

# TACKLING THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC AT WORK

“Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—  
it harms both individual and societal health.”

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy



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# LONELINESS IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Remote and hybrid work models have become more common in the post-pandemic world. While remote work can boost worker satisfaction by improving work-life balance, research consistently shows it can lead to loneliness and social isolation. Even before the pandemic, full-time remote work was found to increase loneliness by 67% when compared to in-office work.

While some businesses have implemented policies to “return to work,” many employees are struggling with their ability to reconnect in the office, particularly in the midst of a heightened polarized climate. In this critical moment of re-establishing workplace cultures, the U.S. Surgeon General has sounded the alarm on an “epidemic of loneliness and isolation” throughout the nation—a mere 39% of U.S. adults report feeling very connected to others.

Loneliness is more than a feeling. It’s a detriment to the health of individuals, society and your business. With 62% of U.S. adults reporting feelings of loneliness, this potential impact on the workplace is too costly to be ignored.

## **LONELINESS HURTS WORKER HEALTH**

Workers who feel lonely have a greater risk of:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- Stroke
- Dementia
- Premature death at levels comparable to daily smoking

## **LONELINESS HURTS THE BOTTOM LINE**

Workers who lack connection experience:

- Diminished productivity
- Greater physical and emotional stress
- Team withdrawal
- Higher absenteeism
- Greater intention to quit in the next year

## **WORKPLACE LONELINESS BY THE NUMBERS**



of U.S. adults report feelings of loneliness



increase of loneliness in full-time remote work

**\$154  
Billion**

dollars lost to loneliness due to diminished productivity and absenteeism

# THE BUSINESS CASE FOR CONNECTION

The cost of loneliness is high for both your workers and your business. However, this cost can be mitigated—**businesses that foster belonging in the workplace can drive innovation, collaboration and overall success.** Social connection can help prevent chronic stress and burnout, as well as lessen recovery times for accidents and illness. Workers who feel connected to support networks both in and out of the office are not just happier and healthier, they're better for business as well.

## EMPLOYEES WHO FEEL BELONGING AT WORK ARE:

- **2x** as likely to meet or exceed financial targets
- **3x** as likely to be high performing
- **6x** as likely to be innovative and agile
- **8x** as likely to achieve better business outcomes

## EMPLOYEES WHO ARE FRIENDS WITH THEIR COWORKERS ARE:

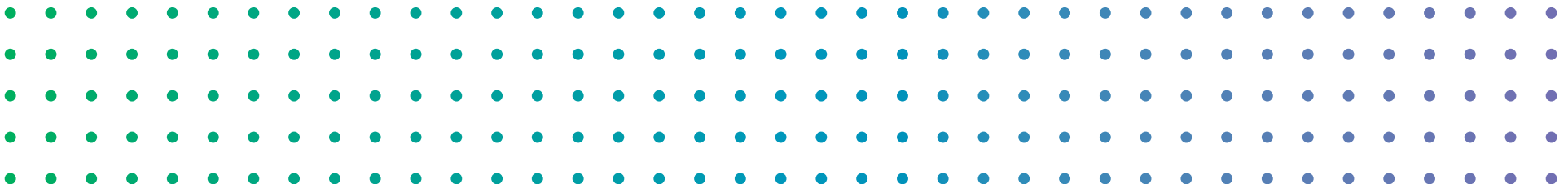
- More engaging with customers
- More likely to collaborate with internal partners
- Able to accomplish more in less time
- Experiencing fewer workplace accidents
- Better at innovating and sharing ideas
- More likely to have fun at work

## LEADERS WEIGH IN

**“At the very core, it's a business problem. If you have employees who don't have a high level of health and well-being, then they're not going to be able to bring their best selves to the workplace.”**



**Dr. Sohini Stone**  
Chief Medical Officer for  
Global Employee Health  
Google



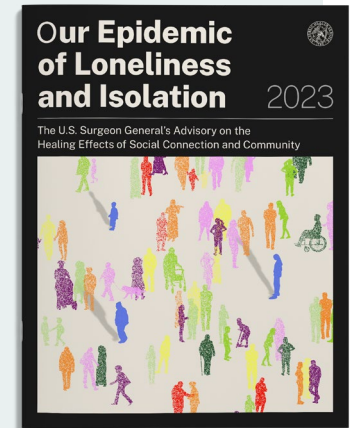
# A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

In the summer of 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General introduced a first-of-its-kind [advisory](#) offering six key recommendations to advance social connection at work.

This guide breaks down the six key recommendations with actionable insights from leaders at **Eventbrite**, **Google**, **Disney**, **Estée Lauder Companies**, **Thermo Fisher Scientific** and the **U.S. Surgeon General's Office**.

