



ALL THINGS WORK

# Dealing with Social Isolation

With millions of workers now telecommuting due to the coronavirus, business leaders must help them foster social connections.

By Jennifer Moss | April 25, 2020

Feedback

**N**ot too long ago, "bumping into" someone on the street or at the grocery store was an opportunity for a brief human connection that might end in a hug or a handshake and a promise to get together soon. Today, hugs and handshakes are dangerous, in-person interaction is discouraged, and we're left feeling socially adrift.

Many of us have felt isolated at some point during the coronavirus pandemic. As COVID-19 has forcefully swept across the world, it has caused a ripple effect of loneliness for millions of people in every sector of the workforce. No one is immune from the feelings of isolation that this contagion has caused. When loneliness becomes a chronic experience, it can harm our health and well-being.

Leaders have a responsibility to help mitigate workplace isolation. They need to prioritize social connections in these unprecedented times of social distancing and remote work. Since random lunchroom run-ins and deskside drop-bys are no longer a given—even after employees are asked to return to their workplaces—new approaches will be needed to foster healthy relationships at a distance. Absent that, workplaces will feel the aftershocks of isolation and burnout long after the pandemic is over.

### All by Myself

**T**o reduce the spread of COVID-19, millions of employees worldwide began working from home this spring. (In a recent interview with Bloomberg, Mark Barronechea, CEO of software company OpenText, estimated that up to 300 million people switched to teleworking at the start of the pandemic). Business leaders who once thought it was impossible for their workforce to be remote now realize that it is quite possible. That is likely to lead to an increase in telework and virtual events in the coming years.

For those who enjoy working remotely, this is great news. However, surveys show that loneliness is one of the biggest struggles employees experience when teleworking.

The problem is compounded by the increasing number of people who live alone, which was once rare. Now, single-person households are the second most-common type of U.S. household—just behind married couples without minor children and even more prevalent than married couples with children under 18. In many urban centers, roughly 40 percent of households are single-occupant.

The trend to live alone raises concerns among mental health experts. Studies have found that it is linked to depression, lower quality of life and health problems.

Millennials, who make up the largest segment of the workforce, are the loneliest generation. Three in 10 Millennials always or often feel lonely, according to a poll by YouGov, a London-based research and analytics company. At work, 66 percent of Millennials found it hard to make friends, compared to less than 23 percent of Baby Boomers, according to a 2018 survey from U.K.-based Milkround, a student and graduate career resources company.

# THE HIGH COST OF LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

The negative effects are high and may increase as Americans work remotely or distance themselves once they return to the workplace.



**1 in 5**

Americans always or often feel lonely or socially isolated.

**3 in 10**

Millennials always or often feel lonely.



Those reporting loneliness or social isolation also report being dissatisfied with other aspects of life, most notably:



**53%**

Personal finances



**44%**

Employment



**33%**

Housing



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation/The Economist Survey on Loneliness and Social Isolation in the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan (2018) and YouGov.

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Friendships and social interactions are basic psychological requirements for human well-being. It's also critically important to have

friends at work. A survey by LinkedIn analyzed the impact of workplace relationships for 11,500 full-time professionals between the ages of 18 and 65 in 14 countries. Forty-six percent said that work friendships make them happier.

Gallup's research has repeatedly shown a "concrete link between having a best friend at work and the amount of effort employees expend in their job." Additionally, "women who strongly agree they have a best friend at work are more than twice as likely to be engaged [63 percent] than women who say otherwise [29 percent]."

Personal connection isn't just good for engagement and happiness at work, it's what makes us human. It's part of our genetic makeup. This deeply ingrained evolutionary legacy goes back to the days when our survival depended on safety in numbers. Today, work is where we often find our tribe.

## All Things Work From SHRM

Last time on SHRM's All Things Work podcast, we discussed how businesses can successfully implement remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. This time, we're turning our attention to employees' *experience* of remote work and its accompanying feelings of isolation and loneliness. In this week's episode, host Tony Lee is joined by Michael and Katie Stallard to discuss the isolating nature of remote work and solutions employees can take to stay well in this new, unprecedented era of work. Mike and Katie are a husband and wife team who have been studying the impact of personal connection in the workplace since 2002 and recently recently wrote a great article for LinkedIn on Why Relational Connection Is So Important During the Coronavirus Pandemic (<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-relational-connection-so-important-during-michael-stallard/?trackingId=Q1j5V4NYql4dGWTA6DiSCg==>). Listen to hear them talk with Tony to unpack big questions such as, "How can employees successfully adapt to working from home?" and "Can video conferencing tools really replace the experience of being with someone?"

Feedback

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### Virtually Together

**B**y some accounts, before the pandemic struck, technology was losing its spark as a human connector. People were pushing back on social media, feeling a deep need to spend more time together IRL (in real life).

