

**Move in a healthy direction**

# Loneliness, Social Isolation and Mental Wellbeing:

An Employer's Guide

Logo, Medway Healthy Workplaces

 

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## **Introduction**

When we think of loneliness or being isolated, we often think of the elderly, or retired people living alone. It is true that many older people are lonely, with half a million older people spending 5-6 days a week without speaking to anyone1. However on delving deeper into the research loneliness does not just affect the elderly. Loneliness is not classified as a mental health condition but is strongly linked to mental wellbeing. Particular groups and individuals may be more vulnerable than others, depending on facts like physical and mental health, level of education, employment, income and life-stage. Research by ComRes for BBC Radio 5 found that women on maternity leave were the most lonely, and in addition Action for Children reported that 43% of 17-25 year olds using their services experienced periods of loneliness.

Over 9 million people across all adult ages are often or always lonely.2 As many people experiencing loneliness wouldn’t identify as such many schemes to combat it don’t link to loneliness prevention, but rather to improving social connections and support.

As Dame Carol Black found, Good Work is Good for health3. People in meaningful employment have better health outcomes than those out of work

loneliness is as bad for health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day
loneliness increases the risk of stroke by 32%
loneliness increased the risk of heart attack by 29%

Loneliness has impacts on health and costs to the whole economy including increased absence from work due to sick leave, or taking leave to support lonely relatives as well as reduced engagement and productivity.

## **What do we mean by loneliness?**

Loneliness focusses on how people feel about their contact with other people. Perlman and Peplau (1981) defined loneliness as “**subjective, unwelcome feeling of a lack or loss of companionship. It happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social connections that we have and those that we want”.**

Social isolation refers to a lack of contact with others and society.

Loneliness has been found to be as bad for health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day4.

Loneliness leads to increased risk of developing certain health conditions such as dementia and depression. Loneliness can lead to less active and healthy lifestyles and then leads to an increased risk of diabetes, heart disease and stroke. Some studies found that loneliness and social isolation increased risk of heart attack or angina by 29% and the risk of stroke by 32%.5

Research suggests that loneliness leads to lower wellbeing, as people are less connected and less likely to participate in healthy activities such as sports, exercise classes and eat well. Loneliness can lead to anxiety and depression and in some cases, anxiety and depression can lead to loneliness as people become disengaged in their usual activities.

These issues lead to increased sickness absence, increased healthcare costs to the economy, potential loss of job and increased staff turnover for the employer and loss of quality of life for the individual.

## **The cost of Loneliness to the UK Economy and Employers**

The New Economics Foundation carried out a review of studies into the costs of loneliness6. They found that loneliness not only influenced the health of employees in the UK, but also those they care for, which had a further impact on employees.

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) report written in conjunction with the British Red Cross and the Coop, estimates that the cost of sickness absence that can be attributed to loneliness to employers is £20million. They also looked at the costs associated with caring for people where employees were carers. The evidence linking loneliness, depression, dementia, and the number of working carers out the cost to of loneliness to UK employers at £220 million. Reduced employee wellbeing leading to reduced productivity cost an estimated £665 millon and the increase caused in volunatary staff turnover at £1.62 billion.

The London School of Economics estimated that the societal and health costs of loneliness is £1700 per person over a ten-year period, which rises to £6000 per person who are the most lonely.

The NEF report recommends that employers take a proactive and a reactive approach in combatting loneliness with their employees.

**When is loneliness a risk?**

Risks of loneliness and social isolation are greater at certain times in life, than others. Research for Red Cross and Coop found that 73% of people reporting feeling lonely often or always had experienced one of the life stages within the last 2 years:

Moving jobs, particularly those moving to a new area for work away from family or previous support structures. 39% of people who have moved area for work have experienced loneliness (13% very lonely, 26% quite lonely) ICM omnibus survey

* Being made redundant
* Retirement
* Maternity leave
* Becoming a carer or having caring responsibility for a relative or close friend
* Having a disability
* Bereavement or relationship breakdown
* Children leaving home (often called empty nest syndrome)
* Those who spend their day lone working, working remotely, travelling for work and working away from home