## FROM THE U.S. SURGEON GENERAL'S ADVISORY, ["WHAT WORKPLACES CAN DO"](#)

- 1. Make social connection a strategic priority in the workplace** at all levels (administration, management, and employees).
- 2. Train, resource, and empower leaders and managers** to promote connection in the workplace and implement programs that foster connection. Assess program effectiveness, identify barriers to success, and facilitate continuous quality improvement.
- 3. Leverage existing leadership and employee training, orientation, and wellness resources** to educate the workforce about the importance of social connection for workplace well-being, health, productivity, performance, retention, and other markers of success.
- 4. Create practices and a workplace culture** that allow people to connect to one another as whole people, not just as skill sets, and that fosters inclusion and belonging.
- 5. Put in place policies that protect workers' ability to nurture their relationships outside work** including respecting boundaries between work and non-work time, supporting caregiving responsibilities, and creating a culture of norms and practices that support these policies.
- 6. Consider the opportunities and challenges posed by flexible work hours and arrangements** (including remote, hybrid, and in-person work), which may impact workers' abilities to connect with others both within and outside of work. Evaluate how these policies can be applied equitably across the workforce.

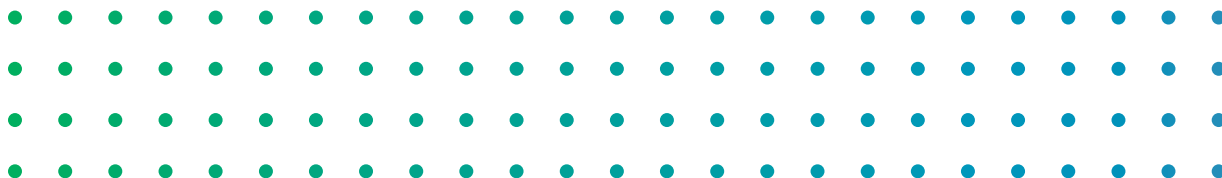


# 1. MAKE SOCIAL CONNECTION A STRATEGIC PRIORITY AT ALL LEVELS

It's not enough for business leaders to hope that employees connect on their own. In the face of such widespread loneliness, companies have a role to play in fostering social connection. Businesses must prioritize this support for employees, and make it clear that they are taking steps to address the epidemic.

## TACTICS FOR ACTION

- Implement and hold leadership accountable for regular assessments of employee well-being, with a focus on monitoring levels of connection and loneliness.
- Listen closely and respond promptly to employee feedback, as well as offer avenues for employees to provide said feedback.
- Establish systems for cross-team collaboration and prioritize teamwork across various departments.



## LEADERS WEIGH IN

Rafael Campos, Spokesperson for the U.S. Surgeon General's Office offers: **"It's really thinking about mental health, not outside of the workplace, but thinking about the physical and mental health of their workers being important to the health of the company or the organization as a whole."**

Thermo Fisher's Director of Global Wellbeing uses technology to help address employee needs at scale: **"I call it getting into the needs and the weeds. When I look at the full spectrum of our colleagues and how to best reach them, we need to look at the needs first."**



**Aimee Hollis**  
Director of Global Wellbeing  
Thermo Fisher Scientific

## 2. TRAIN, RESOURCE, & EMPOWER LEADERS & MANAGERS

Managers who don't feel equipped to help their employees won't be effective at providing meaningful support. There are a variety of resources and tools available for leaders to seek guidance from—it's important that businesses invest in these resources and allocate them effectively, so they may be easily accessible to all employees.

### TACTICS FOR ACTION

- Provide managers with tools they can use to assess loneliness in workers, like the [UCLA Loneliness Scale](#) or the [Belonging Barometer](#).
- Offer tips and tools to help managers communicate more effectively with employees, like the [HAA's Mental Health Conversation Guide for Managers](#).
- Maintain regular communication with leaders to help them stay up-to-date on the latest information and resources available to them.
- Host training sessions and panel discussions for managers to learn from health experts.



### LEADERS WEIGH IN

**“Working and training both leaders and managers to increase autonomy in the workplace and to work and improve the relationships between them and the staffers they’re engaging with can really increase buy-in and alignment with the mission and vision of organization.”**



**Rafael Campos**  
Spokesperson  
Office of the U.S. Surgeon General

**Dr. Stone** encourages managers at **Google** to create space for more intentional learning among team members. Inviting people to share their unique experiences and backgrounds allows for a deeper sense of connection across teams.

At **Thermo Fisher Scientific**, employees are encouraged to submit anonymous comments during a regular webinar series called ‘Ask Me Anything,’ where questions are offered in advance - providing insights into workers’ concerns and needs.

