



connect 6

Mental Health Awareness Week: 9th-15th May

Mental Health Awareness Week 2022 is exploring loneliness, something we may all have experienced. We can all play our part in connecting with one another and reducing loneliness in our lives, our workplaces and our communities.

Loneliness is a feeling and, the truth is, it can affect anyone, whatever their circumstances. When it does, a person's mental health may suffer.

According to Ireland's Central Statistics Office, levels of loneliness almost doubled between April 2020 (6.8%) and February 2021 (13.1%). Research conducted by Microsoft Ireland found that 36% of Irish hybrid workers felt lonely.²

The UK Government has suggested that the cost of loneliness to employers amounts to £2.5 billion every year. This stems from increased staff turnover, as well as diminished wellbeing and productivity, and ill health.³

As we all know, the world around us is so inter-connected. We can work from home and never be more than a click away from our colleagues. It might seem strange to think of anyone experiencing loneliness when technology allows us to be in touch with one another all the time. But it happens. In a world full of people, many are lonely – it's not unusual at all.

Loneliness is a contributing factor to the higher levels of worry, anxiety and distress that have been documented since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Intermittent and unpredictable periods of lockdown – including, for many, enforced remote working – have created a sense of isolation across workforces. But there is hope.

Our Connect 6 tips are simple but helpful pointers for combatting loneliness by connecting with ourselves, co-workers and peers:

- **Make the most of your free time**

It's easy to retreat from life when we feel alone, especially if we're tired after the working day, but loneliness doesn't have to be a burden. We can use it as motivation for reaching out to people and building relationships. Making the most of our time outside of work is all the more valuable if we use it for memorable moments. Volunteer with a local community group, even call in to see a neighbour – you could be making someone else feel less lonely just by saying hello.

- **Connect in real life**

Yes, checking in with people in real life is slightly more difficult than it used to be but so much exists beyond our smartphones, e-mails and virtual offices. One way we can tackle loneliness is by being really present in the moment with someone. This is actually pretty easy: look them in the eyes, listen and watch out for the social cues they're giving you. You will both get so much more out of connecting face to face than through a screen.

- **Foster good relationships**

You can't force colleagues to become friends but you can encourage them to form bonds. In doing so, you'll create opportunities for collaboration. You could organise team building activities and support inclusive, appropriate social events. Be aware, however, that these activities may only get you so far. Foster your own high-quality connections and urge those around you to do the same.

1. 'Addressing loneliness has become more important than ever', says Taskforce', ALONE, 15.06.21, shorturl.at/hIAS8

2. 'One third of hybrid workers struggle to disconnect', RTÉ, 08.04.22, shorturl.at/drIII

3. 'Employers and loneliness', Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 08.05.21, shorturl.at/otuC6

- **Focus on the little things**

The smallest gestures can make a big difference. Little things like making someone a coffee or just remember to say “Good morning” every day will show people that you care. This is especially relevant as we adjust to life back in the workplace. These small, easy acts will also have a positive knock-on in your team. If you’re a manager, use your one-to-one meetings to discuss issues and concerns beyond workplace objectives.

- **Be nice to yourself**

It’s important to practice self-compassion when you think you need to be doing more in work or you have to cancel a meeting at the last minute – everyone does it. Instead, try talking to yourself in a way that is supportive, kind and caring. You’ll be more likely to acknowledge the moments when you’re overwhelmed. You’ll also be in a better place to challenge yourself and take the next steps towards socialising, however you see fit. Whatever you do, the main challenge is to stay in touch with those around you. Even if you just send a text message or phone someone you haven’t spoken to for ages, that’s a great start. And, just remember, you’re not on your own.

- **Seek support**

Taking that first step towards support can make a big difference. The past two years have been difficult for many; social isolation, anxiety, concern are all feelings experienced during the pandemic and these may still exist as society opens up again. We should remember that not everyone welcomes this change and if you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, worried or anxious, there are people who can help.

If you are worried that any of the issues referenced above are impacting your performance or wellbeing, you should discuss matters with your manager. If you are concerned about your health, speak to a GP or other medical professional.

