The Power of Social Ties in Reducing Workplace Absenteeism

Wendy Coduti, PhD

Regional Director, Health, Productivity Analytics & Consulting Practice, Prudential

LaToya Rodriguez, MS, CRC

Regional Director, Health, Productivity Analytics & Consulting Practice, Prudential

Rachel Wesley, Med, CRC, LCMHC, CEAS

Director, Strategic Workplace Solutions, Prudential

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Meet your presenters

Wendy Coduti, PhD
Regional Director
Health, Productivity
Analytics &
Consulting Practice
Prudential

LaToya Rodriguez, MS, CRC
Regional Director
Health, Productivity
Analytics & Consulting
Practice Prudential

Rachel Wesley, Med, CRC, LCMHC, CEAS,
Director
Strategic Workplace
Solutions
Prudential

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What we will cover...

- Overview of loneliness including risk factors and implications for employees and employers

- How to assess the level of loneliness within your workforce

- Strategies and practices for minimizing absences by fostering social connection in the workplace

What is loneliness?

- Loneliness arises when there is a significant gap between the social connections we want and those we currently possess.

- Of the adult workforce, 62% reported being lonely.[1]

- Both loneliness and social isolation can be due to cultural, demographic, and societal factors.[2]

[1] Lustig, S & Bowers, A Empowering Employers to Address Loneliness in the Workforce (umaryland.edu) Journal of Employee Assistance, EAPA. 10/2022.
[2] "Health Risks of Social Isolation and Loneliness." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 30 Mar. 2023, https://www.cdc.gov/social-connectedness/risk-factors

Risk Factors

- Income below $50,000 per year

- Health conditions like depression, chronic illness, or other disabilities

- Discrimination and/or marginalization

- Stress due to limited resources or difficulty accessing resources (transportation, language barriers, living in a rural area)

- Living alone or being unmarried/unpartnered

- Victim of abuse and/or violence

- Major life transitions such as loss of a job, divorce, or death of a loved one[1]
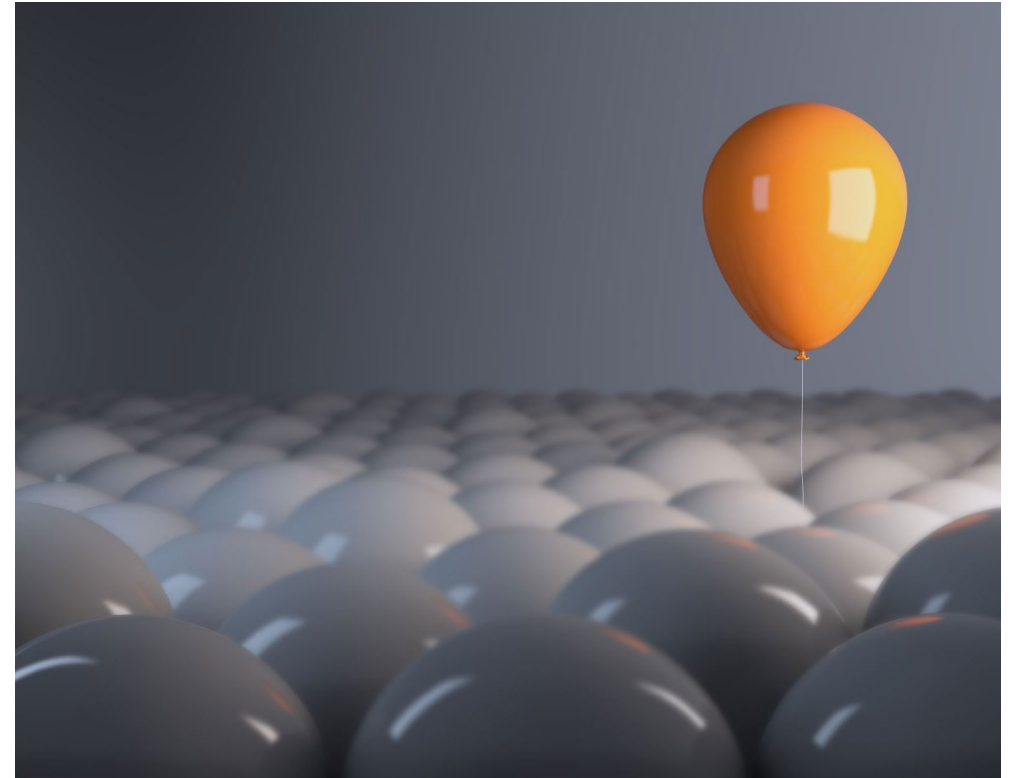
[1] "Health Risks of Social Isolation and Loneliness." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 30 Mar. 2023, https://www.cdc.gov/social-connectedness/risk-factors/

