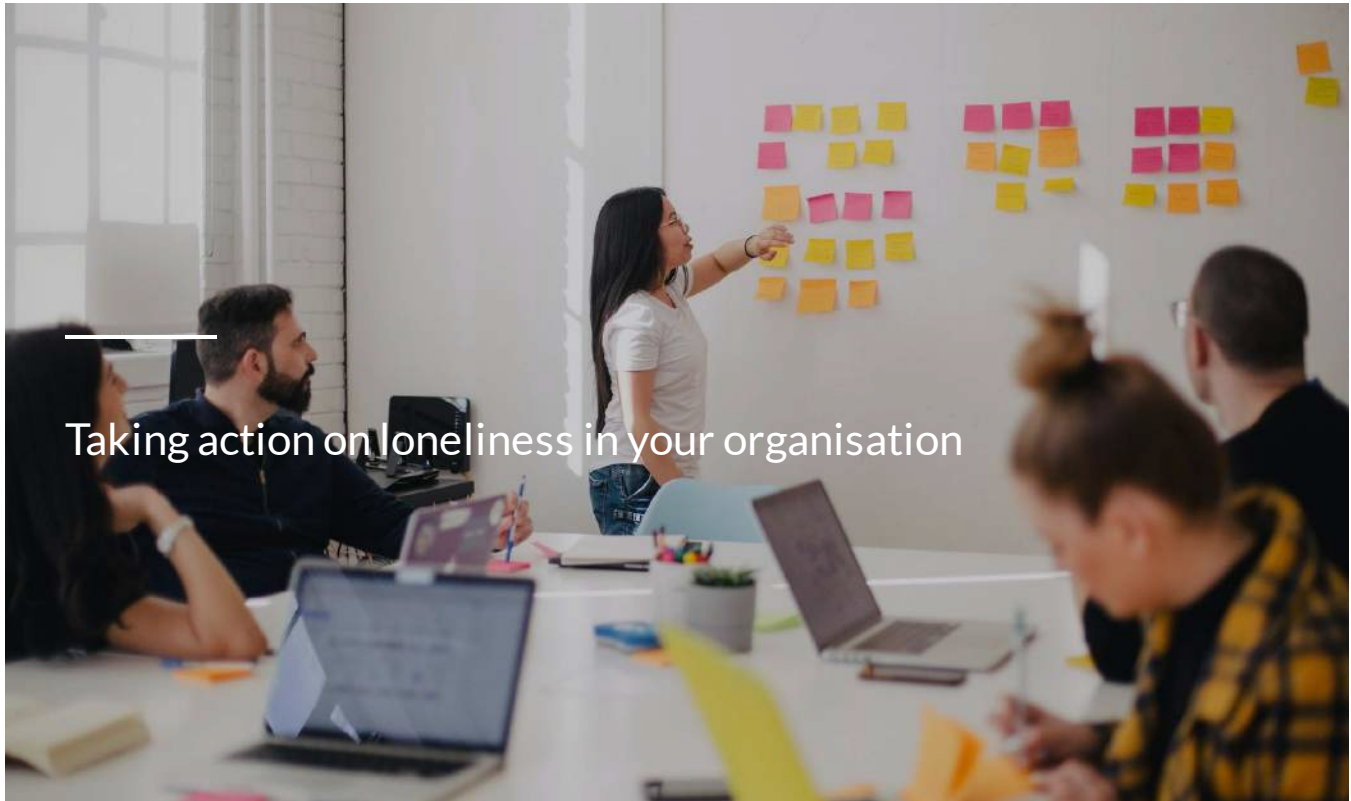
Recently an outing was arranged within the WEWATCH group to attend an open air cinema showing of Grease in the local park, and this has had some fantastic feedback. One of the members of the

WEwatch group has said how the group has meant that they have connected with colleagues and has given them the opportunity to meet new people, which had been hard for them to do previously due to working in a hybrid environment. Another member spoke about how the WEwatch group feels like a community which had brought people together to make them feel less isolated.



CONTINUE

Taking action on loneliness in your organisation



Taking action on loneliness in your organisation

Taking action on loneliness

How you address loneliness in your organisation will vary depending on the particular needs of your staff, but using the recommendations outlined in this module can help to guide you in your approach.

Download the action plan to start addressing workplace loneliness among your team. To help guide you in populating the table, think about:

- 1 What are you already doing as an organisation or team to promote connection and reduce the risk of loneliness? (eg. team meetings, working groups, employee assistance programme, resources...)
- 2 How well are you currently doing this?
- 3 Are there any gaps or areas for improvement?
- 4 What can you easily put in place? Is there something free or low cost you can do, or can you adapt existing provision?
- 5 What do people say they want?
- 6 What are the priorities?

Taking the time to talk to people in your team and finding out how they are doing and what matters to them is an important first step. In doing so, you are not only making the steps to improve relationships at work, but you are laying the foundation for future workplace loneliness initiatives that are right for your team.

We would love to hear how you get on.