WorkLifePsych

Connect and Thrive

A guide to combating loneliness and connecting with others

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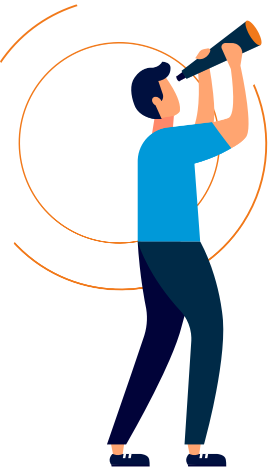


Introduction and overview

About us

Dr. Sarah Wright

Sarah is an Associate Professor of organisational behaviour at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. She teaches courses in organisational behaviour, management skills, teams and group dynamics, and leadership. At the heart of Sarah's research and teaching is a focus on relationships within groups and organisations, with a particular focus on workplace loneliness and relationship quality.

Sarah is a scientific advisor for Ending Loneliness Together in Australia, and a research advisor for the Coalition to End Loneliness in New Zealand. She has published in leading academic journals such as *Human Relations* and *Leadership Quarterly*. She is a Fellow with the Higher Education Association, and a Director for the Management and Organizational Behavior Teaching Society. Beyond her professional roles, Sarah loves spending time with her husband and three boys, and enjoys travelling and reading.

You can find out more about Sarah on her website: https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/business/contact-us/people/sarah-wright.html

Dr. Richard A. MacKinnon

Richard is a Chartered Psychologist based in London, UK. Originally from Dublin, Ireland, Richard has been a practitioner psychologist for over twenty years. He's the founder and managing director of WorkLifePsych, a team of accredited and experienced psychologists who provide coaching, training and development programmes in organisations worldwide.

Richard's interests include helping people to improve and maintain their wellbeing at work, cultivate a sustainable approach to their productivity and develop their psychological flexibility – so they can deal with life's setbacks and challenges more effectively. Richard is passionate about music and travel and is never happier than when people-watching in Barcelona or enjoying ramen in Tokyo.

You can find out more about Richard on his website: https://www.worklifepsych.com

Why we created this guide

We created this guide to help people improve their social connections at work, and support those who may find themselves feeling lonely. Over recent years, we have observed that a good number of people struggle to find a sense of belonging at work, feel ostracised or rejected by others at work, and often encounter personal and professional obstacles to achieving good quality connections and a sense of camaraderie at work.

We want to help individuals work through these issues so they can feel a little less alone and a little more connected to those around them. This guide will help you learn research-based strategies to promote positive social connections and better relationships at work. There's no "right" way to use this guide just as there is no single solution to overcoming loneliness. We encourage you to take ideas and build your own connection habits at work, and most importantly we encourage you to experiment with what feels comfortable for you in your work environment.

It is important to note that the ideas covered in this workbook might not be appropriate for you especially if you are experiencing difficult relationships at work or feeling discriminated against. Social connection with people that may harm us is very destructive, and sometimes unavoidable in a workplace. We implore you to seek help if you are dealing with bullying, harassment, prejudice, or discrimination. You will find some suggestions at worklifepsych.com/connectandthrive.

What we cover in this guide

This guide covers theory and practicalities. We start the guidebook by presenting theory on loneliness and social connection so you can understand what might be going on for you, and why you might be feeling the way you do. This theory helps lay the groundwork for the advice we offer. We then focus on practical things you can do to actually experience change in the social aspects of your life.

We end the guide with additional resources you can access if you'd like to know more about any of the topics we cover here.

A connect and thrive case study

Throughout this guide, we've included a brief, fictional case study, to bring the concepts to life. Our main focus is on James, an early career IT professional. We'll explore his experience of loneliness at work, his attempts to make connections with others, and his use of the key skills we'll cover later on.

Introducing James

James is an early career IT professional, providing technology support to colleagues across a large professional services company. He joined the business just before the outbreak of COVID and lockdown. So, after a very brief face-to-face onboarding process, like everyone else he had to work from home.

Over two years later, James spends the majority of time working from home. His colleagues on IT support also work remotely and he rarely sees them on his occasional visits to the office.

His role requires him to work through a busy in-box of support 'tickets' each day, solving a variety of technology-related issues for his colleagues. He enjoys the role and the technical challenges that come with it. He is evaluated on the volume of tickets he successfully closes each day, so he doesn't get much time for small talk while dealing with support calls.

