Episode #147: The Epidemic of Loneliness at Work

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With Your Host
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Hello, and welcome to another episode of the Working Conversations Podcast, where we talk all things leadership, business communication, and trends in organizational life. I'm your host, Dr. Janel Anderson.

It's not uncommon to make friends at work. Your coworkers become your work friends, your work friends become your real friends. But these days, that's happening far less frequently. We've emerged from a global pandemic of COVID-19, and it has been replaced with a global epidemic of loneliness, and it's costing us. Individuals are feeling the toll on their mental and physical health, and organizations are feeling the toll in turnover and other costs.

Today on the podcast, we are diving into what caused this epidemic of loneliness, the mental and physical health effects of it, and, of course, how to overcome workplace loneliness. Now, in the wake of the global pandemic, we are experiencing a loneliness epidemic. This is the subject of one of my most popular keynote speeches these days. It's called "Reconnecting in a Disconnected World." Now, it's a paradox when you think about it; we have more ways to connect with one another than ever before with all the technology we have at our disposal, but we are more disconnected and lonely than ever before. In fact, loneliness is such a big issue right now that the governor of New York in November of this past year appointed a loneliness ambassador to address the serious health risks, none other than Dr. Ruth Westheimer, most notably known as the sex therapist who helped couples with intimacy issues for decades. She is now the loneliness ambassador for the state of New York.

New York is not the only jurisdiction to have a loneliness official; the United Kingdom appointed a minister for loneliness over five years ago, even before the Coronavirus pandemic back in January of 2018. So, a full-on six years ago, their first minister of loneliness was appointed. This points to the idea that loneliness was already a significant issue prior to the pandemic; COVID certainly made it worse, much, much worse. So it's bad for organizations and it's bad for individuals. According to a survey conducted in 2022, two out of three executives believe that workers are likely to soon quit their jobs because of a feeling of disconnectedness and loneliness. So senior executives are aware of this, in the competitive labor market that we're still in, any threat of turnover is bad for business. A recent study of nearly 6000 employees by the healthcare organization Cigna quantified the problem. According to their research,

loneliness cost employers more than $154 billion, billion with a B dollars per year due to lost productivity and absenteeism. Their findings mere results published in the Journal of Organizational Effectiveness in February 2022, in which the authors of a study found that lonely workers have significantly greater stress-related absenteeism and a higher likelihood of turnover compared with those who are not lonely at work.

Now, some have called loneliness the invisible enemy. Loneliness does not discriminate. Extroverts can be lonely just as much as introverts can be. Your personality type, age, race, nationality, gender, management level in the company that you work for, and so many more factors make, for the most part, absolutely no difference to loneliness. Now, there are a few categories of people who may be more predisposed to it, but loneliness can strike at any time, and it can strike anyone; it does not discriminate. Those who have to interact with people all day long are also not immune to loneliness; loneliness or lack thereof depends upon how close you feel with others at work, whether you have a strong sense of psychological safety and security at work, and whether you are able to seek support in your interpersonal relationships at work.

Loneliness takes a significant toll on people's mental and physical well-being. Before I get into the effects of loneliness, though, I want to address something that you might be thinking. If you're not lonely, you might be wondering why and listen to the rest of this podcast. So let me address that. You might not be the one who is lonely, or you might be. If you're not lonely, good for you. Just know that many of your colleagues and even friends and family members might be. They might be lonely at work; they might be lonely in their personal lives. So if you're not lonely, listen to this episode for them. Listen to see if you recognize signs of loneliness in them and think about what you can do to proactively help them through it. Obviously, recognizing that you can't solve it for them, but you can be a catalyst in them finding their way through a dark time.

Let's also be clear that your coworkers won't necessarily advertise their loneliness, and neither will you if you're the one who's lonely. It's an entirely subjective and personal feeling that there are very few people who understand you or would help you out in a time of need. That's what loneliness feels like, and only the person who feels lonely can know if they're lonely. Sometimes people don't even realize that they're lonely. In fact, you might, after listening to this podcast, realize that you are lonely at work. But the good news is that I'm going to share with you some strategies that will help you overcome loneliness should you discover that you are, in fact, lonely at work.

