

Lessen Loneliness and Boost Belonging Across Generations at Work
60-90min Virtual or In-Person Program by Ryan Jenkins

Overview: *Today's workers are lonelier than ever before resulting in a disengaged, disloyal, and disenchanted workforce. Below you'll discover what's causing today's loneliness, the role inclusion plays in solving it, and several ways to decrease loneliness and increase belonging, engagement, and performance at work.*

If you're feeling lonely, you're not alone.

[Sixty-one percent of American adults](#) report they are lonely, a 7 percent increase since 2018. In addition, people are making fewer friends on the job. In 1985, [half of people](#) said they had a close friend at work. By 2004, less than a third did.

Additionally, since the outbreak of the pandemic, [75 percent of people](#) say they feel more socially isolated.

Among Generation Z workers aged 18-22, [73 percent report](#) sometimes or always feeling alone, a 4 percent increase since 2019. The next generation entering the workforce is the [loneliness of any other generation](#).

Loneliness is a growing health concern. Vivek Murthy, the former U.S. Surgeon General, estimates loneliness can [shorten a person's life by 15 years](#), equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes per day or being obese.

Loneliness also represents an employee engagement and retention issue as half of Millennials and 75 percent of Gen Zers have left a job because of mental health reasons, compared with 34 percent of other generations.

The Modern Causes of Loneliness

Loneliness is the absence of connections. Someone who is surrounded by people may still feel lonely. A connected world that's leaving so many feeling disconnected is counterintuitive and yet it's our new reality.

Here are a few reasons why humanity is experiencing more loneliness than ever before.

- **Demanding Work:** Today's modern workers have a tendency to deprioritize relationships at work and instead focus on productivity and being professional.
- **Dependency Shift:** Information is no longer centralized in a family member, neighbor, or coworker. Information is decentralized, empowering humanity to seek knowledge and help individually via YouTube.

- Mobility: More mobility in where, when, and how we work has caused people to invest less in their relationships at work and in their community.
- Technology and Social Media: Technology can reduce quality human interactions through distractions and/or by substituting lower quality online connections. Very heavy [social media users are significantly more likely to feel alone](#), isolated, left out and without companionship.
- Work Life Balance: If meaningful connections are reserved for outside of work, then today's always-on work culture leaves little to no time to pursue and cultivate meaningful connections.
- Immediacy: Today's on-demand culture has left many people opting for swift transactional digital relationships over the delayed gratification of investing in long-term relationships

The Business Impact of Loneliness

"The trends shaping how we work – increasing use of technology, more telecommuting and the always-on work culture – are leaving Americans more stressed, less rested, spending more time on social media, and less time with friends and family," said [David M. Cordani, President and Chief Executive Officer, Cigna](#). "For the business community, it is resulting in less engagement, less productivity, and lower retention levels."

Lonely workers are...

- [Two times more likely](#) to miss a day of work due to illness.
- [Five times more likely](#) to miss work due to stress.
- [Twice as often](#) to think about quitting their job.
- More inclined to believe their work is lower quality ([12 percent](#)).
- [More likely](#) to be remote workers.

For organizations to create a more engaged, productive, and loyal workforce, they must be mindful of worker loneliness. Since work is a profound place for people to create belonging, organizations and leaders have an unparalleled opportunity to provide people with a greater sense of acceptance, support and inclusion.

The Science of Loneliness

Humans are social creatures. We have a deep desire to [be accepted, cared for and involved in meaningful community](#). These desires were (and continue to be) essential for our survival. Our ancestors who roamed the plains, lived in tribes where becoming separated or banished from the tribe made survival unlikely.

This explains why loneliness creates a psychological stress state in humans. And [according to Murthy](#), “When we are lonely for a prolonged period of time that translates to a chronic stress state which leads to higher levels of inflammation in the body which damages blood vessels, tissues, and is the root of other health problems.”

Additionally, during recent experiments [neuroscientists recently discovered](#) that people who were put through an experience of exclusion, their brain would light up and it was the same part of the brain that registers physical pain. Therefore being excluded is felt biologically the same as being physically hit. Even being excluded from a group that someone doesn't respect is still harmful and creates pain.

The Significance of Inclusion

What often drives separation, isolation and exclusion isn't difference, but distance.

Humans aren't that different. In fact, the [three things all humans are wired to do](#) are survive, belong and become. These items are the hidden operating system running everyone's work and personal lives.

Humans, however, can be distant. When someone else's view, perspective or behavior is unknown, unfamiliar or unexplored, distance is created. Understanding and empathy grows with proximity. Abraham Lincoln once wisely said, “I don't like that man, I must get to know him better.”

Busyness, distractions, hostility, immaturity, ignorance, efficiency, fear and selfishness can all contribute to the distance between people. If less loneliness and greater inclusion is the goal, move towards others and close the distance between people.

A powerful sense of belonging stems from the human desire to utilize one's strengths, gifts, or talents to make a contribution that is valued by the team. Being needed reduces the risk of social abandonment, ultimately freeing people to do higher-level work.

Why Leaders Are Best Suited to Extinguish Loneliness

Work is a major source of loneliness. Remote working, switching to a new team, eating lunch while answering emails, or having no one to talk to on an off day can all contribute to people feeling lonely.