Additionally, most colleagues he speaks to on these calls are pretty irritated with their technology and it sometimes means James has to deal with their frustration.

Part One: Understanding connection

1. The importance of social connection

Imagine a work environment where people genuinely have fun together while achieving their work goals, give each other encouragement, respect one another, are generous towards each other, and celebrate milestones together. In this workplace, people are drawn in and want to be in each others' company. There is significantly less personal stress, higher levels of autonomy, less dysfunctional conflict, and higher productivity and engagement. The hallmark of these work environments is positive social connections.

Social connection plays a vital role in our health and well-being, both positively and negatively. Positive social relationships bring happiness and life satisfaction, improve our health, strengthen workplaces, and are also good for the bottom line. High-quality relationships show a consistent positive association with mental[1] and physical health[2]. This link is thought to be caused by the reduced stress we experience in positive social encounters. For example, people in high-quality relationships help calm each other down when things are not going well, whereas people in dysfunctional relationships often escalate conflict and stress.

Our most trusting and respectful relationships are therefore infused with frequently experienced positive emotions[3] such as joy and gratitude, and are not just based on the absence of negative behaviours such as hostility and disrespect. Interestingly, research[4] also suggests the mere presence of others we like and trust has many physiological benefits, such as lowered blood pressure, and therefore lowers the tax on our bodies. These benefits occur because we are less vigilant to threats than when we are alone or with people we cannot trust.

Creating connection habits at work, such as a team lunch once a week, birthday celebrations, or honouring a colleague, helps draw us together as a community and can create a sense of belonging. But focussing on improving social connections in organisations demands a new way of thinking about our values and priorities, along with our roles, skills, and behaviours. We will be exploring all of these factors in this guide.

2. Understanding loneliness

> *Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself.*
>
> Carl Jung (1963)

Most jobs require us to work with others: peers, colleagues, customers, supervisors, patients, clients. Our connections with, and interdependence with, other people is a key element of the contemporary workplace. Even remote work requires engagement with others to achieve our goals. Because work often involves social interaction, there is an assumption that merely being in a social environment should protect us from loneliness. But we need to challenge this assumption because many people feel lonely despite being in the company of others[5].

We are social beings who seek meaning from our relationships. So much so that we can perceive social connections where no actual relationship exists and no reciprocity is possible, such as between a character in a book and the reader. Yet, at the other end of the spectrum, we often fail to harness the power and opportunity of social connectedness at work and can feel socially isolated as a result.

Loneliness indicates that our relationships are unsatisfying in some way and signals a yearning for connection. Across most definitions, loneliness consistently involves an emotional experience and is negatively felt. The clue here is the word ‘felt’ – although thoughts and behaviours are wrapped up in loneliness, we don’t say “I think lonely” or “I act lonely”, we say “I feel lonely”. In this sense, loneliness is not the same as isolation or solitude which are more objective conditions and can be positive or neutral. It is important to understand that loneliness can stem from isolation or social deficiencies but those aspects are not loneliness itself.

Loneliness is subjective, meaning that people can feel lonely when they are alone or in the company of others. As noted by Carl Jung in the above quote, loneliness is often exacerbated when we are with others who don’t understand or value us. And it is this understanding that helps us make sense of loneliness when experienced in a work environment surrounded by other people. In the academic literature, workplace loneliness is defined as the *discomfort associated with perceived relational deficiencies in your work*[6].

In other words, loneliness is the bad feeling we have when we don’t have people we can truly connect with but wish we could. The lack of connection might be objective such as working alone, or a perception such as not having anyone to turn to when you need to talk through an issue or make a difficult decision.

Because loneliness is often seen as a social failure, it can be shameful to talk about and so we don't bring it up at work. The first step in unravelling loneliness is to recognise it and notice the feelings associated with it. Noticing, labelling, expressing, and working through our emotions are learnable skills which we cover in this guide. Recognising when we feel lonely at work is important information that tells us something needs to change, and typically means we are desirous of more satisfying social connections.

3. The prevalence of loneliness

If you are reading this guide and feeling lonely, you are not alone! Loneliness is a significant worldwide issue, with problematic levels of loneliness being experienced by a substantial proportion of the population in many countries[7]. According to the Campaign to End Loneliness, 45% of adults in the UK feel occasionally, sometimes, or often lonely. This means that on average, around thirty million people in the UK are feeling lonely at any given time. Similarly, around 50 percent of Americans report feeling lonely[8].

