

Tip Sheet – Isolation & Connection

Roadmap reference: Build Resilience and Coping Skills

Isolation and Connection

Humans are designed to be social beings, so feelings of isolation, loneliness and disconnection from others can have a detrimental effect on both physical and mental health. In our industry long haul driving, with the separation from home and family, and working in warehouses where there is limited opportunity to connect with others can be extremely challenging. (Although we should be mindful that some people actively choose such jobs because they like their own company and prefer limited interaction with others).

Feelings of loneliness and isolation along with disconnection from others can be a major risk factor contributing to poor mental health outcomes. Poorer social relationships are associated with an increased risk of physical ailments and contribute to mental health concerns, including depression.

Whilst tending to your physical needs is important, ensuring your relationships and social bonds are maintained promotes good health. Strong relationships, and a sense of belonging to your community, are vital for maintaining and improving mental health and wellbeing.

Key Signs of Loneliness

Feelings of isolation and loneliness are different for everyone and can impact overall mental health and wellbeing. Even if you don't feel like you're lonely, there are signs which are important to look out for such as:

- Feeling tired and exhausted all the time due to fragmented sleep. Lonely individuals are more likely to experience shorter duration and poorer quality sleep.
- Materialism and increased focus on buying things is linked to loneliness and may suggest an attempt to point fill a void
- Feeling more stressed than usual, as loneliness can cause higher levels of stress
- Weight gain, which is a common side effect of loneliness. The pleasures of food can provide a short-term distraction from emotional pain.
- Weakened immune system and an increased susceptibility to viral infections, both of which are associated with loneliness

What a Workplace Can Do to Help with Isolation and Connection

Workers spend a good part of their lives at work, so supportive and respectful relationships with colleagues is vital. Reducing the impact of isolation through increasing connections may lead to better health and wellbeing outcomes for all staff. Below are some tips:

1. Assess

If you notice signs of a change in a staff member's level of contact with family or friends, this could be a sign that something is amiss. For example, a staff member may stop referring to a regular family dinner or no longer mention someone that they used to discuss frequently.

Sometimes people make the decision to reduce or end their contact with family and friends for good reasons, including reasons that protect their mental health. However, if the change seems out of character a quiet conversation about reconnection and engagement may be worthwhile.

2. Connect

Encourage connection through deliberate and regular contact with staff. This can be tricky where staff are remote from the workplace. They might, for example, be on a long haul drive or work from home. Phone calls that disrupt driver rest or distract from the driving task can be unsafe, so find a time and means appropriate to the situation.

Having meaningful connections is an integral part of the human experience and provides protective factors for mental health. Being familiar with a worker's baseline 'normal' better equips you to notice the verbal and physical cues that something might not be right.

3. Maintain

Try to encourage staff to maintain good relationships as much as possible, both within and outside of the workplace. Provide pleasant, clean and functional shared spaces such as breakrooms that encourage connection and interaction. Actively support work/life balance by discouraging consistently long hours and emphasising the importance of life outside of work.

4. Review

Familiarise yourself with the signs of loneliness and isolation. Make discrete inquiries where you sense that a worker may be alienated from their family or community or socially withdrawing.

What an Individual Can Do to Help with Loneliness and Maintain Connection

- Make the most of the time you spend with the people in your life. Loved ones will remember the quality rather than quantify of time you spend with them.
- Be a part of your local community where possible through involvement in sport, social activities and events.
- Break through the stereotype of being a stoic, silent, hardworking person and talk through any mental health concerns you may be struggling with
- Join an online supportive community which offers meaningful connections and like-minded interests or even create a group on social media
- Listen to audio books, podcasts or series which can be downloaded ahead of time and coordinate what you are listening to with a friend or loved one so you can discuss chapters and insights as you go.
- Use a digital marathon app as a team or group to go walking or jogging anywhere in the world.

Additional Resources:

For further information on starting conversations with others at work, or even checking in with yourself, go to [Healthy Heads Trucks & Sheds Toolbox talks](#).

For further information on loneliness and isolation, go to [Healthy Heads Trucks & Sheds resources](#)

To help check in on your own wellbeing, download the Healthy Heads App on your mobile device