

RSM Discovery

Tips: Loneliness and working from home during the COVID-19 crisis

Friday, 27 March 2020

It is 15:30 and you just made yourself a cup of coffee in your kitchen at home. Then you thought, “wouldn’t it be nice to have a coffee chat with my colleagues now?”

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, many employees are forced to work from home and physically isolate themselves from friends and colleagues. For some, working from home may drive loneliness due to the sudden longer term disconnect from social interactions at the workplace. At the core of loneliness can be unmet expectation: we can no longer enjoy meaningful work relationships.



Why do we feel lonely when working remotely for a long time?

Folk wisdom and research suggest that working from home can promote work efficiency. But it is this strong focus on tasks and performance that may make work less meaningful. Face-to-face work interactions, the opportunities to give, support and help our colleagues or clients can make our work more meaningful.

By working remotely for a long period of time, we lose the vast majority of our spontaneous interactions with others. Also, non-verbal information from virtual work interactions is limited. For example, we can't see a friendly smile or a worrying frown through email exchanges and instant messaging. These signals, however, provide strong socio-emotional values to keep us feel connected. In addition, the COVID-19 crisis requires us to keep any social face-to-face contact to the minimum. So, not surprisingly, feeling lonely at home is now more likely.

Reducing loneliness

These four tips can help to prevent loneliness while working from home:

1. **Engage in self-disclosure.** Sharing your feelings and information is a powerful way to maintaining relationships at work. The more depth you share with your colleagues and your supervisors – for example talking about your worries about the current situation – the more likely you will feel connected and authentic. But be careful; sharing information that disrupts the way others have usually seen you may backfire. Appropriate, ethical



disclosure is key.

2. **Create meaning in virtual work.** Are you starting to feel bored by working on tasks in front of the computer? By focusing on the needs and feelings of others, you can add meaning to your work relationships and pay less attention to thoughts and emotions that trigger loneliness. You can reach out to your colleagues, give some support or advice, and say thank-you to those who have been nice and helpful to you at work. Ask yourself and your colleagues *why* you (and they) do your (their) work. This way you can create meaning to what you do. Realise and appreciate that you are doing important work – whether it's from home or the office.
3. **Think about the good-old times.** Studies have found that recollecting the positive incidents helps reduce loneliness. The next time you feel lonely working from home, try recalling a happy outing with your colleagues or eat something you might eat in the office canteen – our brains automatically associate comfort food with meaningful relationships. You may also share these “old” stories and pictures with your colleagues on socializing platforms – for the sake of nostalgia.
4. **Know what your tasks are.** At home, we get easily distracted. And if you are uncertain about your role in your team, you may feel helpless when isolated in remote working conditions. In other words, you need to know what your tasks are and how they contribute to your team work. If you are feeling uncertain about your tasks, duties, and responsibilities right now, ask your supervisor to clarify your role in the current working conditions.

Big picture takeaways

No woman/man is an island. It is normal to feel lonely while working from home, as loneliness is a signal reminding us to stay connected. And we can stay connected, be it at the office or online.

These tips were compiled by PhD candidate [Hodar Lam](#), [Professor Steffen Giessner](#) and [Dr Meir Shemla](#) from Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM), based on academic research.

References:

Lam, H., Shemla, M., & Giessner, S. R. (2019). *Why do powerful leaders feel less lonely? Upward self-disclosure as a mechanism to reduce leader loneliness*. 79th Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management Proceedings. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMBPP.2019.10232abstract>

Troisi, J. D., & Gabriel, S. (2011). Chicken soup really is good for the soul: “Comfort food” fulfills the need to belong. *Psychological Science*, 22(6), 747–753. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797611407931>

Wright, S., & Silard, A. (in press). Unravelling the antecedents of loneliness in the workplace. *Human Relations*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726720906013>

Crisis-related Research Series

This article is part of our [crisis-related research series](#): a growing collection of research-based thought pieces and opinions from RSM's academics and researchers. Topics range from tips for battling loneliness to the ethical dilemmas faced by managers and leaders.

Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM) is one of Europe's top-ranked business schools. RSM provides ground-breaking research and education furthering excellence in all aspects of management and is based in the international port city of Rotterdam – a vital nexus of business, logistics and trade. RSM's primary focus is on developing business leaders with international careers who can become a force for positive change by carrying their innovative mindset into a sustainable future. Our first-class range of bachelor, master, MBA, PhD and executive programmes encourage them to become to become critical, creative, caring and collaborative thinkers and doers. Study information and activities for future students, executives and alumni are also organised from the RSM office in Chengdu, China. www.rsm.nl

For more information about RSM or this article, please contact Danielle Baan, Media Officer for RSM, via +31 10 408 2028 or baan@rsm.nl.

[Loneliness](#), [Remote Working](#), [Working From Home](#), [Tips](#), [Meaning](#), [Task](#), [Crisis](#)

Related articles

Effective leaders let their emotions show

Barometer 2013: Cost-cutting main expectation from the New Worlds of Work



Lucas Meijs: What profit-making businesses can learn from volunteering

Lucas Meijs

Organisation



Steffen Giessner: The merging of companies is the same as merging identities

Steffen Giessner

Organisation



Why are we talking inside?

Gail Whiteman

Organisation

About the researchers



Steffen Giessner

Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Change
[See profile](#)



Meir Shemla

Assistant Professor
[See profile](#)



Ho Wa (Hodar) Lam

PhD Candidate
[See profile](#)

Stay Informed

Want to keep up with new content? Fill in your email address.

© Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University