And approximately 10% of the population struggle with chronic severe loneliness and associated mental health challenges. If conquering loneliness was easy to remedy, we would not find these high percentages of people reporting they are lonely – nor sadly would we see nearly as many suicide incidents related to loneliness[9].

Statistics can make for depressing reading. But they can also help us realise that loneliness is embedded in the human experience, and can be a motivating force within us to connect with others. We would not experience loneliness if we did not yearn for better social connections. Simple shifts in our thinking, our work practices, and the way we interact with others can make meaningful differences to our social and psychological wellbeing.

4. The impact of loneliness of our wellbeing

How does loneliness impact our psychological wellbeing?

The effects of loneliness on our psychological wellbeing are well-established and point to the ominous effects loneliness has on our psychological health. For example loneliness is linked to higher incidences of depression[10], increased anxiety[11], reduced self-control[12], reduced self-esteem[13], and job burnout[14]. The link between loneliness and these negative outcomes is thought to lie in our behaviours. When people feel lonely they often behave in socially negative ways, such as increased hostility and defensiveness.

These behaviours radiate outward and may negatively[15] affect our workplace relationships, consequently lowering the relationship satisfaction of other employees towards us.

Loneliness can make us feel more hypervigilant or 'on edge' – we feel stressed and anxious, we sleep poorly, and we then have less resilience for day-to-day pressures and push people away, all of which can create a circular experience[16] making our feelings of loneliness worse. Furthermore, lonely people tend to perceive the world as a less kind, more negative place due to feeling socially rejected, and therefore experience less trust in others, inhibiting closer social connections and compounding the feeling of loneliness.

Especially relevant for worklife, loneliness also affects our ability to think, particularly on complex tasks such as abstract thinking, planning, and decision making[17]. Lonely individuals also tend to demonstrate poorer work performance[18], reduced job-related well-being[19], and lower creativity in the workplace[20].

How does loneliness impact our physical wellbeing?

Loneliness has an equally troublesome effect on our physical wellbeing, and takes a toll on our personal health. The physical effects of loneliness include higher risk of mortality[21] and less effective[22] ability to heal due to a weakened immune system.

Cardiovascular health is impaired for those who report loneliness even when taking into consideration other factors such as age, gender, chronic diseases, marital status, alcohol use, and smoking. But just as loneliness is bad for our health over time, good social connections can result in significant personal health benefits[23], such as better immune functions, lowered blood pressure, and faster recovery time.

Many people believe that socialising is the answer to loneliness. Socialising can be a helpful and necessary strategy to journey out of loneliness, but attending social occasions on our own can be daunting and make us feel lonelier and more anxious about social engagement. This is why tackling loneliness is a two-pronged affair. We need to work on our minds then work on our relationships with others. We'll cover both of these in this guide.

James' experience of loneliness at work

This is James' second role after graduating from university. He often finds himself thinking back to his last job, and missing the interaction he had with his colleagues. Back then, they were all co-located in an office and, even though it was a busy and high pressure role, they found time to chat over coffee each day and provide each other with moral support when clients were difficult on the phone.

Objectively, James is performing well. Feedback from his manager has been very positive since day one and he finds dealing with, and solving, tricky support calls quite rewarding. He's even received great feedback from the colleagues he's helped and his manager has explored the possibility of James supervising a couple of interns next year.

However, despite all of this, James feels isolated. He'd love to reach out to colleagues and arrange a chat, but he worries that they're all too busy to speak with him. He also wonders if they'll think he's unprofessional for wanting to chat and find out more about them. He recently realised he knows far less about his closest team members after over two years, than he learnt about his former colleagues within a matter of weeks.

When he does speak with them, it’s via video chat during hurried online meetings. They never seem to get through the agenda, so he’s sure they don’t have time for ‘small talk’. Most of their communication is via Slack, the instant messaging app they use. He’s noticed quite a bit of chat there, even some jokes - but it’s just not the same as going to get a coffee together.

James has a single flat mate, who works shifts as a nurse in a nearby hospital. Due to her working arrangements, they rarely spend any time together. James now lives far away from the town where he grew up. Over the last six months or so, he’s realised he feels quite lonely and just doesn’t get enough face-to-face time with other humans.

He knows that if this were a problem with someone’s laptop or mobile phone, he’d relish the challenge. But this is about people and how they might judge him, so he has avoided mentioning how he feels to anyone else.

