

Loneliness & Social Isolation at Work

When you feel alone in a room full of people

You can be surrounded by colleagues, conversations and activity - and still feel deeply alone. Workplace loneliness is not simply about how many people are around you. It is about whether you feel seen, included, safe, understood and able to belong.

What workplace loneliness can feel like

It may look ordinary from the outside: you attend meetings, answer emails, make conversation and complete your work. Internally, however, there can be a persistent sense of being separate from everyone else. You may feel that people know the professional version of you but do not really know you, or that you are tolerated rather than genuinely included.

For some people this grows after a change of team, remote or hybrid working, conflict, bullying, redundancy fears, returning after illness, becoming a manager, or feeling different from the dominant culture around them. Neurodivergent people may also experience loneliness when they are masking heavily, missing unspoken social rules, or using so much energy to fit in that connection stops feeling natural.

Signs you might be experiencing loneliness or social isolation at work

- You regularly feel invisible, overlooked or on the outside of the group.
- You eat lunch alone or avoid shared spaces even when you would like company.
- You notice colleagues making plans, sharing jokes or exchanging information without you.
- Meetings leave you feeling disconnected rather than part of a team.
- You rarely have someone at work you feel safe asking for help.
- You mask, rehearse conversations or change yourself to feel acceptable.
- You stop contributing ideas because you expect to be ignored or misunderstood.
- You feel anxious before work, especially around social situations or team events.
- You compare yourself with colleagues and assume everyone else belongs more easily.
- You withdraw after repeated experiences of rejection, exclusion or being talked over.
- You feel emotionally exhausted after appearing sociable all day.
- You dread birthdays, celebrations, networking, office parties or informal gatherings.
- You feel relief when working from home, but prolonged home working also increases isolation.
- Your confidence, motivation or enjoyment of work has started to fall.

Why it can affect wellbeing

Belonging matters. When work repeatedly feels socially unsafe or excluding, the mind can become watchful for further rejection. Small interactions may begin to carry a lot of emotional weight: a message without a reply, a meeting you were not invited to, colleagues going for coffee without asking you, or praise being shared unevenly.

Over time, loneliness can contribute to stress, low mood, anxiety, reduced confidence, difficulty concentrating and burnout. It can also create a cycle: feeling excluded makes us more likely to withdraw, and withdrawing can reduce opportunities for the kind of connection we need.

What may help

Start small rather than forcing yourself to become more sociable. One safe relationship at work can matter more than trying to fit into a whole group. Consider identifying one colleague you trust and creating a regular point of connection - a coffee, a short check-in, a shared lunch or simply asking how their week is going.

Notice the difference between loneliness and active exclusion. If information, opportunities, meetings or social contact are repeatedly being withheld from you, keep a factual record and consider speaking with your manager, HR, trade union or another appropriate workplace contact.

If social communication, sensory overload, disability or neurodivergence is part of the difficulty, reasonable adjustments may help. Examples can include clearer communication, predictable meetings, advance agendas, a named point of contact, quieter workspaces, structured check-ins or alternatives to high-pressure social events.

Outside work, protect relationships and activities that remind you that your identity is bigger than your job. Connection does not have to come entirely from colleagues.

A gentle reflection

Ask yourself: **Where do I feel most alone at work?** Is it in meetings, breaks, group chats, social events, remote working, decision-making, or when I need support? Then ask: **What would help me feel 10% more included?**

A 10% change might be one regular check-in, being copied into relevant communication, sitting with one familiar person, having clearer expectations, joining a small interest group, or telling someone you trust that work has been feeling lonely. Small, realistic changes are often easier to sustain than trying to fix everything at once.

When to reach out for more support

If loneliness is affecting your sleep, mood, confidence, ability to work, or making you feel hopeless, it is worth talking to someone. This might be a trusted person, your GP, a therapist or counsellor, an employee assistance programme, occupational health, HR, or another support service available to you.

If the isolation is connected to bullying, harassment or discrimination, you deserve to have the situation taken seriously. Keep records of specific incidents and seek appropriate workplace or independent advice.

A supportive message from Maggie

If you are reading this because work feels lonely, I want you to know that being surrounded by people does not automatically create connection. You may be doing everything expected of you and still going home feeling unseen. Please do not measure your worth by how easily you fit into a particular workplace group. Start with what would help you feel safer, more included and more able to be yourself. You do not have to solve the whole situation today. One conversation, one boundary or one supportive connection can be a meaningful beginning.

Space to Breathe Therapy