When workers feel lonely, they are [less committed and less approachable](#) which makes it less likely that others will reach out to help which compounds the problem. The opportunity to lessen loneliness and boost belonging lies in the hands of organization leaders.

Organizational leaders play a critical role in the fight against loneliness.

Perhaps the two things people want most in life are meaningful relationships and meaningful work. Organizational leaders play a unique role in that they can deliver both of those items.

For tackling loneliness, work is very fertile ground for creating connections among people.

- After sleep, [work is the activity](#) humans spend the most time engaged with.
- [People are more lonely](#) when they don't have good relationships with their coworkers
- [People are less lonely](#) when they have just one work friend who they feel connected to, understood by, and can share ups and downs with.
- People have [high trust in their employers](#) (more than media and other institutions)
- Leaders and their commitment to employee's success is the [most significant driver of employee happiness](#) at work
- [86 percent of people](#) say it's important that a company's culture supports mental health

The growing concern of mental health and loneliness presents an opportunity for organizations and leaders to improve the well-being and health of it's employees and thus boosting belonging, engagement, and performance.

How Leaders Can Lessen Loneliness and Boost Belonging at Work

1. Socialize Smarter

Create connections beyond traditional socializing. While socializing outside of work (happy hours, company parties, etc.) can [reduce loneliness](#), group conversations tend to stay shallow and people tend to talk about what they have in common which is work. One-on-one conversation or doing an activity together is more likely to create deeper connections.

For example, some UK companies have [created connection spaces](#), such as a “Chatty Table or Friendly Bench,” where the expectation is for people to connect when present in those spaces. Other organizations have created micro-communities where people connect based on similar interests, such as running before work or salsa dancing. Recently, [my company helped The Home Depot](#) create an onboarding scavenger hunt where new hires were not only oriented to the work and workspace but also to the people inside the organization.

2. Prompt Personal Sharing

When people feel they do not need to hide their true selves at work, they [are less lonely](#).

One of the primary [hallmarks of a high-performing team](#) is psychological safety, the belief that you won't be punished when you make a mistake. Create opportunities for individuals to share aspects of their personal lives with the goal of seeing the human behind the job. Ways to prompt

personal sharing might be to have a bring your kids or parents to work day, provide a virtual tour of your home office, or carve out five minutes each meeting to have someone share a personal anecdote.

For example, Vivek Murthy, the former U.S. Surgeon General, created [the “Inside Scoop” exercise](#) where his team devoted five minutes once a week during their all-hands meeting where one person would share pictures of anything they wanted as long as it wasn’t related to their current job. One researcher on Murthy’s team was perceived as very detailed oriented and “nerdy” by her colleagues but that changed once they saw the pictures of her marathon training and heard about how she qualified for the U.S. olympic team. She saw herself as an athlete, not just a researcher, and now her colleagues saw that too.

3. Promote Work-Life Balance

Employees [are less lonely](#) among employers that promote good work-life balance and when they can “leave work at work.”

Work-life balance should be pursued and consistently reevaluated by any organization. Enabling telecommuting, prioritizing volunteering, supporting vacation, offering childcare, and extending parental leave are all examples of how organizations can help employees strike better work-life balance. [Read this](#) for more work-life balance ideas.

For example, Facebook and IKEA recently began offering new parents (mothers and fathers) four months of paid baby leave. And JPMorgan Chase recently joined other Wall Street banks in telling its employees to take weekends off in order to improve their work-life balance.

4. Create a Communication Agreement

When employees feel that technology helps them make meaningful connections with coworkers and when technology is not perceived as a replacement for in-person interactions, [employees are less lonely](#).

Ubiquitous connectivity has eroded many boundaries we once had between work and life. Communication can be impersonal and incessant if appropriate boundaries aren’t established.

Establish a communication agreement among the team that enables more meaningful connections and ensures every person is heard. Items a communication agreement can highlight are response time expectations, how face-to-face interactions are to be prioritized, preferred communication channels, appropriate technology for the type of information, “do not disturb” timeframes (vacation, evenings, deep work, etc.), channels for urgent communications only, participation expectations during meetings, etc.

5. Help Them Help Others

Helping others helps people feel less lonely. Adam Grant, organizational psychologist and New York Times bestselling author, recently [shared on his podcast](#) that he was feeling alone one month, so he began sending emails to people telling them why he appreciated them. As a result, he felt less lonely.

Additionally, relationships don't have to be lasting to be meaningful. A [brief forty-second positive interaction has significant impact](#) on both people and can alleviate loneliness as long as the moment leaves an individual feeling seen. For example, offering a pen to someone who might be trying to fill out a form can make someone feel seen and less stressed.

Leaders should encourage their team to proactively look for ways to help someone else. As demonstrated by Grant, it doesn't take a lot of effort to move from lonely to connected.

*And learn additional strategies in Ryan's program.
Contact Ryan to explore further at ryan@ryan-jenkins.com.*

About Ryan Jenkins



Ryan Jenkins is an internationally-recognized [keynote speaker](#) & [author](#) on the topics of leadership, generational differences & the future of work. He is the co-founder of [SyncLX](#) which creates lasting learning experiences for organization's #1 asset, their people. He also serves as President of [Top Rock University](#), a digital university where next-generation students can earn a bachelor's degree via their smartphone. He is an active columnist for [Inc](#) & [Entrepreneur Magazine](#). Ryan lives in Atlanta, GA with his wife, 3 children & dog.