Part Two: Taking action

5. How to think about connection

Research[24] has shown that loneliness needs to be tackled from a psychological and social perspective. What this means is that you need to work on your own thoughts, feelings and interpersonal skills, along with actively increasing opportunities for desired social contact and support from others. By focussing on ourselves and our interactions with others, we can enhance the quantity *and most importantly* the quality of social interactions, and ultimately mitigate the harmful consequences of loneliness.

When cultivating connections in our work, strengthening our inner awareness is important. This involves noticing how we're responding to others in our everyday interactions. For example, are we responding carefully and with intention or reacting thoughtlessly? When we feel lonely, we can become increasingly sensitive to our interactions with others, which can make us feel even lonelier.

For example, we might feel a stronger sense of rejection if a colleague doesn't stop to chat after a meeting, and so we no longer try to make a connection with them because we feel rejected. With stronger inner awareness, we will notice our own automatic feelings, inferences, (mis)interpretations and judgments of others, and this can help lift us out of the loneliness spiral. For example, in the above example, you might see your colleague rushing off after the meeting and rather than feel rejected, reinterpret this behaviour as understanding that she is busy today and you will touch base with her in a few days to see if she is available to catch-up over lunch.

Once we have worked on our minds and our automatic responses, we then need to focus on others in our social environment and what we are *doing* to foster social connection with our colleagues. One specific method to enhance connection at work is to listen to your colleagues. High-quality listening involves conveying attention to the person you are engaging with, showing understanding and compassion, and promoting the relatedness (i.e., closeness) between you and the speaker. Research[25] shows that such high-quality listening behaviours can reduce loneliness, particularly if the speaker can discuss past experiences of social rejection, and be heard. At work, affirming a colleague's feelings or opinion, such as a simple "that makes sense" can help build trust and mutual respect – two critical aspects of relationship quality. When we feel listened to at work, we're more likely to want to bridge our differences with others when we feel heard and understood by them. And when we feel heard and understood we are not likely to feel rejected, socially marginalised or lonely.

Active listening is a useful skill for fostering empathy and connection in our working lives, and is especially useful for difficult conversations.

6. How we can make connections

Philosophers (e.g.Schopenhauer) have argued that we often want deeper and more meaningful relationships but we are reluctant to pursue them because we expect that such intimacy might be unpleasant or we may be rejected. Indeed, our attempts to avoid the discomfort of rejection can bring short-term relief, but set us up for longer-term problems when we continually avoid even the *risk* of rejection.

These expectations can discourage more meaningful social connections and can entrench us in a social environment of ‘small talk’ or disengaging from others. In the workplace, recent research[26] highlights the common paradox of being “alone together” – feeling isolated whilst at the same time being wary of connecting with others at work. Research suggests that we should all experiment with bringing a bit more of ourselves to work to help build stronger social connection at work.

1. An interesting series of experiments[27] were conducted in Chicago (and subsequently the London Underground[28]) on our perceptions of talking to strangers. Prior to the experiments most people claimed that talking to strangers would be a negative experience, and the discomfort would increase over time. However, the researchers found that participants talked longer than expected and felt better after the conversation. Such research suggests that if we take the time and energy to engage with others, even strangers, both parties can feel better as a result – and this connection can lead to more fulfilling social engagement over time.

2. Another research study[29] suggests that we often undervalue how much others want to engage with us which can create a barrier to deeper connections in everyday working life. By deeper connections, we mean people self-disclosing to their colleagues personal information about their thoughts, feelings, or experiences. As a general rule, we believe others will be reluctant to engage in ‘deep talk’ because we believe they will be indifferent to our thoughts, and so we overestimate how awkward and uncomfortable deeper conversations will be. But, over several experiments, the researchers found that participants felt less awkward, and had greater feelings of connectedness than the participants expected.

3. Other research[30] also consistently demonstrates that ‘deep talk’ can speed the development of closer relationships.

Based on the above evidence, we encourage you to talk to someone at work who you have not engaged with before each day for a week. The research suggests that if you practise talking to a new person every day for a week, you will grow progressively less worried about being rejected, and more confident about your interpersonal abilities. Even if someone at work has a different status to you, the chances are you can find threads of similarity in at least one important identity, role, or recreation activity you have in common. For example, you both might have children, pets, elderly parents, come from the same geographic region, share the love of a sports team or musician, or enjoy outdoor pursuits. Often those shared identities are more meaningful than our perceived differences, and finding what you have in common can create a basis for ongoing conversations and connection.