Overuse of digital technology and social media contributes to loneliness, according to recent studies. That's true even at work. Far too often, people choose technology as a default communication tool. It's common for people seated at their desks to send messages via e-mail or Slack to their co-workers who are a few feet away. Loneliness in some workplaces grew as in-person interactions slowed and digital collaboration picked up speed.

But in the time of COVID-19, for most leaders, virtual collaboration is a beacon of light in a dark world. It's an emotional life raft, keeping us afloat as we navigate work and life under lockdown and social isolation. Once seen as a cause of loneliness, technology has now been tasked as the cure.

Virtual technology "allows employees to meet and collaboratively work in the comfort of their homes," says Lisa Kaye, president of Greenlight Jobs, a media and entertainment jobs site. "This new work environment affords a level of privacy and productivity whilst observing the necessary safety precautions. It will forever change the way we live and work."

# STAYING CONNECTED FROM A DISTANCE

To maintain social connection while working remotely, Beverly Somers, SHRM-SCP, founder of SMART Human Resource Solutions in New Brunswick, Canada, suggests leaders emphasize the following:

**Check in.** Schedule regular video chats with employees, such as morning meetings or afternoon coffee breaks, simply to check in and ask how everyone is doing.

**Keep learning.** Encourage employees to take a step back from their work or social media by leaning in to learning something new each day or week. Go further by asking workers to share their favorite podcasts, webinars or books.

**Listen to music.** Music can provide emotional healing. Ask employees to submit their favorite upbeat songs and create a playlist for team members to help improve their mood while working from home.

**Commit acts of kindness.** Encourage everyone to be kind to others. Create a hashtag to capture and share your team's kind gestures.

**Stay connected.** Create a private Facebook group for your team to stay connected. Encourage them to share photos

Kunal Gupta, CEO of tech firm Polar, wants new leaders to emphasize well-being, and he has taken the lead virtually. "I've started to host daily live meditations each morning for my team and clients, in addition to encouraging them to also find what works for them and to make the space for it," he says.

The team at Grain Farmers, a Canadian nonprofit group that represents farmers' interests, is staying connected in several ways. "We have a staff website where we post a joke and a funny quote each day," says Sarah Plater, human resource leader. "We also share pictures of the pets that keep us company in our home workspaces. We have a gratitude channel [on Microsoft Teams] where people share what they are grateful for each day."

Other examples of technology being used as a social connector:

- Vox Media hosts an online story time for kids, and even CEO Jim Bankoff participates.
- General Assembly, which offers courses in coding, is re-creating the morning coffee break. Staff members spend a few minutes each morning catching up on nonwork-related topics.
- Software company Basecamp has dedicated social media channels where no work-related discussions are allowed; topics are focused on food, sports, pets and humor. The channels are also free from talk about the pandemic. Similarly, GitLab has a "feel good" Slack channel with only positive stories posted by employees to read, share and discuss.
- *The New York Times* hosted a pet parade featuring staff working from home and their pets.
- Some companies are starting virtual book clubs, team-bonding movie nights, virtual pizza parties or remote happy hours where employees dial in and share a cocktail over Zoom or Skype.
- Many businesses still celebrate birthdays by having a monthly lunch where workers gather virtually to toast their colleagues.

These ideas demonstrate that it's entirely possible to help people connect while working remotely. It may be imperfect, and many employees will still long for moments of physical human interactions, but with a bit of regular levity and fun, leaders can make the work-from-home experience a little less lonely.