## **The benefits in reducing loneliness:**

* Reducing loneliness leads to better employee health outcomes, and therefore reduced levels of sickness absence
* Reducing loneliness leads to better health outcomes for dependants and therefore a reduction in days lost to carers leave (or sick leave where staff have reported sick to care for someone)
* Reducing loneliness leads to better employee wellbeing, and therefore improved levels of Reducing loneliness can improve employee wellbeing and therefore improve staff retention. (The cost of replacing a member of staff who leaves, averages £6000 when taking into account training, recruitment and management costs)
* Reducing loneliness can support improvements to employee health outcomes and relative/ dependent health outcomes

## **How connected is your organisation?**

Asking employees if they feel valued and if they think the culture of the workplace supports connectedness will give you a good starting point in addressing loneliness, isolation and mental wellbeing. For help in running a staff survey, please contact us using the details on the back page.

**What employers can do to help**

There are several things that employers can do to support their staff. Here are some suggestions based on HR guidance and latest reports. This guide has focussed particularly on loneliness and its affects on wellbeing. Many of these initiatives will support and promote greater mental wellbeing as well as combatting loneliness in the workplace. Some situations and circumstances can make a person more vulnerable to loneliness and low wellbeing.

**Moving jobs** - be aware for new starters, especially if they have moved to the area for the role and may lack support outside of the workplace. A robust on-boarding programme can assist in helping the new staff member to feel settled and integrated into the organisation. Signposting staff to a variety of social activities locally can help such as sports clubs, Adult Education centres, local community groups, faith settings and so on.

**Redundancy** – offering good redundancy support through interview and CV workshops and working with local Job Centres or employment agencies to assist staff in finding new work. Having an Employee Assistance Provider(staff counselling and advice line in place) or recommending local help lines. Offering budgeting advice, not just at times of restructure but as part of the routine support offer so the people are encouraged to build financial resilience.

**Retirement** – as with redundancy, an Employee Assistance Provider (staff counselling and advice line in place) or recommending local help lines can help. Running retirement workshops for people to plan and get advice regarding pensions, but also how to maintain social connections in retirement through volunteering and community activity. Local Health Walks have been shown to help people form friendships as has other local community projects such as the Slough Fort Trust or local Foodbank.

**Maternity leave** - findings by Com Res for BBS Radio 5 Live show that women on maternity leave one of most lonelygroups in UK. Particularly for first time mums who have taken a break from the workplace, they can feel isolated and cut off from their usual routine in addition to getting to grips with their new parental responsibility. Supporting parents about to take maternity or paternity leave with signposting to local groups can help. In addition, having a colleague buddy who can keep in touch with them during their leave, keep them up to date on any changes in the workplace and check in with them can help. Allowing parents to use their Keeping in Touch days can also help, and ease their return to work when they are ready.

**Having caring responsibilities.** 1 in 9 people in the UK workforce are juggling the responsibilities of caring and paid employment7. Most of us will look after after an elderly, sick or disabled relative at some point. 2 million people become carers every year and with an ageing population this is set to rise over the coming years. Offering flexible working and support to employees can help them to stay at work, reducing costs of staff turnover, help to prevent falls in productivity as well as managing their wellbeing. Local charity Carers First exists to give support and advice to those who are carers, and can also provide guidance for employers. Visit their website [https://www.carersfirst.org.uk/medway](http://www.carersfirst.org.uk/medway) to find out more.

**Having a disability.** Almost 3.5 million UK workers have a disability. Offering the right support through schemes such as the Disability Confident employer Scheme or Access to Work can improve staff engagement. Running health events to raise funds and raise awareness for disability can help increase awareness of various conditions amongst your workforce, further adding to a supportive and inclusive culture.

**Bereavement or relationship breakdown.** Breakdown in relationships and bereavement an lead to staff feeling alone. Having the right support through counselling can make all the difference through either a staff Employee Assistance Programme, or local helplines such as [Release the Pressure](http://www.releasethepressure.uk/), Relate or the local Samaritans. Ongoing good mental health support in the workplace can also aid in people feeling like they have somewhere to go and can ask for help.

