# LONELINESS

## HOW CAN EMPLOYERS SUPPORT THIS GROWING SOCIAL CHALLENGE

# Introduction

**In the UK, loneliness is a widespread problem. It can affect people of all ages, including those in work.**

The latest report on loneliness from the Office of National Statistics stated that 5% of adults in England reported feeling lonely 'often' or 'always'[1]; it is a widespread issue, but due to associated stigma it can be taboo topic – and therefore not appear as prevalent as it really is.

Employers need to take note as new workplace trends are a contributing factor. The rise of agile, flexible and remote working – enabled by technological advancements – has led to a reduced necessity for face-to-face contact between colleagues. This has been further exacerbated by the mandatory COVID-19 lockdowns implemented both in the UK and internationally.

It's an area which can be difficult to resolve. It's not always obvious when people are feeling lonely, and because it can affect anyone and everyone, there's no one-size-fits-all solution. However, tackling loneliness is an integral part of improving employees' social wellbeing.

Read on to see why it's important for employers to address this growing challenge for both their contribution to society and their own business performance.
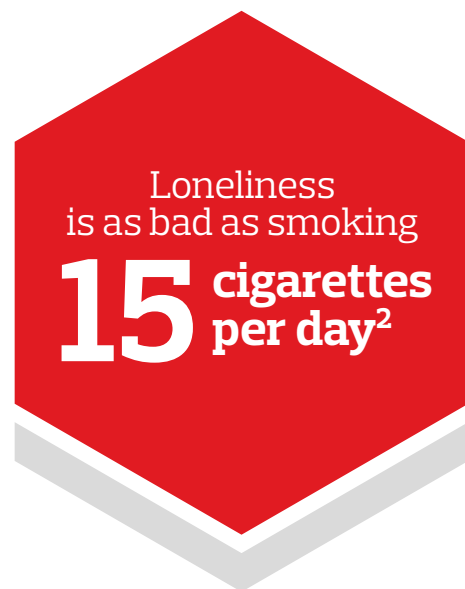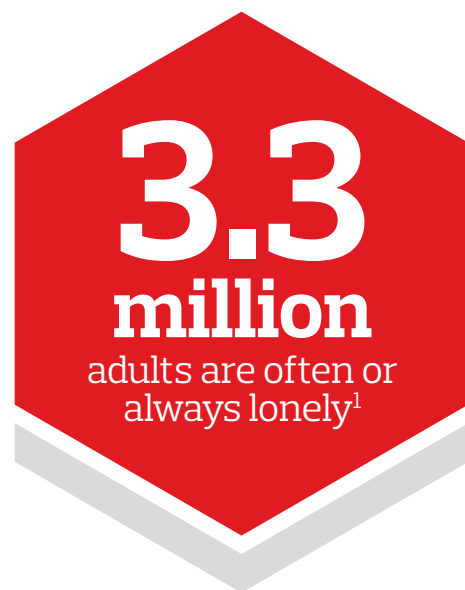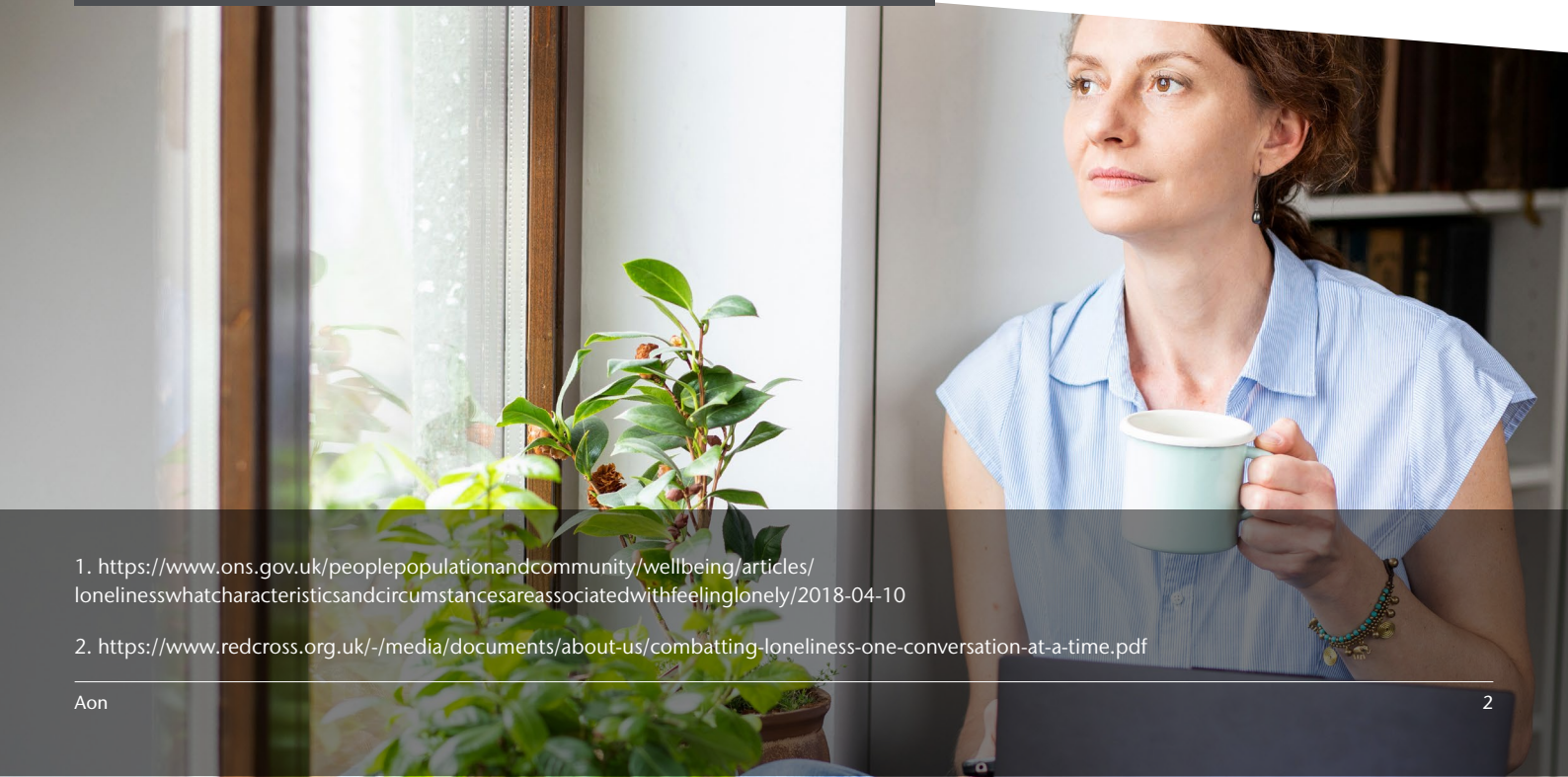
> "We may be technologically connected, but we are sleepwalking into becoming the least humanly connected society ever."
>
> **Charles Alberts,**
> **Head of Health Management**