Employee Implications of Loneliness

- Increased risk heart disease (29%) and stroke (32%)[1]

- Mortality rates due to loneliness equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day[2]

- Health consequences of loneliness are comparable to those caused by obesity, inactivity, and air pollution[3]

- Loneliness has been shown to lead to an increase in psychosis, personality disorders, depressive symptoms, suicide and increase risk of Alzheimer's Disease and dementia by 50%[4]

- Difficulty making and keeping relationships which can contribute to lower self-esteem and increase risks of social isolation[5]

[1] "Health Risks of Social Isolation and Loneliness." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 30 Mar. 2023, https://www.cdc.gov/social-connectedness/risk-factors/

[2] General, US Surgeon. "Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation." The US Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community 2023 (2023).

[3] Holt-Lunstad, Julianne. "The potential public health relevance of social isolation and loneliness: Prevalence, epidemiology, and risk factors." Public Policy & Aging Report 27.4 (2017): 127-130.

[4] Hawkley, Louise C., and John T. Cacioppo. "Loneliness matters: A theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms." Annals of behavioral medicine 40.2 (2010): 218-227.

[5] Lyyra, Nelli et al. "The Association between Loneliness, Mental Well-Being, and Self-Esteem among Adolescents in Four Nordic Countries." International journal of environmental research and public health vol. 18,14 7405. 11 Jul. 2021, doi:10.3390/ijerph18147405

Employer Implications

- Lonely employees are twice as likely to quit and have higher rates of absenteeism (5.7 days more), costing employers more than $154 billion annually.[1]
    - Feeling of dissatisfaction with their job
    - Decreased productivity
    - Higher rates of burnout
    - Decreased risk taking
    - Lack of motivation
    - Struggle with cohesion

[1] Bowers, Anne, et al. "Loneliness influences avoidable absenteeism and turnover intention reported by adult workers in the United States." Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance 9.2 (2022): 312-335.

Assessing Loneliness

- Scales
    - Loneliness at Work Scale[1]
    - UCLA Loneliness Scale[2]

- Current data
    - Employee surveys
        - Connection and belonging
        - Employee resource groups
        - Where is there "noise"
    - Retention and demographic data
    - Participation and engagement
    - Productivity
    - Absenteeism and presenteeism

[1] Wright, Sarah L., Christopher DB Burt, and Kenneth T. Strongman. Loneliness in the workplace: Construct Definition and Scale Development. 2006
[2] Russell, Daniel W. UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3): Reliability, Validity, and Factor Structure. Journal of Personality Assessment 66.1 (1996): 20-40

How HR Is Tackling Loneliness[1]

- Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University:
  - Created the Eagle Guide program, a buddy system matching new employees with current ones based on shared interests.
  - Encourages connection through shared experiences, like riding with student pilots.

- University of Mississippi:
  - Provides three wellness hours per month by law for physical, mental, or social well-being.
  - Offers robust programs like lectures, plant swaps, fitness classes, and grief support groups.
  - $5/month gym and personal trainer access for employees.

- Stanford's Multi-Campus Approach:
  - Events hosted in multiple locations and virtually to bridge geographic gaps.
  - Specific attention to isolated campus groups, such as Redwood City employees.
  - Hybrid events ensure inclusion of all staff — in-person, hybrid, or remote.

[1] Burrell, J. (2025). "How Higher Ed HR Is Tackling Loneliness". Higher Ed HR Magazine. 2025

The Power of Work: Good Work Matters

Mental Well-being

Physical Well-being

Financial Well-being

Social Well-being

Work is good for our health and well-being

Fostering a Supportive Culture

Social Connections:

- Encourage team-building activities and social interactions- create mentorship programs
- Foster connections- "wellness check-ins"; "buddy systems"; "self-care tip Friday"

Mental Health:

- Offer access to mental health resources such as counseling and stress management workshops
- Support employees while they are on leave
- Encourage authenticity and bringing "whole self" to the workplace

Work-life Blend:

- Encourage policies that promote a healthy work-life blend- be flexible
- Offer meeting free days/times
- Work from home days

Training:

- Train managers to recognize signs of emotional strain and burnout and to provide support
- Provide training on loneliness and importance of social connections

Questions?

- Wendy Coduti (Wendy.Coduti@Prudential.com)

- LaToya Rodriguez (LaToya.Rodriguez@Prudential.com)

- Rachel Wesley (Rachel.Wesley@Prudential.com)

THANK YOU