**Lone working, or travelling for work and working away from home.** Today people work more flexible and often remotely than before. Team members may stay away from home in the week, or spend long hours travelling. Others may work from home and rarely come into the main workplace. Keeping in touch with staff who work remotely and having a communication policy can go a long way in keeping them engaged. Make opportunity for them to have face to face time with colleagues. Signposting staff who may live away from work in the week to positive activities can support them from getting lonely. Some companies use hotels with gym and leisure facilities for staff working away and travelling, or offer gym discounts for national chains so that staff can make use of these facilities where ever they may be.

**Sole traders and entrepreneurs** can often find loneliness creeping in when they first start their business ventures. Ifyou have recently moved out of employment and set up your own business, the pressures of starting up and working alone can be very isolating. Joining local business networking organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce can offer support, advice and the chance to collaborate with like-minded business people. Co-Working spaces can provide a place for lone workers to hot desk in a supportive and social environment.

## **Other initiatives can also help**

* Encourage colleagues to seek help when they need it. Speaking to a colleague, a manager or using a helpline are all good sources of support when things get tough.
* Running regular lunch time sessions for people to attend. From lunchtime walks to photography clubs you may find staff members willing to volunteer in running these activities which can also be a great boost for mental wellbeing and stress relief.
* Encourage colleagues to eat lunch with others, away from their desks or workstation.
* Setting up ‘Chatter and Natter Tables’. If you have a staff room or canteen area, you can designate tables to be for people who might be lunching alone to sit and be open to chatting to others that they might not know. This idea was originally developed by a group of people who found themselves alone in a café and ended up talking. Find out more at https://thechattycafescheme.co.uk/about/
* Have a team social over lunchtime. It doesn’t need to involve a long lunch eating out. A recipe swap or bring and share lunch can get people together. Relationships charity Relate found that 42% of workers didn't have a colleague that they would consider as a close friend. Getting to know colleagues helps.
* Support national campaigns such as Mental Health Awareness Week, or World Mental Health Day
* Encourage employees to use a mix of communication media rather than just emails, particularly when they are in the same building.
* Distribute [the Staying Connected Guide](https://www.medway.gov.uk/downloads/file/2785/staying_connected) in your workplace.
* Consider how you can help to combat loneliness in your local community. Many local charities welcome volunteers
* from local organisations. Support doesn’t have to be financial and volunteering is great for your corporate and social responsibility as well as for the wellbeing of your staff.

It's worth mentioning that many people experiencing loneliness will not always admit to feeling this way, or may not classify themselves as lonely. Therefore it is worth bearing in mind that making good mental wellbeing part of what is on offer will support people feeling lonely and experiencing other mental health and wellbeing related issues as well.

If you have other ways that you have combatted loneliness or promoted mental wellbeing, we would love to hear from you. Please share your ideas by emailing [workplacehealth@medway.gov.uk](mailto:workplacehealth@medway.gov.uk)

## **Useful Resources**

* [A Better Medway](http://www.abettermedway.co.uk) - local health improvement advice and support
* [One You Kent:](https://www.kent.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/health/one-you-kent) local health improvement advice and information for Kent
* Access to work programme for support and equipment at work when you have long term health condition or disability [https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)
* Business in the Community Public Health England Toolkits: [Mental Health toolkit for employers](http://wellbeing.bitc.org.uk/all-resources/toolkits/)
* [Every Mind Matters](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/) Mental Health information from the NHS and Public Health England
* [For Better Mental Health at Work](https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/)
* [Live Well Kent](https://livewellkent.org.uk/): Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Support for Kent and Medway
* [Release the Pressure](https://www.kent.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/health/release-the-pressure): Kent and Medway wide helpline for mental health support, 24/7, 365 days a year. Call 0800 107 0160 or text “Medway” or “Kent” to 85258
* [Health and Safety Executive](http://www.hse.gov.uk) – [HSE Management Standards](https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm), [Advice for Managers on Mental Health Conditions](https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/mental-health-line-managers.htm)
* Mental Health First Aid – [Line Manager’s Resource](https://mhfaengland.org/line-managers-resource/)
* Mind: [https://www.mind.org.uk/](http://www.mind.org.uk/)
* NHS for information on various conditions and healthy lifestyles: [https://www.nhs.uk/](http://www.nhs.uk/)
* NHS One You for healthy lifestyle advice: [https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/](http://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/)
* [The Marmalade Trust](https://marmaladetrust.org/), charity dedicated to recognising loneliness and supporting friendships
* [Jo Cox Foundation](https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/), supporting work to combat loneliness and build a fairer society
* [Age UK:](https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/health-wellbeing/loneliness/) Information on combatting loneliness with older adults