# 3. LEVERAGE EXISTING LEADERSHIP & EMPLOYEE TRAINING, ORIENTATION, & WELLNESS RESOURCES

It's likely your business already has tools and programs in place that can be used to boost employee wellness. Examining these existing resources and using them in new or more consistent ways can be an easy method for supporting social connection. Adding to pre-existing tools will likely be easier than building new programs from scratch.

## TACTICS FOR ACTION

- Formalize an employee mentorship or buddy program to make it easier for workers to build these relationships.
- Add comprehensive mental health benefits to employee healthcare.
- Examine current onboarding practices to find ways to further encourage connection, like by forming new hire cohorts or setting up virtual coffee chats.
- Share resources regularly and widely—it's easy to miss something if it's only in one email or newsletter.
- Add new trainings that emphasize belonging, connection and socializing.



## LEADERS WEIGH IN

**“It’s really [about] thinking through how you can meet the need of your employees by adding the support and information into spaces that they’re already looking for that information,”** says Mr. Campos of the Surgeon General’s Office.

**“When individuals need to talk, we’re making sure there is a leader who can direct them to the right resource. The other thing is we have leveraged our ERGs (employee resource groups) to work alongside our EAP (employee assistance program) and other mental health specialists that we have within the organization to prepare group discussions, where it could be a safe place for individuals to talk.”**



**Dr. Pam Hymel**  
Chief Medical Officer  
Disney Experiences

# 4. CREATE PRACTICES & A WORKPLACE CULTURE THAT ALLOW PEOPLE TO CONNECT TO ONE ANOTHER

It's always important to encourage teamwork and collaboration among employees at work, but if employees are only ever able to speak with one another about workplace issues, they won't fully benefit from the connection. Employees should have opportunities to connect with each other that don't directly relate to their jobs. This way, they are able to get to know each other as individuals rather than simply coworkers.

## TACTICS FOR ACTION

- Host social, non-work events, with options for in-person and virtual engagement.
- Form virtual spaces for sharing and collaborating, like a social channel in the office Slack.
- Create affinity groups for employees to connect with other coworkers who share their identities and experiences.
- Celebrate milestones, achievements and employee successes.
- Cultivate a sense of belonging in the workplace—consult our [guide](#) for more information.

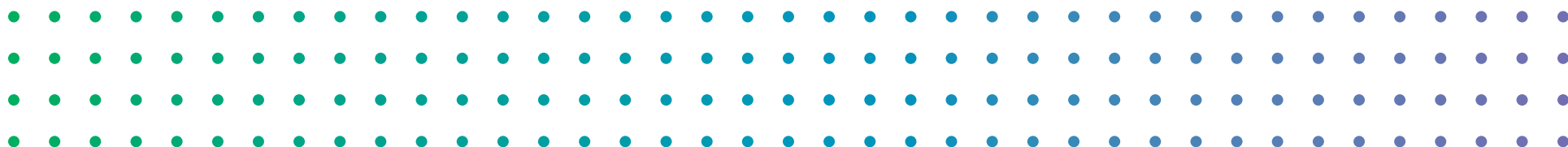
## LEADERS WEIGH IN

**“Part of fostering belonging, inclusivity and social connection is valuing employees as whole human beings.”**



**Jerry Golden**  
Head of Public Policy  
& Government Affairs  
Eventbrite

**“Core to belonging is understanding what people’s authentic needs are,”** says Dr. Stone. At Google, Dr. Stone starts team meetings with “small wins” where anyone can share a personal or professional success story that allows colleagues to get to know one another on a deeper level.





# 5. PROTECT WORKERS' ABILITY TO NURTURE THEIR RELATIONSHIPS OUTSIDE WORK

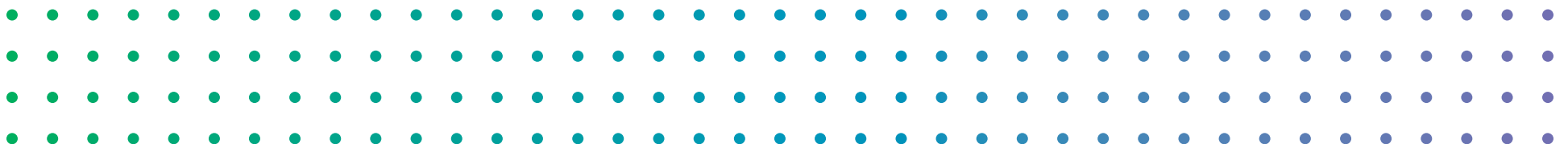
Work-life balance is an important aspect of supporting worker mental health. Even the most social employee at work can struggle with feelings of loneliness if they don't have time to engage with their loved ones, hobbies and communities outside of the office. Businesses don't need to stand at odds with these goals—in fact, the policies they implement can help support a worker's external life as well.