**3.3 million**
adults are often or always lonely[1]

Loneliness is as bad as smoking **15 cigarettes per day**[2]

1. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10

2. https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/combatting-loneliness-one-conversation-at-a-time.pdf
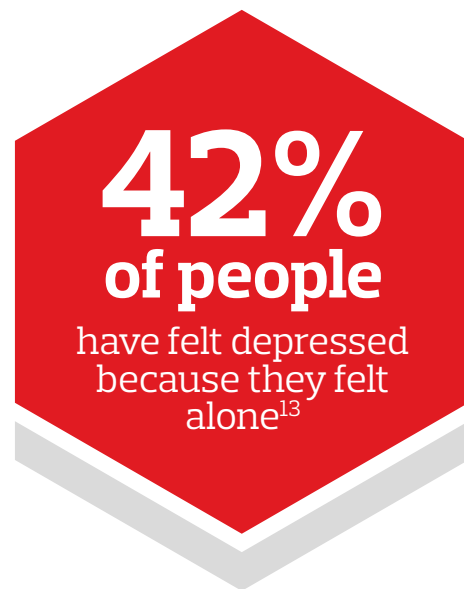
## The impact on health

Loneliness isn't just a social issue; studies have shown that loneliness can increase the risk of developing serious health issues. It has been linked to an increased risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, depression, cognitive decline and dementia[9].