So let's look at exactly how many people are reporting loneliness at work, and then we'll move on to why people are so lonely at work these days and the negative impacts that it has on physical and mental health. And then, of course, I will give you some options for what you can do to mitigate it. A recent study by the consulting firm EY, Ernst and Young, found that 82% of workers that they surveyed in the United States, Brazil, China, Germany, and the United Kingdom reported feeling lonely at work. That same study notes that lonely employees are more likely to feel dissatisfied and burned out at work. A study by the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business shows that loneliness also drags down employee performance and commitment, leading to turnover and, of course, poor work performance.

So where does it all come from, and why are people lonely these days? Well, in that same Ernst and Young study I mentioned, 40% of respondents said a lack of face-to-face interactions with their coworkers was a main contributor to being lonely at work. What is super interesting is that many of those same people enjoy working from home and don't necessarily want to be back in the office full time. So we do need to address loneliness wherever it occurs; just going back to the office is not the answer. Also, research shows that loneliness, again, predating the pandemic, has come about because of so much connection with our smartphones and so little connection with other human beings. Take, for example, the experiment that I did in the last episode where I shared my six weeks of being on a digital detox or a digital diet where I was intentionally restricting my own use of screen time. I saw so many people so hooked on their screens like all the time, so it is, in part, due to our dependency and addiction to screens that we are feeling lonely again, what a paradox.

Alright, now let's look at the impacts of loneliness on your mental health and your physical health. Back in May of 2023, the US Surgeon General made the claim that loneliness's effect on mortality is equivalent to smoking up to 15 cigarettes every single day. Social isolation and loneliness contribute to a higher risk of heart disease, stroke, anxiety, depression, and even dementia. And it makes people more likely to become ill with infectious diseases when they are lonely. So let's make a quick distinction here between social isolation and loneliness because those terms were used in the Surgeon General's warning, and because it's important. So, social isolation is an objective measure that shows a lack of connection to friends, family, and community members. So literally, you can map it; you can put yourself in the middle of a diagram and list out

all of your connections around you and draw lines to those connections and then count them up.

Loneliness, on the other hand, is a subjective feeling of being disconnected to others or not having strong connections with others. One could be socially isolated, that is, having a very small number of people with whom they are connected to and not feel lonely at all. On the other hand, someone else could have many social connections and still feel lonely. Again, loneliness does not discriminate. The fact that the Surgeon General of the United States, the nation's top public health official, is raising this to our attention indicates its importance. Reports from the Surgeon General are reserved for urgent political health issues that require immediate action. So this is not to be taken lightly. Again, the issue is not new. In the 2016 Medical Journal Heart, a study was published that was a meta-study where the researchers reviewed a whole bunch of other studies looking for the impact of loneliness on heart health. Poor social relationships or loneliness resulted in a 29% increase in coronary heart disease and a 32% increase in strokes. Their findings suggest that a lack of strong social relationships is associated with a significant increase in the risk of coronary heart disease and strokes. If that's not enough to get your attention, I don't know what it is.

Alright, indeed, having close friends at work makes a positive difference in overcoming loneliness. Research released in 2023 from the Society for Human Resource Management shows that close relationships at work can have a significant positive effect on someone's career. In their study, a full 85% of US workers who were surveyed found that having close friends at work, those folks say it has positively impacted their career. Those with close friends at work also reported being significantly more likely to say they feel a strong sense of belonging in their organization, and that they're more satisfied with their job. Companies that provide meetings, companies that provide meaningful support and encourage connections may have a competitive advantage. And they can do that through better onboarding when they connect new employees with both each other and long-term employees and through designing work to be interdependent rather than done in social isolation and in establishing employee resource groups and dozens of other ways. In fact, if you're in human resources and you want to know my thoughts on this, just reach out; I am chock full of ideas.

