SEVEN STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME ISOLATION AND LONELINESS.

How to support yourself and your team when working remotely

When we run surveys on the things that people have valued during lockdown and are keen to maintain in whatever future world we emerge into, working from home is often one of the most popular answers. The time saved by not having to commute, the ability to flex your working hours to suit your situation and the chance to be able to focus away from the office all being reasons people find it helpful. However, it has its downsides too, especially if you are trying to juggle care of children or elderly relatives and don't have a quiet space to work separately in, away from the rest of your home and household. You might also be struggling with slow broadband speeds and competing demands for Wi-Fi.

But even the most self-assured person, who is happy with their own company for long periods of time, will notice that certain things are missing. If you previously worked from a traditional office, you might miss the opportunity to have a quick passing catch up with colleagues in the kitchen or the canteen, or just hearing other people talking about their lives and exchanging friendly and helpful comments. Even those who worked remotely on a regular basis may have had the option of going to the office on some days, or perhaps going to a local coffee shop, meeting clients and colleagues at social events or attending meetings and training.

Remaining safe and physically distant whilst working, for the foreseeable future, can create feelings of isolation and loneliness. This can be a difficult and even distressing change for individual team members and their leaders, and it can be difficult to maintain focus, motivation and energy when isolation and loneliness take over.

So, what you can do for yourself and for other people in your teams? Here we share some simple and effective coping strategies to help alleviate the situation. Remember that everyone is different so find the ones which work well for you and members of your team.

The Seven Strategies

1. Make full use of virtual collaboration tools, especially with video and visual stimulus

A recent study of how the brain reacts to the visual stimulus of seeing people on video tells us that the positive response signals are much higher than using voice alone. If bandwidth permits, keep your camera on as much as possible, as it will help you to feel more connected and less isolated. Even a phone call is better than relying on email but use all the tools at your disposal to stay in touch – set up WhatsApp groups with colleagues so that you can share and see what is going on within the team, both inside and outside work. Posting or viewing a picture doesn't need to feel intrusive and you can choose when and whether to respond.

2. Reach out to others, however hard it might feel

It's natural to assume that everyone else is busy and perfectly OK with the situation, but the chances are they would also welcome the approach to set up a virtual chat and are probably also feeling isolated. Get in touch with colleagues or team members and suggest something more informal than a scheduled meeting – they may welcome a general catch up or perhaps you could just ask their opinion about something you are working on or may be struggling with.

3. Make your meetings about more than just the task in front of you

Get into the habit, whether you are leading or participating in a meeting, of taking a few minutes at the start to engage with your colleagues about things other than work. It can seem tough when you've got a lot to get through but a short space where you check in with each other, admire their environment and ask them how they are getting on, will help the meeting to be more successful and help you to work together better in a remote setting. After all, it's only the time it would have taken for everyone to get a drink and get settled in the meeting room.

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The Seven Strategies (continued)

4. Find positives in the situation but don't feel under pressure to be constantly cheerful

Take a positive view and try to put things into perspective – focus on the things you can control rather than worrying about the things you can't. Take a moment to note down all the things that are attractive about working remotely and which you will value in the future to help alter your mood. Rather than dwelling on what you are missing, make a note of those too, under the heading of things you are looking forward to doing in the future which already feels more positive. You can also do this as a team (see the section on team activities). However, recognise that you and other team members will have good days and bad days and it's not necessary to be falsely or relentlessly cheerful. Acknowledge the struggle for yourself and others by listening to concerns (or your inner voice) and working through things to get to a better place.

5. Set realistic objectives and reward yourself

Start small by setting goals which you can achieve, especially on a tough day, then you can be more ambitious as you get used to the isolation of working alone. You may need more social interaction on some days than others, so if you've got a day with lots of virtual meetings, don't expect to get lots of focused work done as well. Relax and enjoy working with colleagues rather than rushing through to try and get other work done. You may need to create new working patterns as it's much harder to only interact with a screen all day. Expect to have shorter, but much deeper sessions of focused time, interspersed with other activities to give your eyes and your body a rest. Don't forget to take a moment to reflect on everything you have achieved during the day.

6. Plan your day so that you have variety and breaks

Create a calendar for each day which gives you plenty of variety even if you have major tasks to complete. You'll find you are much more productive, and the feeling of loneliness will have less of an impact. Block out time to focus on the big stuff but include virtual conversations, time to deal with emails and other messaging channels, and include some smaller tasks which will give you the satisfaction of getting things ticked off on your 'to do' list. Take regular breaks, even if it's just for a few minutes, go outside or stand by a window if you can, to get natural light. Try not to eat at your desk but to have meals elsewhere (even sitting in a chair in the same room).

7. Create a work environment which works for you

If you are used to working in a busy office, it can feel quite distressing to sit in silence all day and can add to feelings of loneliness. When you're not in a meeting try having the radio on at a low volume, or the TV on in another room, or listen to some music. Put up pictures or surround yourself with other visual stimuli which will help to enhance your mood. One of the biggest irritations of office life is having to adapt to how other people want to work. You can indulge yourself if you are alone in your work space – keep it at a temperature which suits you, get the lighting just right and you can even choose scents which make you feel good, rather than spending the afternoon working with the smell of someone else's lunch.

But most importantly, if you or your team members are struggling, feeling overwhelmed and unhappy don't be too hard on yourself – take a bit of time out, read a book, call a friend, listen to music, make a delicious hot or cold drink and savour it. Be kind to yourself.

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Virtual activities to help teams cope with isolation and loneliness:

Create a virtual 'cookie jar' of hope for the future:

- Write down the things you and your team are enjoying about remote working, and which ones you would like to take with you into the future

- Write down the things you and your team are missing and will looking forward to doing in the future

- Capture them on a virtual white board and spend a few minutes each time you have a team meeting thinking about how you can make these a reality in the future.

Getting to know our team (especially useful when bringing new members into the team but can be done with intact teams)

Ask everyone to complete a little template about themselves to cover:

- A photo of them doing something they love outside work

- How long they have worked for the organisation

- Something they love about where they live

- Something about them which other people might not know or which they are particularly proud of

- Create a team 'storybook'.

Share it with all team members and then run a quiz at a team meeting which could be remembering the unusual facts, longest serving team member, pictures of the places where team members live to guess where they are etc.

Visualising the future

- Ask everyone to choose or take a picture of an image that they can use to describe what they would like the future of the team to look like (or you can share pictures with them but it's much more engaging if people choose or take their own)

- Ask everyone to post their pictures beforehand and in a virtual meeting ask them to describe why they chose that image, what it means to them and why it helps them to describe the future they would like to see

- You can then create a simple montage and word cloud for everyone to display in their home office or on their screen to help them in isolation.

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