

The SABPP™

FACT SHEET

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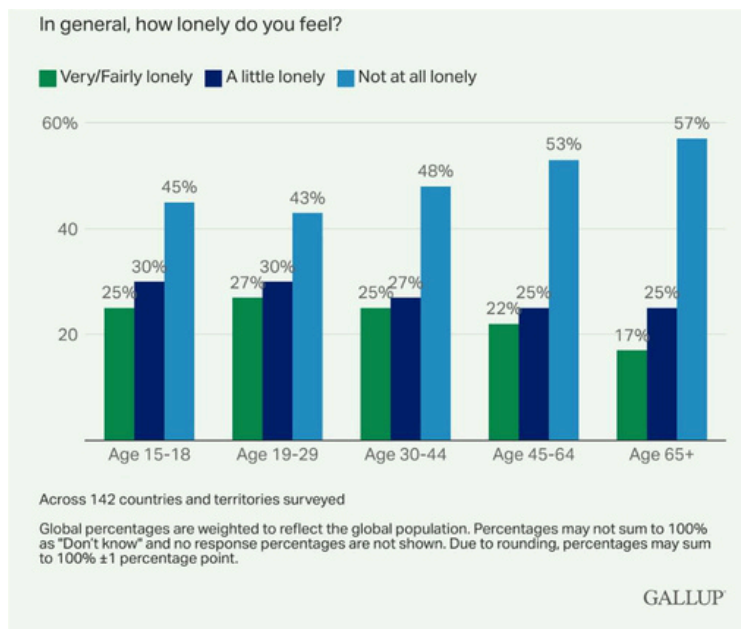


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WORKPLACE LONELINESS

Introduction

Globally concern has been raised regarding loneliness. It is seen as a significant socio-economic issue, and this was even before the COVID pandemic and its aftermath. In 2023, Gallup estimated that “nearly one in four people worldwide – which translates into more than a billion people – feel very or fairly lonely, according to a recent Meta-Gallup survey of more than 140 countries”¹. The below figure illustrates the estimates for various age groups in the survey. Other government and non-government agencies, such as the World Health Organization, UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Tackling Loneliness, and the US Surgeon General, have also called attention to what some describe as the ‘loneliness epidemic’ and the need to address it (Bryan et al., 2023)². We should note that this description of an ‘epidemic’ is contested by some³. Whether it qualifies as an epidemic or not, we cannot dismiss the concern raised globally.



Source: Gallup (2023a)⁴

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/512618/almost-quarter-world-feels-lonely.aspx>

The survey did not include a sample from China. The article suggests that if it is included this may increase the estimate.

https://www.psychologytoday.com/za/blog/the-psychology-of-work/202402/the-epidemic-of-loneliness#:~:text=Some%20say%20that%20loneliness%20has%20reached%20epidemic,community%20%20**Exploring%20something%20new%20and%20different**

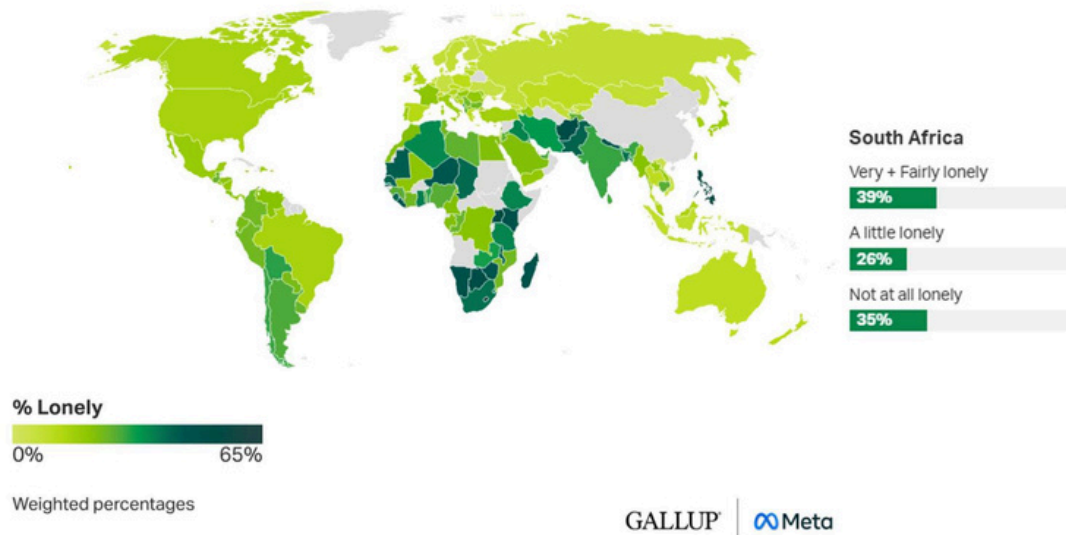
² Bryan, B. T., Andrews, G., Thompson, K. N., Qualter, P., Matthews, T., & Arseneault, L. (2023). Loneliness in the workplace: A mixed-method systematic review and meta-analysis. *Occupational Medicine*, 73(9), 557-567.

