

# Managing Remote Workers: Preventing Isolation and Loneliness



The sudden move to working at home has been a boon to some and a bane to others. Even the same person can feel differently about the experience from one day to the next. Realistically, remote work is likely to continue for a while, so managers need to take proactive steps to address the downsides of remote work: isolation and loneliness.

Feeling isolated is not necessarily the same thing as feeling lonely. Isolation is more about access. An isolated employee is cut off from coworkers, resources and opportunities. If this person is given access to the people, information, equipment and technology they need, they may be able to work effectively and happily from home. If they aren't equipped with the tools they need, they could become frustrated, unmotivated and eventually dissatisfied and lonely. On the other hand, employees may have all the tools and access to the resources they need but can still feel lonely due to being disconnected from coworkers.

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Unfortunately, loneliness has often carried a stigma. In the past, people weren't likely to admit they were lonely; the admission seemed shameful or weak. Hiding loneliness only makes it worse, and studies have shown that being lonely can take a toll on people's physical health. Perhaps one of the silver linings of the COVID-19 pandemic may be that people are talking more freely about loneliness, even sharing the ways they're dealing with it.

So where do you fit in this conversation as a manager of remote employees?

Managers can't predict how their employees will react to prolonged work-at-home orders, and you certainly can't read minds, so the first thing you need to do is talk with your employees. Then you need to assess the information you've gathered and take practical steps to help prevent employee isolation and loneliness.

### Have a Conversation with Each of Your Employees

If you ask employees a general question such as "How are you doing?" don't be surprised if the answer is "Fine." There are many reasons why your employees may not tell you they're struggling: job security fears, not wanting to burden you, fear their reputation as a dependable employee may be downgraded, even fear you can't or won't help. The antidote? Venture beyond vague questions. Listen attentively. Be sincere and understanding in your response.



Ask specific questions to get to the heart of the matter:

- What's been the most difficult/frustrating/surprising thing about working from home?
- What resources/tools/technology/training would make your job easier right now?
- How can I help you succeed in your job?

Listen attentively:

- Don't multi-task while having this conversation
- Repeat back in your own words what the employee has said to make sure you've understood
- Ask follow-up questions

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Be sincere and understanding:

- Don't pretend to be superhuman--empathize by admitting some of your own struggles (without unloading on your employee)
- Avoid judging employees' feelings/reactions
- You don't have to become a therapist—you're not trying to solve every emotional issue the employee faces, but you are trying to help them navigate a path forward

### Preventing Isolation

Preventing isolation involves helping your employees get access to the people and resources they need.

- What tasks are they unable to do from home that they could easily do at the office? How can you help resolve these difficulties?
- What technology or apps can your employees use to interact and collaborate more efficiently? Do they need help learning how to use these tools? Do you need to get your IT department involved?
- Does your team use more than just email to stay in contact? Have you tried conference calls, video calls, as well as chat and messaging apps to keep the lines of communication open, timely and vibrant?



To prevent feelings of “out of sight, out of mind,” you also need to make sure your employees know they count, that their contribution is important and their unique talents and skills are valued.

- Publicly acknowledge employees for a job well done
- Share a “Great Idea of the Week,” highlighting a different person each time
- Applaud employees for reaching out to other coworkers to problem-solve and collaborate

### Preventing Loneliness

To prevent employees from feeling lonely, you need to create a sense of connection between coworkers and to the organization. The casual hallway and break room banter employees were used to in the office is way more important than you might have thought, so think about ways to re-create social interactions for remote employees.

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- Start conference and video calls with a few minutes of social time at the beginning--ask employees to share dishes they've been cooking, shows they've been watching or creative ways they've been getting exercise
- Use online messaging apps and channels to share (appropriate) photos, memes and inspirational quotes
- Encourage virtual social groups unrelated to work projects, such as book or gardener clubs, dance enthusiast meetups, coffee/tea socials, cocktail hours, lunch with the work gang, etc.
- Engage in team building games or virtual group "field trips" to online destinations such as museums (find over 50 ideas for virtual team events at <https://museumhack.com/virtual-team-building-for-remote-teams/>)
- Use peer mentoring, especially when you can't be available to less experienced employees as much as you'd like

Remote work has been a big adjustment for many people. Certainly, there are benefits to working at home, but with a little effort, even the issues of isolation and loneliness can be resolved or at least minimized. Just remember to:

- Have a conversation with each of your employees about their remote work experience
- Help employees get access to the people and resources they need, and acknowledge their contribution as a whole
- Create a sense of connection between coworkers.

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