

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

The Healing Effects of Social Connection in the Workplace

How Employers Can Help

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In contemporary workplaces, social connection is essential for employees to thrive at work and promote overall well-being. Connectedness is defined by the quality and quantity of interactions that individuals have with their coworkers, supervisors and peers within the work environment, at home and in the community.¹ It is a critical business issue that has the power to transform employee health, well-being, productivity and job satisfaction.

Over the past few decades, trends in the United States show that companionship and engagement with friends and family have declined, and social isolation has increased.² When the global pandemic hit in 2020, approximately half of U.S. adults reported feelings of increased loneliness after lockdown and stay-at-home orders were enforced.³ Employers faced an estimated cost of \$154 billion from lost productivity, and employees who reported feeling lonely missed 5.7 additional days from work than those who had not.⁵

Loneliness and isolation tend to be most prevalent in ethnic and racial minority groups, younger and older

adults, single parents, LGBTQ+ individuals, lower wage earners, people who live in rural areas and individuals with poor physical and mental health.¹ This is also true for those who are experiencing grief, the loss of a job, divorce, the death of a family member or other life events human resources leaders help their workers deal with regularly.

As shown in the chart below, being physically separated from each other can put people in a state of physiologic stress, which, when prolonged, could become chronic and damage physical and emotional health.⁶



In May 2024, the U.S. Surgeon General, Vice Admiral Vivek Murthy, MD, MBA, called for a whole-of-society approach to address the epidemic of loneliness and isolation.⁴ Murthy states, “Given the profound consequences of loneliness and isolation, we have an opportunity, and an obligation, to make the same investments in addressing social connection that we have made in addressing tobacco use, obesity and the addiction crisis... It will take all of us... to work together to destigmatize loneliness and change our cultural and policy response to it.”

Loneliness Prevalence and Health Effects

- **24%** of the global population – **15%** of the American population – reported feeling very or fairly lonely in 2023.
- Greater social connection is associated with **50%** lower odds of early death.
- **20%** of workers do not feel they belong at work.
- Loneliness is associated with **increased symptom severity** when sick, impacts recovery from cancer and leads to higher risk of onset of disability.
- **26%** of workers report having felt lonely or isolated - **35%** of workers in client/patient/customer services roles report feeling lonely.
- A Harvard survey conducted in 2020 found that **61%** of adults from 18 to 25 reported feeling serious loneliness, compared to **39%** across the general population.
- Loneliness has a comparable impact on health and longevity as smoking **15** cigarettes a day.



Callout Sources:

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ppar/prx030>

<https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-in-america/2023-workplace-health-well-being>

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[When the Loneliness Epidemic meets a Global Pandemic...What Happens to Work? | Business Group on Health \(businessgrouphealth.org\)](#)

[Loneliness in America: How the Pandemic Has Deepened an Epidemic of Loneliness — Making Caring Common \(harvard.edu\)](#)

Organizations can implement various strategies to cultivate and strengthen social connections among employees, such as:

Encourage Open Communication

- Foster a culture of open communication where employees feel comfortable sharing ideas, concerns and feedback with their colleagues and supervisors. Open communication channels promote transparency, trust and collaboration in the workplace.
- Host training for managers and supervisors to strengthen their empathetic leadership skills. Such training could include mental health first aid and ways to incorporate wellness into everyday work (wellness check-ins during meetings, sharing self-care tips, etc.).

Facilitate Social Activities

- Organize team-building events, social gatherings and networking opportunities to encourage employees to socialize outside formal work settings.
- Consider hosting virtual gatherings or other activities that can be easily accessed remotely to engage the hybrid workforce.
- Provide volunteer opportunities to enable employees to connect outside work hours while deepening community/civic engagement.

Promote Inclusivity

- Create an inclusive work environment where all employees feel valued, respected and included. Promote diversity and equity initiatives that celebrate differences and create opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds to connect and collaborate.
- Consider implementing employee recognition programs to celebrate your employees' hard work and further reinforce a caring and inclusive environment.

Support Mentorship and Peer Support Programs

- Implement mentorship programs that pair employees with more experienced colleagues who can provide guidance, support and career development opportunities. Peer support programs can also be beneficial, allowing employees to connect with peers facing similar challenges and share resources and advice.
- Mentorship and peer support programs can be especially beneficial for newly hired employees who are still becoming familiar with the company culture and their role.

Provide Flexible Work Arrangements

- Offer flexible work arrangements. Remote work and flexible scheduling can help employees balance work and personal responsibilities while maintaining social connections with their colleagues.
- Be mindful that hybrid or fully remote employees may require different methods of employer support than their in-person counterparts (fewer face-to-face interactions in the workplace warrant a greater effort needed to create opportunities for social engagement and connectedness).

Organizations can create a supportive and inclusive environment where employees feel valued, engaged and fulfilled by prioritizing cultivating positive social relationships and implementing strategies to strengthen social connections in the workplace. Investing in social connection not only improves employee satisfaction and productivity, but also fosters a positive organizational culture that attracts and retains top talent.

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