A study into how COVID-19 has affected anxiety has shown that those who report they 'always' or 'often' feel lonely were almost five times more likely to have higher levels of anxiety than those who 'never' feel lonely; the impact of loneliness is a tangible one[10].

Ill health typically leads to an increase in absenteeism and presenteeism – which have a clear economic impact (combined, they cost the UK economy £81 billion each year[11]).

**There's a clear driver for resolving loneliness at work - even busy, bustling offices might still have 40% of their employees state they feel isolated. When you look beneath the surface, tackling loneliness might need to be more of a priority than you first considered.**

## The commercial impact of loneliness

Even the busiest of work environments can have issues with loneliness. In a recent report by EY, 40% of employees stated that they felt isolated in their role[3]. Loneliness doesn't just impact an individual, it also affects businesses and society as a whole. Research has shown that lonely workers take twice as many sick days, and demonstrate less commitment and weaker performance.[4]

## The impact on performance

Research has found that loneliness has a quantitative business impact. The estimated cost on UK businesses is £2.5 billion per year, with a £32 billion cost to the wider economy[5]. The impact of loneliness on employees is significant; lonelier workers have lower job satisfaction, change jobs more frequently, have fewer promotions, and have a higher likelihood of leaving their current job within the next six months[6]. There is also a link between loneliness and poor performance, impaired creativity, lower productivity levels and poor decision making[7]. Research has also shown found that lonely employees are seen as less approachable, which in turn has in impact on collaborative working[8].

# £2.5bn
### estimated annual cost of loneliness for employers[12]

# 42%
### of people
### have felt depressed because they felt alone[13]

3. https://www.inc.com/adam-robinson/new-study-finds-40-percent-of-employees-feel-isolated-heres-how-to-make-your-workplace-more-inclusive-and-productive.html

4. https://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonwingard/2020/02/14/loneliness-is-crippling-workplace-productivity-heres-the-leadership-prescription/

5. Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time. A call to action (Jo Cox Loneliness, 2017) https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/combatting-loneliness-one-conversation-at-a-time.pdf

6. Harvard Business Review: https://hbr.org/2018/03/americas-loneliest-workers-according-to-research

7. https://blog.dropbox.com/topics/work-culture/tips-for-fixing-workplace-loneliness

8. https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/03/why-loneliness-lowers-your-performance-at-work.html

9. A connected society. A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change (HM Government, 2018) https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-governments-first-loneliness-strategy

10. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/coronaviruscovid19roundup/2020-03-26

11. https://workinmind.org/2019/04/15/presenteeeism-ill-health/

12. https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/cost-of-loneliness-2017.pdf

13. https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/the-lonely-society/

# The loneliness risk factors

Although loneliness can impact anyone, numerous studies have uncovered specific groups who experience loneliness and key triggers which may cause an individual to feel lonely (detailed below). This information gives employers an at-risk blueprint for tackling loneliness in the workplace. However, it's important for companies not to make assumptions – just because an individual doesn't fit the below demographics, it doesn't mean they are not lonely. Companies can both implement manager training to raise awareness of the risk factors – allowing team leaders to cascade additional support – whilst acknowledging that loneliness doesn't discriminate.

| Specific demographics | Key triggers[14] |
|---|---|
| ❱ 16-24 age group[15] | ❱ Moving home or jobs |
| ❱ Women[1] | ❱ Experiencing discrimination |
| ❱ Parents[16] | ❱ Bereavement |
| ❱ Disabled people[17] | ❱ Being a victim of crime |
| ❱ Carers[18] | ❱ Divorce / relationship breakdown |
| ❱ Renters[1] | ❱ Children leaving home |
| ❱ People who were single or widowed[1] | ❱ Retirement |
| ❱ People in poor health or with 'limiting' health conditions[1] | |
| ❱ People who don't feel connected to their community[1] | |

It's worth highlighting that some of these issues create a vicious circle. For instance, poor health and disability can increase people's risk of experiencing loneliness. Experiencing loneliness can then cause their health to worsen, impact their employment prospects and exacerbate feelings of loneliness – employment can be a vital source of social interaction.

