Social Distancing

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COVID-19 has rapidly become a challenge for everyone and while social distancing is an extremely important way to slow down the spread of the virus, the issue of moving suddenly from a ‘socially aware’ community within the office environment and being thrust into a homeworking environment where you can find the only way you communicate with your co-workers is via the telephone or the internet, is very real.

As a result of these extreme and sudden measures, an individual can feel the impact of working on their own very quickly. Battling questions such as how they will keep in touch; and are they able to deliver their work both safely and to the same standards without having immediate colleague support. The enforcement of lone working which many workers are currently experiencing can result in a disconnect or isolation, in extreme cases a feeling of abandonment leading to loneliness.

Feeling lonely is a normal human emotion, but when you feel loneliness for an extended period of time, it isn’t just unpleasant, it’s actually bad for your health.

While we know that isolation from a societal perspective has a negative impact on health, we don’t really know what the long term impact of enforced (and possibly prolonged) social isolation from the workplace could be. From academic research we do know that extended periods of being alone can lead to issues with sleep disturbance, which ultimately can lead to tiredness and poor decision making and retention of information. It can also impact on your overall health where your immune system can become suppressed, leading to higher levels of illness.
When there is connection to a familiar group, a sense of motivation and intention can encourage a person to take better care of themselves. The influence of others may encourage behaviour that contributes to good health, such as laughter, feeling happy and being more active.

In times like this, it’s essential that we support one another and show compassion to those who need it. This is a shared experience that’s stressful for everyone – and we don’t know how long it’s going to go on for.

Older or more vulnerable people and perhaps those without a personal support system may be more susceptible to feeling lonely if they’re forced to isolate.

Positive social interactions can help reduce loneliness. Showing genuine interest in others, sharing positive news, and bringing up shared memories can further improve our relationships, and while we can’t replace the value of face-to-face interactions, we need to be flexible and think creatively in these circumstances.

It’s important to recognise that individuals will likely need additional guidance and support in the coming weeks and months.

Here are some tips to remain connected when you’re practising social distancing or in quarantine:
Present practical information
Not knowing can be worse than knowing and one of the most important things an employer can do, is to provide useful information to its employees. This includes everything from clear guidance on what policies are in place whilst Coronavirus is active, changes that are happening across the business and resources to support employees through difficult times.

It is essential that we make the message clear, unambiguous and firmly commit how we plan to support employees in the business, especially team members. These messages are particularly powerful coming from the top, but it’s also important that managers feel empowered to communicate clearly.

Instant messaging
Communication within organisations and teams can be one of the biggest challenges when your entire workforce is remote. Chat software like Microsoft Teams, Whiteboard and WhatsApp allow seamless communication between individuals, departments, regions and the business unit. Instant messaging allows people to discuss work, brainstorm ideas and stay connected to each other throughout the workday. Encourage your team to pay extra attention to their messages right now, as this may become the primary method of communicating with you during periods of isolation.

Video conferencing
Video meetings where the participants can see each other’s expressions and react to one another in real time can replicate the benefits of face-to-face meetings you would have had in an office environment. Zoom has a screen-sharing option and live chat, which can add an extra layer of connection and comprehension to your meetings.
Supporting each other
Positive peer support has the ability to improve our resilience for dealing effectively with stress and anxiety.

So much of the way we communicate is non-verbal, and we are able to get a better feel of how someone is when we can see them during a conversation, even if we need to use technology to do that.

We do more than work
Set up support networks within your region, your department or your usual social groups. Open a video conference for individuals to drop in and out of while they eat their lunch for example or host an occasional virtual ‘coffee break’ for employees to simply chat and laugh – as they normally would in the office environment.

Speak up if you’re struggling
If you’re new to working from home, don’t underestimate the potential impact it can have on even the smallest of things, from the simple act of not having to commute or ‘get dressed’ it can take some time to tune in. You may very well find it challenging in the beginning. It demands a great amount of focus, independence and dedication.

Have regular and frank conversations with your supervisor to let them know how you’re doing from a professional and personal perspective. If you find yourself feeling isolated or overwhelmed, speak to your supervisor or to your HR representative.
Conclusion

It’s very easy when working in isolation to feel like you haven’t got the support of colleagues or leadership. Removing in person interaction makes it harder to notice when people need guidance or are going through something challenging.

In addition to operational workers, managers may also face increased pressure due to additional responsibilities, it is important to not exclude them from these plans. Cross-functional leadership support groups should also be taken into consideration.

The most important thing is to get thinking, take considered action, and be creative to see how you can help to minimise not only the spread of COVID-19, but its social and psychological effects too.

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