## **Case Studies**

MCH Singers is a community choir that currently meets twice a month. It is for anyone who wants to come along including Medway Community Healthcare Staff, Medway Community Healthcare patients and the general public. The focuses of the individual sessions are to promote and generate feelings of wellbeing through exploring voice and having fun singing together. We start with a body and breath warm up, sing some shorter warm up songs and then work on longer ‘repertoire’ songs in parts. We have taken part is various community Arts performances including Dante or Die’s production of Take on Me at Strood Sports Centre and Leeds castle 900 anniversary, Carnival of History. The group has a relaxed ‘drop in’ feel although there is a core group who attend most sessions. We have been running for 2 years so far and are looking forward to more singing adventures together.

Workplace choirs

have been shown to reduce isolation by 86%. Participants were asked what they liked about MCH Singers and commented as follows:

“The feel good factor after a session”

“Fun sessions, good company, lovely to be feeling part of something”

“We have a great sense of community and it is great to get out and meet new people”

“the music and the lovely people in the choir”

"I really enjoy coming to Choir, the word I used when I first started coming was I left the sessions feeling so 'uplifted'. I still do!!

**Rachel Lowrie, Speech and Language Therapist, Medway Community Healthcare**

I started my business working from my living room in 2015 and although I enjoyed being a home-based business I needed to find like- minded people to encourage me and to help with my wellbeing. I was fortunate to find a group of other people to network with. We became friends, supporters and confidants. Some of the women I met had children a similar age to my daughter and so we would arrange working play dates in the park or at play centres. As the business became more established, I moved into a serviced office within a co-working space. This was a really good move as it meant that I had become part of the co-working community. We share ideas, celebrate each other and lift each other up when we are down.

**Jemma Fairclough-Haynes, Managing Director, Orchard Employment Law**

At Dovetail Games we employ the best talent sourced from around the UK & Europe. In doing this we assist the candidates with both financial and logistical support to help with their move. We understand that moving away from your friends and family can be difficult and could possibly be lonely so we have schemes in place to help avoid this.

From the initial job offer, the recruitment team keep in regular contact with the candidate offering any assistance we can with house hunting and advice. This starts building a rapport that will help for their first day. Their new line manager also sends an email to the candidate before their start date as a “we look forward to you starting”. On their first morning with us, the new employee meets with the HR & Recruitment team for their induction morning, learning where everything is, how to book holiday and learning about health & safety etc. We have an info point with loads of information ready to pass on, including who our First Aiders and Mental Health First Aiders are. We have a “buddy scheme” in place for their first few days which ensures they are looked after and lunchtimes are filled with meeting new people.

As a company we really pride ourselves on our regular 1:1’s and communication with new members of staff. It really is important to make sure the wellbeing and mental health of them is cared for, especially if they have relocated to join us.

We believe that our caring approach really helps us stand out as an employer.

**Fiona Turner** CSR Executive Dovetail Games

Thank you to all those who have contributed to this guide: Carers First,

Medway Community Healthcare, Dovetail Games, Orchard Employment Law, and members of the Public Health Team

For support in putting together workplace wellbeing initiatives in your workplace, please get in touch by emailing [workplacehealth@medway.gov.uk](mailto:workplacehealth@medway.gov.uk), by calling 01634 334307 or by visiting the [website.](http://www.medway.gov.uk/healthyworkplace)

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