³ For a contrasting view on the supposed epidemic see the following:

https://ourworldindata.org/loneliness-epidemic?utm_source=dco.beehiiv.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=the-future-of-nfts

⁴ <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/512618/almost-quarter-world-feels-lonely.aspx>

The figure below shows the percentages of people feeling lonely across countries. This is in terms of a colour scheme as indicated in the bottom left part of the illustration. We can note variations across countries. The percentages for South Africa are presented as an insert on the right side of the figure⁵. A 2025 Guardian article states that according to a June 2025 report by the World Health Organization “Africa is the loneliest continent on Earth [with almost] a quarter (24%) of people there reported feeling lonely” (Johnson, 2025)⁶.



Source: Gallup (2023b)⁷

Recently, loneliness in the workplace or workplace loneliness has gained public and policy as well as research attention (Bryan et al., 2023). A 2026 CIPD article reports on a UK poll which suggests that 42 per cent of the employees surveyed “have considered leaving or actually left their employer because of workplace loneliness”⁸. In this Fact Sheet we explore workplace loneliness. We begin with a definition of workplace loneliness and then explore some of the misconceptions about its causes and why we need to consider a range of individual, team, job, occupation, organisational and social factors. Thereafter, we explore the outcomes of workplace loneliness and the ways to address these.

⁵ These percentages can be supplemented by studies of specific age cohorts in South Africa. For example, see the following research report on loneliness in adolescents:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02673843.2025.2495877#abstract>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/aug/12/africa-loneliest-continent-social-isolation-western-culture-technology-urbanisation-friendship#:~:text=Loneliness%20is%20not%20recognised%20as%20a%20problem,people%20do%20not%20want%20to%20discuss%20it.>

⁷ <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/509675/state-of-social-connections.aspx>

⁸ <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1946833/loneliness-epidemic-driving-workplace-disengagement-turnover-poll-finds>

Definition

Loneliness can be defined as the “subjective dissatisfaction arising from a mismatch between the quality and quantity of relationships a person desires and has in reality” (Bryan et al., 2023, p.557). The focus is on the subjective experience of an individual and the perceived quality and quantity of relationships in relation to what the individual desires. Workplace loneliness can be defined as loneliness that is “experienced specifically within the workplace or resulting from aspects of an individual’s job or work [where there is] dissatisfaction with professional relationships” (Bryan et al, 2025)⁹. The focus is on the subjective experience of an individual of their dyadic relationships or connectedness with others in the workplace. This definition though may ignore the more social aspects or dimensions of workplace loneliness, including group identity and dynamics as well as social identities and norms. Here, we could consider the debates on diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging.

It is important that we neither pathologise nor diminish workplace loneliness. We may feel lonely from time to time or experience transient loneliness. However, this is different from sustained, chronic or debilitating workplace loneliness or when it leads to negative wellbeing or organisational outcomes, especially when individuals perceive it to be beyond their control.

Misconceptions about causes

Hadley et al. (2024) state that one of the key misconceptions is that workplace loneliness is due to the uptake of remote or flexible working arrangements during the COVID pandemic. Firstly, loneliness in general has been prevalent prior to the COVID pandemic and the attendant increase in remote or flexible working arrangements. These working arrangements may exacerbate for some individuals their experience of workplace loneliness, but it is not the primary cause or factor thereof. This means there is no simple or one-directional relationship between remote working arrangements and workplace loneliness. Hadley et al. (2024) in their study found that “whether someone works five days in the office or just two days in the office **makes no difference** when it comes to level of loneliness” (bold added, p.70)¹⁰. This means that returning to the office or the frequency of being at the office will not address workplace loneliness as it misdiagnoses the cause of it. Neither will in office team work automatically result in less workplace loneliness. The earlier cited 2026 CIPD article states that “fixing loneliness isn’t **about where** people work, it’s about how the **culture works**” (bold added)¹¹. This includes the nature and quality of team interactions and relationships, the leadership culture and practice, and how remote working is designed and managed. These are not the only factors. We need to consider a range of individual, team, job, occupation, organisational and social factors and dynamics that lead to workplace loneliness. As Soler-Gonzalez et al. (2017) noted, “loneliness is a complex phenomenon that is an outcome of numerous factors related to unsatisfactory human connections at different levels”¹².

