

Dealing with isolation

Supporting colleagues

With the country in lockdown, many people who used to enjoy the hustle and bustle of working in a busy office are now finding themselves feeling increasingly isolated as they adhere to social distancing rules.

Being suddenly cut off from society can have a big impact on our mental and physical health, so it's more important than ever to look after ourselves and support the people we work with.

Who might be feeling isolated?

Because we all react to change differently, in unprecedented times like this any colleague might feel isolated to a degree, as they come to terms with their new unique set of circumstances. While no one is immune to feelings of isolation they might be particularly common for:

- those who live alone
- single parents
- people with caring responsibilities
- people with existing mental or physical disabilities
- people with challenging relationships or circumstances at home
- those with financial concerns,
- people who're required to self-isolate or be 'shielded' due to age or health conditions.

From an inclusion perspective, it's really important that colleagues understand that everyone's situation and response will be unique to them. Everyone has different ways of coping so it's important to be kind and patient with others. Remember that you might not know the full story about what each colleague is going through in their personal lives, so empathy is important.

Staying connected

Working from home can be very insular, especially if your role doesn't require you to attend many meetings. With that in mind, it's important to have regular virtual check-ins with colleagues and your teams.

Ensure that you book a regular amount of time in the diary throughout the week to check-in with your team.

In advance of your check-in, find an online tool that works for your team and organisation's IT capabilities. This might be WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, Zoom or simply a conference call by telephone.

Work doesn't always have to be a discussion point, but asking people how they are feeling and having conversations about wellbeing is important.

Maintaining a balance

Being on lockdown means you no longer have a commute and can't go out to socialise. With more time on our hands, it's easy to fall into the trap of working longer hours and taking fewer breaks when working from

home. Try to ensure that you maintain a positive work/life balance and encourage your colleagues to do the same. Some tips include:

- Putting reminders in your diary when you plan to finish working and make sure to break for lunch.
- Using your lunch break to get some fresh air and have a daily walk if you can or spend time in the garden, if you have one
- If you are able to, try to put some time in for a daily workout
- Making time to speak to family and friends
- Using your evenings and weekends to learn something new

Getting additional support

If you are struggling with feelings of isolation or anxiety and feel that you would benefit from additional support why not complete a [Wellness Action Plan \(WAP\)](#) and share it with your line manager or HR Representative? If you already have one then it might be helpful to review it in light of recent changes.

You can keep updating and referring to your plan during your 1-2-1s with your line manager. You don't need to have a mental health problem in order to feel the benefits of having a plan. It just means that you already have practical steps in place to ensure you are supported when you aren't feeling great.

If you need to talk why not see if your business has mental health first aiders, who are usually colleagues who have been trained to listen without judgement and sign post to support available within your organisation. Charities such as the [Samaritans](#) and [Mind](#) also have help lines which you can call if you are struggling with your mental health as a result of isolation.

Take advantage of technology

Use communication/collaborative working platforms to connect with your colleagues and work together. It's a good idea to use a range of technologies so you're not always typing or looking at a screen – switch things up with a telephone call or video call so you can see someone face-to-face.

Use your personal technology tools to maintain your social life. Whether it's saying hi over a cup of coffee for breakfast or hosting an all-out virtual dinner party at the weekend, video calling allows you to see people's reactions and feel like you're in the same room. Get in touch with friends and put a date in the diary, just as you would for a face-to-face meet-up, so you have something to plan and look forward to. [You can also try some of the apps included in this article.](#)

Make your own good news

You can balance the need to stay well informed against the constant barrage of anxiety inducing headlines by setting up a 'good news' WhatsApp group with friends or colleagues. It might be something small like a new recipe you've just tried or a photo that made you smile. It'll give you things to talk about other than coronavirus.

Laughter is an incredible mood booster so you could share a funny story or use social media apps like TikTok or Snapchat to make short videos that'll make your friends and family laugh. Not only will you pass some time making them, you'll have fun too.

Start a book club

Book clubs have been growing in popularity over the past few years; if you're missing your regular catch-ups, keep them in the diary and meet up virtually instead. If you're not yet in a book club, try searching

online for local ones or set up your own with your colleagues, friends or family. [Amazon](#) has a list of the Top 100 free e-books on its website that you can download straight to your Kindle or tablet using the Kindle app.

Keep moving

Exercising will help you feel better, in both mind and body. Whilst going to a gym or your regular fitness class may not be possible, you can still get active at home without the need for any special equipment. Exercises like press ups, squats, lunges and burpees require nothing more than your bodyweight and will really get your heart rate going. There are lots of exercise tutorials available on YouTube, including yoga and circuit training. Have a look for one that you like and that uses the equipment you have available to you. It's important that it's enjoyable and within your physical capabilities, so start off with something basic and follow any medical guidance necessary.

There is [healthy lifestyle](#) support on the NHS [Live Well](#) as well as range of free courses and classes available online through [NHS Fitness Studio](#), as well as their popular [Couch to 5K app](#). Remember to listen to your body carefully. Warm up and cool down, and don't overexert yourself. You can even workout with a friend by setting up a web cam on your phone, tablet or laptop.

Don't forget...

Not everyone has access to or is able to use technology to stay connected. We need to make an extra effort to ensure these people are not left behind so please remember that everyone's situation will be different and to be as inclusive as possible.