## TACTICS FOR ACTION

- Opt for a hybrid work model rather than an all-or-nothing approach, which maximizes the benefits of both working from home and the office.
- Give paid time off for mental health and personal days.
- Be flexible with employee schedules in case they need to handle personal matters or caregiving.
- Host company-wide volunteer days, giving employees a chance to reconnect with their local community.
- Offer floating holidays so workers can have time off to celebrate when it's most relevant to them.

## LEADERS WEIGH IN

Dr. Stone at Google emphasizes recognizing that people's identities are multi-layered, which means their approach to being their "full, rich, holistic self" will be too. **Business leaders have to offer opportunities and space for employees to live their authentic lives, both within and outside of the workplace.**



# 6. CONSIDER THE OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES POSED BY FLEXIBLE WORK HOURS & ARRANGEMENTS

It can be difficult to strike the right balance between offering employees flexibility and making sure productivity and innovation don't suffer. That's why leaders should carefully consider the benefits and detriments of such policies, making sure to find a solution that works well for everyone involved.

## TACTICS FOR ACTION

- Decide what “flexibility” means and make sure it applies equitably to all workers.
- Develop a workplace strategy that clearly outlines expectations and policies for employees.
- Understand the greater societal implications of flexible work and take steps to address them—for example, [studies](#) have shown that women who use flexible work hours more than men are subject to greater backlash.
- Consider many different options and decide what works best for your business. One study from [McKinsey](#) found that spending half the time in-office and half at home may be the “sweet spot” for hybrid work, but there's no one-size-fits-all approach.

## LEADERS WEIGH IN

Dr. Stone highlights the value of making space for everyone to have a voice during remote meetings. **“Having the space to get to know each other at a human level” is foundational to building a sense of belonging.**

**Estée Lauder Companies** is developing a toolkit to “help managers support employees across this journey, and for them to be a resource for people who are working remote.”



**Dr. Sharon E. Smith**  
Corporate Medical Director  
Estée Lauder Companies



# MORE FROM HEALTH ACTION ALLIANCE

- [CULTIVATING BELONGING IN THE WORKPLACE: AN EMPLOYER GUIDE](#)
- [TIPS FOR LEADERSHIP STORYTELLING](#)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- American Psychological Association: [2023 Work in America Survey](#)
- Cigna Healthcare: [Loneliness Fact Sheet](#)
- Cigna Healthcare: [Post-Pandemic Loneliness](#)
- Center for Inclusion and Belonging: [The Belonging Barometer](#)
- Center for Workplace Mental Health: [Loneliness](#)
- Coalition to End Social Isolation & Loneliness: [Policy Priorities](#)
- Empower Work
- Foundation for Social Connection: [Resource Library](#)
- Great Place to Work: [How Hybrid and Remote Workplaces Help Employees Find Connection](#)
- Institute for Life at Work: [Workplace Loneliness & Connectivity](#)
- Love, Your Mind: [Loneliness](#)
- Office of the U.S. Surgeon General: [Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation](#)
- Society for Human Resource Management: [Workplace Loneliness Has Broad Implications for Mental Health](#)
- The Cost of Loneliness Project
- World Health Organization: [WHO Commission on Social Connection](#)
- U.S. Surgeon General: [Advisory on Addressing Worker Burnout](#)
- U.S. Surgeon General: [Framework on Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being](#)

### A MESSAGE FROM HEADSPACE

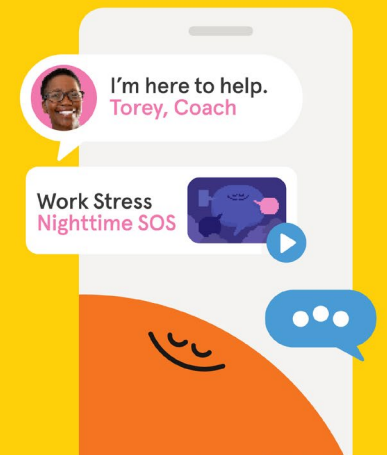


## Your guide to mental health

We're here to help you care for your team. Headspace is changing mental healthcare by providing support with our comprehensive platform – from behavioral health coaching and clinical care to self-care content and EAP services.

Help for  
your teams

Get started:  
[headspace.com/enterprise](https://headspace.com/enterprise)



The Health Action Alliance is a unique collaboration between leading business, communications and public health organizations to help employers navigate evolving health challenges, improve the health of workers and engage with public health partners to build stronger, healthier communities.



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