14. HM Government: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/750909/6.4882_DCMS_ Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update.pdf

15. ONS: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/ lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10

16. Action for Children: https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/9724/action_for_children_it_starts_with_hello_report__november_2017_lowres.pdf

17. Sense: https://www.sense.org.uk/support-us/campaigns/loneliness/

18. Age UK: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-news/archive/-8-in-10-unpaid-carers-have-experienced-loneliness/

## Everyone experiences loneliness differently

Loneliness is a personal experience – whilst humans are inherently social, we all differ in our needs and preferences around social connection. Some people may thrive on solitude – we can be alone, but not feel lonely. Conversely, we can also feel lonely when in a relationship or surrounded by others. Businesses need to take an inclusive approach when it comes to tackling loneliness in the workplace; different individuals may benefit from different types of social engagement. A 2011 study showed that for those in mid and later life, the quality of social engagement helps prevent loneliness, but for young adults it's the quantity of social engagements; strategic interventions need to take this into account[19].

## The impact of COVID–19 on loneliness

The COVID-19 outbreak has inevitably impacted day-to-day human interaction. With mandatory restrictions in place affecting workplaces, social gatherings and enforced social distancing – many people face an increased risk of temporary isolation.

Research by the Office of National Statistics has shown that lockdown-related loneliness is the factor most strongly associated with people reporting high anxiety levels. People who 'often or always' felt lonely were almost five times more likely to report high anxiety than those who 'never' feel lonely[20]. It is therefore imperative for employers to address loneliness if they want to look after their employee's mental wellbeing.

## Support for those who live alone

Although it is important to acknowledge that loneliness does not just impact those who live alone, there has been an increase in the number of one-person households in the UK. In 2019, the figure rose 8.2 million – an increase of a fifth since 1999 – and which equates to more than a third of households.

Being alone and loneliness are two separate issues which are inherently interlinked. Living alone already has a significant impact on an individual's wellbeing; those who live alone report the lowest personal wellbeing scores of all household types, and also have lower levels of disposable income than other households[5]. An increase in social isolation may additionally impact those who are already disadvantaged when it comes to wellbeing, and employers may want to provide further, targeted support for employees they know are not living with others.

19. The Journal of Psychology: Loneliness Through The Life Cycle: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00223980.2011.613875?src=recsys
20. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/coronavirusandanxietygreatbritain/3april2020to10may2020

## Tackling the loneliness challenge

Employers have an important role to play in raising awareness and understanding of loneliness. Businesses are well-placed to provide support for those feeling lonely. In 2019, the average full-time worker spent 37.2 hours a week working. Over five days, this equates to 47% of an individual's waking hours.

It's an area where charities are also calling on businesses to provide support. The recent Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness report also encouraged businesses to act – acknowledging that "business leaders have a crucial role to play... in creating communities that foster connections and help people to build relationships".

Companies can make a public commitment to reducing loneliness in the workplace by signing the the 'Campaign to End Loneliness' pledge. Not only does this signify the importance of addressing loneliness, it can also help destigmatise the problem.

''Employers have a vital role to play in tackling loneliness, and there is a clear case to do so. Everyone benefits – individuals, businesses and society and large.''

**Charles Alberts,
Head of Health Management**

### Tips for combatting loneliness in the workplace:

✔ Encourage collaboration between siloed teams – this could be lunches or networking events

✔ Develop a mentor scheme

✔ Recognise and celebrate individual achievements

✔ Ensure new hires are integrated socially

✔ Create useable social spaces – both virtually and in-person

✔ Celebrate collective wins and company goals

✔ Provide access to counselling or CBT

✔ Encourage employees to broaden their work network

✔ Allow flexible working

✔ Offer training on issues that improve relationships (e.g. conflict resolution, emotional intelligence)

✔ Encourage positive relationships at work

✔ Build support structures for those experiencing loneliness – such as Mental Health First Aiders

✔ Organise teambuilding exercises

✔ Appoint a Board member who will be responsible for the company's loneliness strategy

✔ Raise awareness of loneliness to reduce any stigma attached

# ❱ For more information contact:

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## About Aon

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