The top to bottom of loneliness at work

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

“Cheney 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 solitary 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 of the ladder.

Tall 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 Twitter, formerly known as X. Mr. Musk was interviewed on Twitter, the late Apple co-founder and CEO Steve Jobs, and his successor, Tim Cook.

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

It seems that most substitutes do not much enjoy being with their bosses, let alone bonding with them. In a 2004 study by the Nobel Prize-winning psychologist and behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman, more than 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 women were enjoyed themselves most while socializing and relaxing, and during time spent with their friends, relatives and spouses. And the most negative interaction was time spent with their bosses. No specific reason was given for this, but it is unreasonable to think that they were lonely of being seen as brown-nosing their bosses or feeling — either real or imagined — that they were being scrutinized and evaluated at close quarters by these 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 the impression of control and strength, which practically means strenuously concealing any insecurity 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 a perverse nature of power to distort and undermine those psychological processes that normally surmount a dose of loneliness. Sociologists David Silverman and Nathan Glazer suggested in their book The Lonely Crowd that leaders are lonely because they have a successful exercise of power requires the Machiavellian manipulation and persuasion of others, so they objectify their subordinates and treat them as a means to their ends. Journalist and author Robert Cohn, 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 not only into the people it’s being used against, but also into the people who are using it.”

Among power’s helpful effects, it may alter the perception and beliefs about others. Individuals in a powerful position know they are more likely to be a target for opposition, attacks and anger. So they would understandably be wary of any intimidating and convincing. Hired to do the sociological explanation of the motives of others, they would be suspicious of any overtures, even if these were sincere and well-intentioned — a mistrust that would ripple all 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 by henchmen and minions — and an employee who admits to being lonely at work and risks being seen as pathetic and whiny. Employees do not like it 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.

Loneliness workers perform more poorly, quit more often and feel less satisfied with their jobs. A study of over 34,000 individuals across 16 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.

Loneliness and social isolation can rig our physiology and trigger inflammation and changes in the immune system, making us more vulnerable to stress. Loneliness is purportedly more dangerous than obesity, and just as damaging to physical health as smoking 20 cigarettes a day. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke and premature death (if 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 individuals’ 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 socializing with others are more likely to develop satisfying relationships, on a wider range of work.

Pioneering loneliness researcher John Cacioppo was described 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. Nor 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 blamed 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 the count of ‘friends’.” 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 our own loneliness, helping others is one of the most tangible ways we experience our connections with one another. And maybe our work as a psychiatrist has benefited me in another way too: Through caring for my patients and attending to their needs, I might be keeping at bay whatever loneliness that I might otherwise have felt.