

Studies Find that Working From Home Impacts More on Mental Health Than We Had Anticipated

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Many workers are resisting their employers' push for them to return to the office, with an increasing number of employees [negotiating](#) the inclusion of clauses allowing them to work from home.

However, contrary to popular belief, working in the office might be better for employees' mental health. According to Hazel Stewart, Director of Innovate Learn – a Melbourne-based distributor of solutions from Wilson Learning Worldwide – loneliness is one of the greatest wellbeing risks faced by remote and hybrid workers. “While remote and hybrid work does have some benefits for workers, new research shows that isolation and loneliness are two major drawbacks,” she says.

The dangers of loneliness

An Organisational Psychologist's [study](#) found that full-time remote work increased loneliness by 67% when compared to in-office work. If left unchecked, loneliness is detrimental to physical and mental health. “Scientific studies have established a clear link between loneliness and poor sleep, depression, cardiovascular issues and poor immunity overall,” explains Hazel. She points to the findings of the *Connections Matter* [report](#) (a joint effort of KPMG Australia and the Groundswell Organisation), which found that lonely people have a 26% increased risk of death.

“Employers have an obligation to provide a work environment that is free of health risks and hazards – including the psychosocial risks that affect the mental wellbeing of workers,” adds Hazel.

Yet loneliness also has a significant impact on the business bottom line as lonely workers are more likely to feel dissatisfied with their jobs, and therefore, less productive and engaged. “Lonely employees account for higher rates of absenteeism and they're more likely to resign from their jobs – at a cost to both the business and to the economy,” adds Hazel. The *Connections Matter* report estimates that loneliness costs the Australian economy \$2.7 billion in healthcare-related costs each year.

Prioritising work friendships

The benefits of fostering “friendships” among employees, as a remedy to loneliness, yields more benefits than we might think. Hazel points to new [research](#) from the US-based Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), which revealed that employees with close friends at work enjoy a number of benefits:

- 85% say it has positively impacted their career.
- 80% are more likely to say they feel a strong sense of belonging to their organisation (compared with 63% of workers who don't have close work friends).
- 86% are more likely to say they're satisfied with their job.

Five strategies to foster healthy connections at work:

1. **Create a culture of connection:** Evaluate the current company culture to ensure that it prioritises healthy and meaningful social connections. It's critical that everyone in the business views relationships as a top priority.
2. **Empathy, trust, and good communication are key:** Bring in employee training that covers soft skills, including the development of communication skills and emotional intelligence.
3. **Encourage healthy habits:** Exercise and a healthy diet are important components of good mental health and general wellbeing. Support the pursuit of sporting hobbies such as lunchtime runs or outdoor sport such as soccer, or provide gym packages.
4. **Create opportunities for sincere connection:** Make sure managers have time to engage with their workers, with the aim of getting to know each other. Invest in team building, socialising, and shared positive experiences. At a time when so much of our communication is digital, face-to-face connection has become essential.
5. **Make it easy to get help:** Encourage employees to ask for and offer help. Regular discussion is useful in identifying areas where employees need help – be it to manage an influx of customer orders or to navigate workplace stress. Be prepared to call in professional help if it's required.

“Over 5 million Australians are believed to be affected by loneliness,” concludes Hazel. “Through simple but effective measures, business leaders can effect positive change to make workplaces mentally healthy, more productive and more successful.”

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