But if you know me, and those of you who have been listening for a while, well, you know me. But if you now me, and those of you who've been listening for a while, well, you know me, you know that I'm also all about personal empowerment. You can't just sit

back on your haunches and wait for your employer to fix your loneliness. Yes, there are some things that they can and should be doing to prevent it. But let's look at what you can do about it, like right now. You've probably heard me say on this podcast that remote work has resulted in many people becoming overly transactional in their communication. Like, "I need this from you by 5 pm on Tuesday," that shows up in your email, whereas if you were in the office, they might drop by and ask you how you are or what your weekend plans are and then get down to business. So a relational piece, it's crucial to pay attention to one another and not just focus on the business at hand exclusively. That's when we get overly transactional when we're leaving out the relational part.

So overcoming loneliness does require you to be more relational, for you to be more relational with others, helping them through their loneliness or preventing it, and for yourself and loneliness that you might be feeling or might feel at some point in the future. Overcoming loneliness does, in fact, require that you go beyond superficial workplace relationships, and that can feel risky because it involves some level of vulnerability. Now you don't have to be so vulnerable as to tell other people that you're lonely, and most people won't tell you. But to overcome loneliness, you do have to build safe relationships, and that requires disclosing some personal information to the other person in order to build rapport and trust. This is definitely harder to do in a remote work environment; coworkers don't just stop by to say hello via Teams or Zoom in the same way that they do when you're co-located. So even getting a relationship off the ground at a somewhat superficial level can be challenging when working remotely.

Plus, as I was mentioning before, we tend to be very transactional when using technology to communicate at work. Getting that relational piece back into our communication is critical in building relationships to a place where you can then become vulnerable and share some personal information to deepen the relationship. And just to be clear, I am not advocating that everybody go back to a co-located work environment in order to overcome their work loneliness. Many of the same people who report being lonely, as I mentioned before, also love remote work and would not want to be back in the office full time. So we have to find a way to overcome loneliness regardless of where someone is working. So, and you knew this was coming, I want to give you some ideas.

Idea number one, start by being empathetic or more empathetic with your colleagues. Especially if something goes wrong, like someone misses a deadline or turns in subpar

work to you. Check in to find out what else is going on in their world. When we know the specific challenges that our coworkers are facing, it helps us feel closer to them and more connected in general, and it gives us a measure of compassion when something goes wrong. And it all starts with intentionally being more relational and less transactional. It starts with being empathetic. And empathy is a skill that can be developed. If you're not a naturally empathetic person, you're not off the hook; you can learn empathy, just like any other skill. Google it.

Alright, number two, put yourself out there. Find a buddy. Make a friend request a mentor. Now, this is easier to do if you're not already lonely, and it will help combat loneliness. If you're already lonely, and remember, anxiety and depression correlate with loneliness, so if you already have anxiety or depression, it can be harder to reach out to somebody to establish friendship, mentorship, and the like. So this is more like insulation against loneliness. Although if you are lonely but not overcome by anxiety and depression, I would certainly still encourage you to reach out and begin to establish a new relationship or multiple new relationships at work, whether that's going to coffee with somebody or having lunch together, whether that's on-site or virtually or merely having some small talk with them. Yeah, gotta start somewhere.

Alright, number three: If you have a job where you are in the office some of the time or all of the time, make an effort to get up and walk around. Because so much of our work is done online, even when we're in the office, the serendipitous conversations around the watercooler and the coffee pot, well, they just don't happen as frequently. So get up, walk around, make eye contact, say good morning, introduce yourself to coworkers that you don't know, even if they're not in the same part of the organization. And just see where it takes you to get up and walk around.