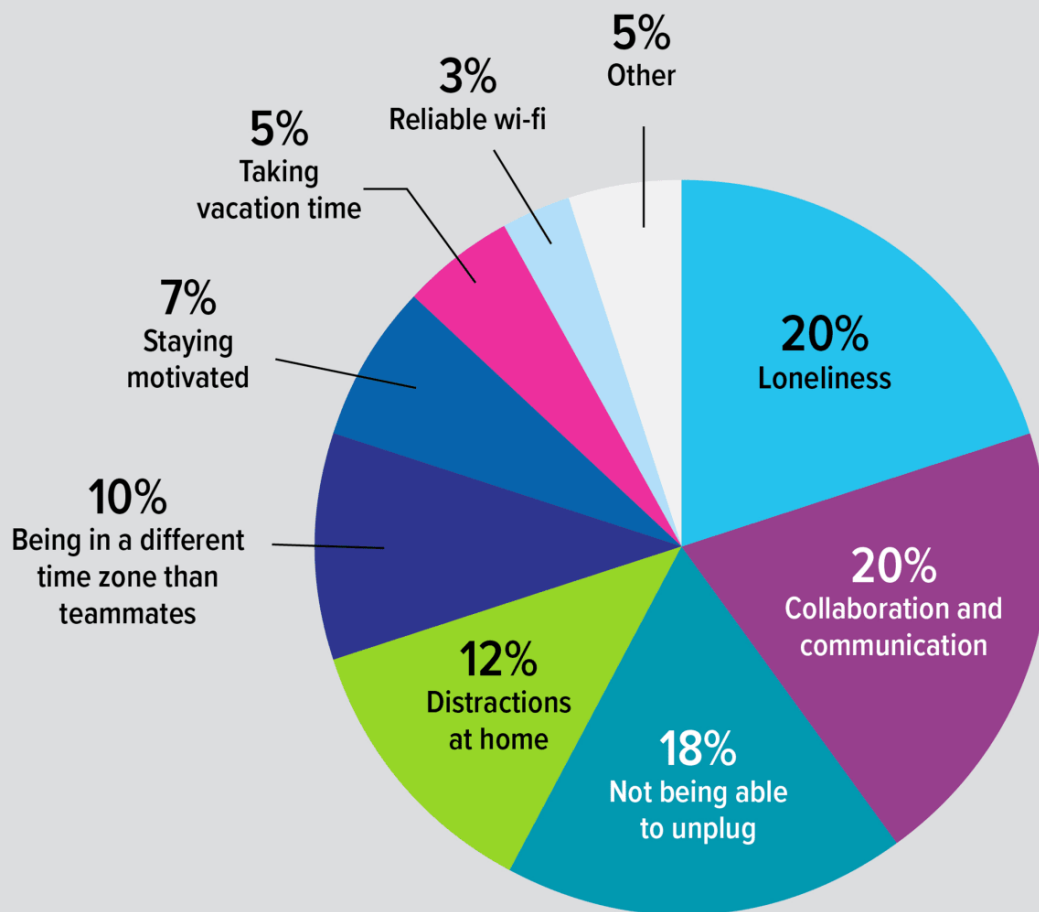
Notably, these interactions aren't focused on work. Instead, they're simply a means to foster relationships and help people battle loneliness and isolation. For some, it may feel uncomfortable to share in large groups. That's an opportunity for leaders to encourage these people to use micro-channels to connect in one-on-one interactions and within small teams.

Now is no time to fear that nonwork-related conversations may decrease productivity. If access to these tools are limited, companies will appear tone-deaf and insensitive. In times of extreme stress, leaders need to behave compassionately and back whatever means necessary to drive social collaboration and peer support.

### Loneliness After the Pandemic

**S**ome business leaders emphasize that a shared, physical workplace creates the conditions for human connection that are hard to recreate virtually. "Work, like any other social gathering, such as weddings, birthdays and dinner parties, fosters our natural inclination to engage, share and find affinity with others," says Shaival Shah, co-founder and CEO of Ribbon, which helps homebuyers finance purchases. "Sharing and receiving are critical human ingredients to being a part of something larger than ourselves and not living a life of isolation."

## WHAT'S YOUR BIGGEST STRUGGLE TO WORKING REMOTELY?



Source: Source: Buffer, *State of Remote Work Report 2020*.

Feedback

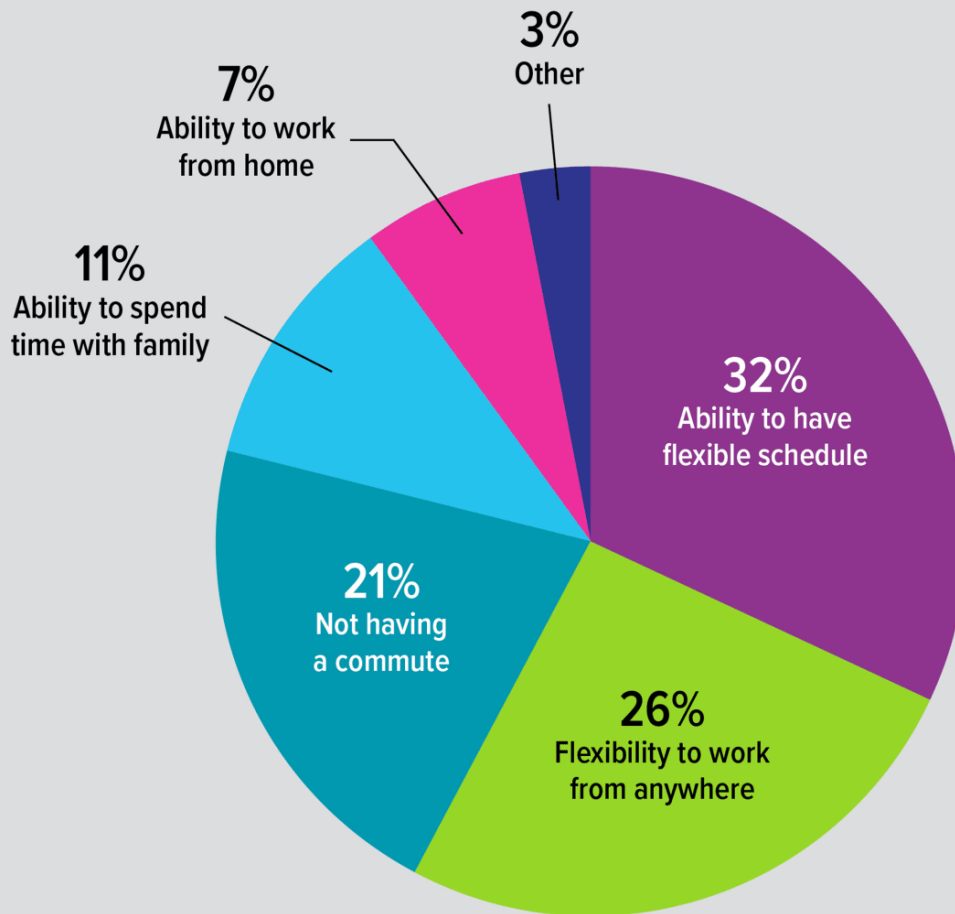
With remote work, employees "lose that incredible ability to gather and unite," Shah says. "Teams across the world are taking heroic efforts to reinvent the way we engage over video and the phone, but nothing will replace the ambiance, sounds and sights of being together."