⁹ Bryan, B. T., Triantafillopoulou, E., Parsons, V., Arseneault, L., & Matthews, T. (2025). Conceptualising workplace loneliness: A qualitative investigation with UK workers. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 60(10), 2325-2337.

¹⁰ Hadley, C. N., & Wright, S. L. (2024). We're Still Lonely at Work. *Harvard Business Review*, 103(11-12), 68-77.

¹¹ <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1946833/loneliness-epidemic-driving-workplace-disengagement-turnover-poll-finds>

Hadley et al. (2024) state that in their “conversations with executives, [they] found that [the executives] often blame loneliness on the “neediness” of certain (usually younger) employees and their unrealistic desire to forge many close relationships at work” (p.72). In this way the executives shift the focus and responsibility to individuals, rather than consider the organisational factors that may cause and exacerbate workplace loneliness. In contrast, Hadley et al. found that “loneliness can affect anyone, regardless of how much they desire social connection in a work setting” (ibid). They also found that “introverts are more likely to be lonely at work than extroverts, even though they tend to have less need for connection” (ibid). They further found that an individual could experience workplace loneliness in one organisation, but the opposite in another organisation. Here we can recall the CIPD article citing the UK poll where some participants suggested they will leave an employer due to experiencing workplace loneliness there. These observations reinforce the point that we need to consider a range of individual, team, job, occupation, organisational and social factors and dynamics that lead to workplace loneliness. For example, personality factors, job levels, occupational groups, nature of work, quality of team relationships, organisational climate and culture, and the ways in which technology is adopted and deployed. These are being identified and elaborated on as the body of research is developing.

Organisational outcomes

There are various outcomes of workplace loneliness¹³. As noted above in relation to the causes or antecedents, these are being identified and elaborated on as the body of research is developing. The outcomes are similarly at various levels, from individual and team to the organisational levels of an organisation. It impacts the subjective experience of individuals and teams, including their attention, cognition, emotion, and motivation. It also impacts the performance of individuals, teams and the organisation. The various outcomes include:

- increased stress and decreased wellbeing
- feeling disconnected due to perceived lack of team and manager support
- decreased individual engagement, commitment and performance
- cyberloafing or engagement in other distraction activities
- reduction in organisational citizenship behaviour or the emergence of counterproductive work behaviours
- increased absenteeism

¹² Soler-Gonzalez, J., San-Martín, M., Delgado-Bolton, R., & Vivanco, L. (2017). Human connections and their roles in the occupational well-being of healthcare professionals: A study on loneliness and empathy. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1475-1490.

¹³ Domènech-Abella, J., Mundó, J., Haro, J. M., & Muntaner, C. (2025). Workplace and non-workplace loneliness: A cross-sectional comparative study on risk factors and impacts on absenteeism and mental health among employees in Spain. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 60(10), 2289-2299.

Park, C., Majeed, A., Gill, H., Tamura, J., Ho, R. C., Mansur, R. B., & McIntyre, R. S. (2020). The effect of loneliness on distinct health outcomes: A comprehensive review and meta-analysis. *Psychiatry Research*, 294, 113514.

- decreased productivity
- strained team relationships and motivation levels
- increased turnover

Organisational interventions

Given the various factors, we find that there are a range of interventions recommended to address workplace loneliness itself and/or its outcomes. These include:

- proactive and reactive wellbeing interventions, including stress management and mindfulness
- providing peer or group-based support
- creating awareness and structured opportunities for individuals to seek support which could include mentorships
- providing training and developmental opportunities for interpersonal and social skills enhancement
- purposeful design of work and working arrangements, including flexible and remote working arrangements
- rethinking the design of spaces and time of teams and individual employees (see the March and April 2022 Fact Sheets), which offer formal and informal relationship building and enhancement opportunities
- managing team development and dynamics and creating constructive spaces and times for team relationship building and open communication
- organisation development interventions including culture change and leadership development to ensure inclusive workspaces and address specific issues such as workplace loneliness and isolation

Studies do suggest that the working environment can help reduce general loneliness, as it seems to be higher within the group of unemployed persons relative to employed persons. However, as noted above, it depends on the nature and quality of the working environment and the relationships therein.

Conclusion

Workplace loneliness is a complex phenomenon involving individual, team, organisational and social dimensions. One of the misconceptions is that the uptake of remote working during and post the COVID pandemic is the primary cause of workplace loneliness. This assumes a simple one-directional relationship between remote working arrangements and workplace loneliness and uses remote working arrangements as a ‘scapegoat’. The Fact Sheet discusses this and other misconceptions. It then outlines the organisational outcomes of workplace loneliness and ways to address it.

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