Number four: If you're working from home, make sure you have your camera on and that you're well-lit at least some of the time. It's easier for others to approach you and get to know you if they have additional information about what you look like and your facial expressions. Now, I know many of you are in a back-to-back meeting culture all day long in your organizations, and Zoom fatigue is real, my friends. So, I'm not advocating that you must have your camera on all day, every day. But intentionally choose to have it on at least part of the day every day. When people can see your facial expressions and other nonverbal characteristics, they'll feel more comfortable and

connected with you. And it will be that much easier to establish relationships, whether those be co-located some of the time or online all the time.

Now, number five, and this may be the most important one, my friends, have big problems. And what I mean by that is to find something at work that you care deeply about and that you can throw yourself into. Let me give you an example: One of my past executive coaching clients started a new job as the Chief Financial Officer at a new company, new to her, one week before the stay-at-home orders went into place at the beginning of the pandemic, one week before she became a C-level employee. Now, she didn't have a chance to establish any relationships in the office that were deep and meaningful before starting to work from home. Six months into her tenure as the Chief Financial Officer, the CFO, she was wondering if she had made a major mistake in taking that job. Her biggest complaint: loneliness.

As I coached her, I asked her why she took the job. She noted that some of the big challenges the company was facing were challenges that she knew she could help them solve. She talked about her technical skill and how perfectly suited she was to help this organization have more sophisticated financial management processes. She cited some specific and detailed issues, which I won't go into here to protect her anonymity and the challenges the organization was facing. I challenged her to take those issues on in a big way, to reconnect with why she wanted the job in the first place. When you throw yourself into solving big problems, it requires being in a relationship with those in your organization in a deep and meaningful way. She needed to enroll others in making change in the organization before she could start making the significant changes that she wanted to make. To enroll others in getting on board with change meant that she needed to have trusting relationships with them first. With her, what I call big problems leading the way, she found it much easier to reach out and connect with people. First around the issues and then around personal connection. She got over her loneliness and created strong relationships faster than you could have imagined. In less than 60 days, her loneliness was a distant memory.

So, if you're feeling lonely at work, a good strategy is to find yourself some big problems that align with the skills that you have to solve them and then go after them in a big way.

Okay, my friends, as we bring this episode to a close, I want to remind you that loneliness is real. Loneliness does not discriminate. Loneliness has significant financial and cultural impacts on organizations, and loneliness has dramatic and severe mental health and physical health consequences for individuals. If you're experiencing loneliness at work, use the strategies I just outlined. To recap, number one, increase your empathy for others. Number two, find a buddy, a friend, or a mentor. Number three, if you're in the office, get up and walk around more. Number four, if you're working from home, be on camera and well-lit. Number five, find big problems to solve with your expertise.

Now, these same strategies may help someone else through their loneliness as a side effect. Remember that loneliness is silent, and you cannot necessarily identify it in others. The more you reach out and connect in small but meaningful ways, the more you help yourself and others transcend the mental health and physical health negative impacts of loneliness.

Before I close, I do want to mention that if you are experiencing both depression and loneliness or anxiety and loneliness, there are other resources that are available to you. If these five ideas that I mentioned feel way out of reach because anxiety or depression is coloring your world, then I want you to go get the mental health that you need first. You can probably find that through your employee assistance program. I've talked about that in past episodes. Otherwise, Google "employee assistance program" or reach out to your human resource benefits person at your organization to see what benefits are available to you. Because if you're that deep in it, and heck, we all have moments when we are, even these five things might feel out of reach.

Remember, the future of work is not only about technology. It's about the values we uphold, the communities we build, and the sustainable growth we strive for. We need to keep exploring, keep innovating, and keep envisioning the remarkable possibilities that lie ahead.

As always, stay curious, stay informed, and stay ahead of the curve. Tune in next week for another insightful exploration of the trends shaping our professional world. If you haven't already subscribed to this podcast, please subscribe wherever you get your

podcasts, or you can go subscribe on YouTube and watch the video version there at youtube.com/JanelAndersonPhD. Alright, until next time, my friends, be well.