In effect, the pandemic may serve as a reminder of what we value most. "This period, which none of us may have ever experienced [before], could be a wake-up call to us all," says Ami Rokach, an associate professor of psychology at the Center for Academic Studies in Israel and a member of the psychology departments at York University in Canada and Walden University in Minneapolis.

"This period may remind us of how much we longed for a hug, for real human contact, for warmth and support, which requires mostly face-to-face interaction. We may learn now to relate more meaningfully to others, to appreciate them and to realize how much we need them in our lives."



## WHAT'S THE BIGGEST BENEFIT YOU SEE TO WORKING REMOTELY?



Source: Source: Buffer, *State of Remote Work Report 2020*.

Feedback

Battling loneliness and chronic stress even in normal times can be exhausting. As today's employees face additional stress and isolation, leaders can do their part by finding novel and positive ways to create connections. By checking in and setting up spaces for workers to collaborate and connect, leaders demonstrate that employee well-being is top of mind.

*Jennifer Moss is author of *Unlocking Happiness at Work* (Kogan Page, 2016) and co-founder of *Plasticity Labs*, a Waterloo, Ontario, Canada-based research and consulting company that focuses on organizational culture.*

### Explore Further

SHRM provides advice and resources to help business leaders support employees and encourage social connections during the

COVID-19 pandemic.

**Pandemic Takes Toll on Employees' Emotional Well-Being** ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/benefits/pages/pandemic-takes-a-toll-on-employees-emotional-well-being.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/benefits/pages/pandemic-takes-a-toll-on-employees-emotional-well-being.aspx))

With the COVID-19 crisis, the emotional challenges employees are confronting have spiked. HR and people managers can take steps to address employees' anxiety.

**HR Storytellers At-Home Edition: Steve Browne** ([www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/hr-storytellers/pages/at-home-steve-browne.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/hr-storytellers/pages/at-home-steve-browne.aspx))

Steve Browne, SHRM-SCP, vice president of HR at LaRosa's Inc., and member of the SHRM board of directors, talks about the value of staying connected while social distancing.

**All the Lonely People** ([www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/Pages/all-the-lonely-people.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/Pages/all-the-lonely-people.aspx))

Loneliness and isolation in the workplace hurt employee well-being—and the bottom line.

**SHRM Resource Page: Coronavirus and COVID-19** ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/pages/communicable-diseases.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/pages/communicable-diseases.aspx))

Review the latest news and updates to prepare your workforce for the possibility of business closures, remote work, quarantines and other outcomes of a viral outbreak.

**SHRM Resource Page: Remote Work** ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/Remote-Work.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/Remote-Work.aspx))

Resources to help employers facilitate flexible work arrangements while navigating a sophisticated array of technologies and remote work policies to meet the needs.

**SHRM Toolkit: Developing and Sustaining Employee Engagement** ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/sustainingemployeeengagement.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/sustainingemployeeengagement.aspx))

An overview of effective practices in developing and sustaining employee engagement, a critical driver of business success in today's competitive marketplace.

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[https://lp.shrm.org/preferences.html?\\_ga=2.22715771.1995750986.1586780024-1187526131.1585670742](https://lp.shrm.org/preferences.html?_ga=2.22715771.1995750986.1586780024-1187526131.1585670742)

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