

Wellness EMPLOYEE report



Solitude may be sweet... ...but loneliness is lousy

For people juggling hectic schedules full of work, family, and social commitments, a little downtime would be a welcome relief. But as important as it is to make sure you get time to relax, unwind, and reflect, be careful what you wish for. There are many people who live at the opposite end of the spectrum – dealing with feelings arising from an abundance of time by themselves. For these people, too much of a ‘good thing’ can be equally bad for their health and well-being.

We tend to imagine that loneliness is an issue that only affects people facing life changes such as retirement, an empty nest, limited mobility, shrinking circles of friendship, or perhaps the restrictions that arise due to failing health. The reality is that loneliness can affect people at any age, including those who are in their prime, leading apparently busy and

fulfilling lives. And loneliness is more than a fleeting emotion. If left unaddressed, it can lead to depression and other forms of emotional or mental illnesses, which in turn affect a person’s ability to feel, function, and perform at his or her best.

How lifestyle can contribute to social isolation

At one time, immediate and extended family relationships dominated a person’s social network, but over the last few decades the trend has been for people to delay getting married, thereby extending the number of years they are single and possibly living alone. While it’s true that being alone doesn’t necessarily lead to loneliness, it’s noteworthy that households consisting of only one person have gone from one-in-ten (usually a widow or widower) in the 1950s, to

What is loneliness?

Loneliness might be described as a sense of sadness or emptiness, and the need for more companionship. It may derive from any of the following factors:

- **Interpersonal Loneliness** – Often associated with grief. You miss someone who was once close to you.
- **Social Loneliness** – Leads to a sense of exile. This is what one feels when they are unwillingly cut off from a desired social group.
- **Culture Shock** – Affects most people arriving in a new country. This is the loneliness that happens when one moves into an entirely new culture.
- **Psychological Loneliness** – This is the loneliness that comes from the depths of our being, either from our chemical makeup or from our reactions to past traumas.
- **Cosmic Loneliness** – Also known as “existential loneliness” and leading to guidance from a higher power, the prevailing sense is that it’s not possible to achieve perfect, complete intimacy with another person.

one-in-four. Delayed or deferred marriage (with current generations marrying less, marrying later in life, and staying married for shorter periods of time), divorce, and the death of a spouse all account for this increase in single person households.

It's also true that the pursuit of employment opportunities can scatter families over long distances, something that's particularly evident in rural communities and smaller towns or cities. As well, today it's not unusual for people to change jobs – either through choice or downsizing – more often than in previous generations when people might have expected to work for the same company until retirement. The process of changing jobs and locations may bring new opportunities, but it can also interrupt traditional family relationships and potentially lead to fewer and less strongly developed social ties through the workplace.

The need to balance work and life

Another situation that contributes to feelings of social isolation is when people choose to spend excessively long hours at work. By doing so, they leave themselves fewer hours to devote to activities outside of their jobs. Traditionally, non-work related interests provide additional opportunities to forge social connections. Involvement with groups outside of work and family are important ways to create strong ties and form supportive networks in the community. Occupational health psychologist Merv Gilbert suggests that the proliferation of cell phones and increasing access to work e-mail through home computers and personal digital assistant devices means that people are connected to their jobs around the clock, making it much more difficult to separate work from family life. So although technology can help people stay in touch with family and friends, it can just as often put a barrier between them.

Suffering from solitude

Someone experiencing prolonged bouts of loneliness will often deal with stress by withdrawing and not seeking out helpful emotional support, which is why loneliness is not only destructive on its own, but can also provoke serious health issues such as depression, high blood pressure, alcoholism, and insomnia. Research has determined that social isolation is an even bigger health risk than smoking.

According to the University of Buffalo's counselling services website for students, loneliness can be self-perpetuating because it leads to the following behaviours.

- Low self-esteem and a dependence on others to initiate activities.
- Self-blame for poor social relationships. Falsely assuming nobody likes you.
- Lack of making an attempt to get involved and then becoming more withdrawn and angry when you are not included in activities and conversations.
- Self-conscious behaviour and a feeling that you are being evaluated by other people.
- A fear of standing up for yourself and saying "No" to unreasonable requests.
- Difficulty making telephone calls, introducing yourself, and participating in group activities.
- Being overly critical of yourself and your appearance.
- Feeling alone, isolated, and unhappy.

Everyone has experienced times when they've felt lonely or sad. That's normal – where would the music business be without those common themes? For some people, however, these feelings are persistent and can spiral into something more serious. For those who truly feel

isolated, the burden of loneliness, its repercussions, and disruption can have long-lasting personal, economic, and social consequences. It's useful for people to understand how our modern, technology-rich lifestyles can potentially contribute to these feelings of social isolation, and to realize the importance of building and maintaining a strong network of family and friends. During times of crisis, stress, or change, that kind of support can help bring stability and balance to a person's life. Equally important is the kind of counselling that's available through religious, medical, and community organizations. And Employee Assistance Programs, made available through many employers, also provide support for the mental and emotional well-being of employees. As psychologist Merv Gilbert points out, "Psychologically-healthy workplaces have lower rates of absenteeism, conflict, grievances, accidents, and a more stable workforce. They also become (an) employer of choice."

So in the coming new year, resolve to spend a little more time with family and friends, or find other ways to connect with people through clubs, sports, or charitable endeavours. You'll be in good company if you do.

Sources: Canadian Mental Health Association (<http://www.cmha.ca/bins/index.asp>); Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, catalogue 11-001-XIE, September 17, 2002; November 29, 2004; "Loneliness," Counselling & Learning Skills Service, University of Toronto, (www.ca.utoronto.ca/pamphlets/loneliness.htm); "Loneliness," Kerby Anderson, Leadership University (www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/lonely.html); "Loneliness and Mental Illness," Will I Go Crazy? (willigocrazy.org/Ch06a5.htm); University of Buffalo (www.student-affairs.buffalo.edu/shs/ccenter/loneliness.shtml)



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