

# The top to bottom of loneliness at work

Workplace loneliness is seldom mentioned despite research showing that it is a real problem.



“Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown” – that famous line from William Shakespeare’s King Henry IV would likely resonate with many corporate honchos. A common assertion is that it is wintry and lonely at the top of the workplace, but the fact is that workplace loneliness is likely to run from the top to the bottom rung of the ladder.

Half of the chief executive officers interviewed in a Harvard Business Review survey said they had experienced loneliness on the job. There is a corpus of research showing that this is a special source of unhappiness for corporate leaders.

Among those who have publicly acknowledged being afflicted with loneliness are Mr Elon Musk, one of the world’s richest men and the boss of social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter, the late Apple co-founder and CEO Steve Jobs, and his successor Tim Cook.

Their loneliness does not come from physical isolation and the deprivation of human company; theirs is that existence trope of “being lonely in a crowd”. Their loneliness comes from a lack of deep human connections.

It seems that most subordinates do not much enjoy being with their bosses, let alone bonding with them. In a 2004 study by the Nobel Prize-winning psychologist and behavioural economist Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues, 909 working women were asked to describe their feelings about what they were doing, and whom

they were with the day before. It emerged that these working women enjoyed themselves most while socialising and relaxing, and during time spent with their friends, relatives and spouses. And the topmost negative interaction was time spent with their bosses. No specific reason was given for this, but it is not unreasonable to think that they were leery of being seen as brown-nosing their bosses or feeling – either real or imagined – that they were being scrutinised and evaluated at close quarters by these same bosses.

There is a certain irony here, because CEOs and other visible corporate leaders are subject to scrutiny for their performance. To continue to rule the roost, they may feel the need to maintain a facade of unflappable confidence and be the embodiment of control and strength, which practically means strenuously concealing any insecurities or feelings of anxiety and doubt. When the inevitable criticisms come, it would feel particularly cutting and unfair, and make them feel misunderstood and lonely.

And there is that perverse nature of power to distort and undermine those psychological processes that normally nurture close connections. Sociologists David Riesman and Nathan Glazer suggested in their book *The Lonely Crowd* that leaders are lonely because their successful exercise of power requires the Manichean manipulation and persuasion of

others, so they objectify their subordinates and treat them as a means to their ends. Journalist and author Robert Caro, biographer of former United States president Lyndon B. Johnson, compared power to a sword, but a very unusual sword: “Not only does it have a sharp blade but a sharp handle. So it cuts into not only the people it’s being used against, but also into the people who are using it.”

Among power’s baleful effects, it may alter the perception and beliefs about others. Individuals in a powerful position know they are more likely to be a magnet for opportunists, strivers and hangers-on. They would understandably be wary of any importuning and conniving. Hewed to this sceptical alternative explanation of the



Mr Elon Musk, one of the world’s richest men and the boss of X, formerly known as Twitter, is among corporate honchos who have publicly acknowledged being afflicted with loneliness. PHOTO: REUTERS

motives of others, they would be suspicious of any overtures, even if these were sincere and well-intentioned – a mistrust that would repel all but the most determined.

## LONELINESS OF WORKERS

With all that focus on the loneliness of those in the C-suite, it is easy not to think of those who are further down the corporate ladder. There is a palpable difference in our perception of a CEO declaring that it is lonely at the top – a crown of thorns to be borne with heroic stoicism – and an employee who admits to being lonely at work and risks being seen as pathetic and whiny. Employees do not like to advertise their loneliness. After

all, there is a stigma that surrounds it, and no one wants to open themselves up to pity or derision from their colleagues and bosses.

While there is much more awareness and discussion of mental health issues in the workplace these days, workplace loneliness is seldom mentioned, despite research showing that this is a real problem.

Lonelier workers perform more poorly, quit more often and feel less satisfied with their jobs. A study of over 10,000 individuals across 14 countries found that loneliness predicts developing a work disability. It can also lead to an array of mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and alcohol and other substance abuse. It may even be lethal.

Loneliness and social isolation can rig our physiology and trigger inflammation and changes in the immune system, making us more vulnerable to stresses. Loneliness is purportedly more dangerous than obesity, and just as damaging to physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. And it is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke and premature death (it has been estimated that it increases the likelihood of mortality by 26 per cent).

Researchers have proposed some contributing factors to workplace loneliness. Other than physical separation from co-workers, as in working in a remote or virtual environment, there are some personal factors at play.

First, there is the extent of one’s desire for social relationships, which might be related to the individual’s inherent characteristics, like shyness and introversion. Second is the range and type of social skills that people have at their disposal: Those who are more adept at communicating and socialising with others are more likely to develop satisfying relationships.

And certain types of work or professions might predispose one to loneliness. Doctors and lawyers are among the loneliest workers in the United States, followed by those who work in engineering and science, according to the Harvard Business Review.

## THE HUNGER OF LONELINESS

Training to be a doctor takes years of cloistered study in medical school followed by even more years of specialist training, which leaves those in the profession having little in common with anybody other than fellow doctors. And as patient care becomes more fragmented among primary care physicians and specialists, there is a lack of opportunity, time and space for talking to each other – especially

for those in a solo private practice.

Communication via electronic health records, e-mails and text messages has taken that more intimate human element out of interactions. And the long hours that doctors keep leave little time to hang out with friends, let alone make new ones. The net result is a lonely crowd of doctors.

At the heart of loneliness is a lack of meaningful connection. Real human connection allows us to relate to others, feel supported and validated by others. Pioneering loneliness researcher John Cacioppo once described

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loneliness as a “perception that one is socially on the edge”. What this means for someone living at this precipice is to be bereft of these human connections and to exist in a state of being unhappy while alone, having nobody to talk to, not bearing being alone, having no one close they can turn to when burdened, and feeling misunderstood and isolated from others.

And there we have it. Strong meaningful connections. Not the number of associations one has, but it’s the quality of these connections that matters more.

In my own work, there were plenty of times when my resolve and resilience were tested – medicine after all is a trying and stressful profession, but my bonds with my colleagues have often lifted and carried me through the struggles.

The late Professor Cacioppo had also likened loneliness to hunger – a visceral compulsion that all humans have – which drives us to establish mutually beneficial relationships that meet social needs essential for survival. He wrote that while loneliness “feels like... a hunger that needs to be fed – this ‘hunger’ can never be satisfied by a focus on ‘eating’.

What’s required is to step outside the pain of our own situation long enough to ‘feed’ others”. Although it may seem counterintuitive to help others when we are feeling lonely, extending help to others and allowing ourselves to receive help is one of the most tangible ways we experience our connections with one another.

And maybe my work as a psychiatrist has benefited me in another way too: Through caring for my patients and attending to their needs, I might also be keeping at bay whatever loneliness that I might otherwise have felt.

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