If you are not yet comfortable disclosing personal information, a safer strategy is to find shared goals with others at work. In most workplaces you can assume that everyone has goals whether they are formalised or otherwise, and finding such common ground can help create conversations, break down silos, and share the load in terms of individual work responsibilities.

7. The role of context

The context we find ourselves in – a meeting, our desk, lunch with colleagues, our commute – gives us valuable information about how we can navigate the present moment and interact with others. Yet all too frequently, our mind has taken us time-travelling, either to a disappointing past or some kind of anxiety-inducing future.

Does this sound familiar? “The last time I tried to talk to them, I felt really awkward”. Or, “What if they don’t respond nicely to my questions? That would be unbearably embarrassing!” Going back and forward in our minds is perfectly natural and can be helpful when we do it intentionally. Learning from our experience in the past and planning for our future, for example.

But when a threat-focused mind brings us to past disappointments for future, imagined catastrophes, it can prevent us from taking the kind of helpful action that can move us away from our experience of loneliness.

Paying attention to now

So, one of the most helpful things we can do for ourselves is to pay attention to the moment we’re actually in. After all, the present moment is the only place we can take action. We can practise noticing where and when our attention is focused. When we notice that we’re drifting to a future moment of imagined awkwardness or disappointment, we can gently nudge our focus back to the here and now.

If you imagine your capacity to focus on the present moment is a bit like a mental muscle, then you might quickly realise this muscle needs development! For so many of us, our attention is spread paper-thin across activities, people and information, while also veering wildly between the present moment and other points in time.

Building this present moment awareness is not like flicking a switch, but more like taking your mind to the gym to do some exercises. In doing so, we're working on our ability to be more mindful in developing our connection habits. What could this look like?

- **Mindful breathing:** Taking a few moments to focus on just one thing. A great starting point is your breath. You need to breathe anyway and bringing all your focus to bear on your breathing is something you can do anywhere and at any time.
- **Mindful self-care:** instead of multi-tasking when brushing your teeth or having a shower, just focus on the activity at hand and experience it in the moment. Don't plan your day or go over yesterday's conversations, simply bring your focus to the moment you're in and see what you can notice.
- **Mindful chores:** rather than multitasking (e.g. checking your phone while talking to someone), bring your focus to the present moment and see what you can notice about the experience. What you can see, smell, hear. What it feels like.
- **Mindfulness meditation:** the evidence supporting mindfulness meditation as something that supports our wellbeing has grown over time. Meditation also allows us to focus on the present moment, and there are so many resources available to help you develop this skill. Have a look at the Resources page online to find out more worklifepsych.com/connectandthrive.

The key point here is that focusing on the here and now helps us notice what kind of thoughts and feelings our mind is giving us and allows us to step away from automatic responses to these. It also makes it easier to notice what's happening around us and how to take action that moves us towards other people and not simply away from imagined discomfort.

Seeing loneliness as a temporary experience, not a fixed state

Loneliness at work is usually a temporary experience, typically created by the social environment we find ourselves in, rather than a chronic unchangeable condition that's wrapped up in our identity. Seeing loneliness as a transient experience means that we can make changes that will likely increase our social connections and reduce our loneliness in the future.

8. The role of our thinking

As we explained earlier in this guide, it's important to understand the role of our thoughts and feelings about loneliness and connection, to enable us to take the kind of action that supports connection. In this section, we're going to explore some ways you can start to reflect on your own thinking, end the struggle with unwelcome thoughts, and take action that allows you to make valued connections with others.

The mind as a 'thinking engine'

Let's start with an image. Think of your mind as a thinking engine. It's working away in the background, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It's running whether we notice it or not, churning out lots of 'stuff' for us to consume.

As noted above, it can take us time-travelling to the past and future, simultaneously conjuring up all kinds of memories, ideas, evaluations, reminders, feelings, self-talk, judgements, plans and predictions. To keep things simple, we'll refer to all of this as 'thinking'. This thinking takes place whether or not we want it. We don't need to maintain this engine. And we definitely can't control it. Just try not thinking about apple pie right now. Just try actively removing a memory you hold dear. Our mind just doesn't work that way!

Sometimes, our mind gives us thoughts that are just what we need in that moment. The answer to a question. A reminder to check our meeting notes for actions. A solution to our scheduling woes. Unfortunately, our mind isn't always so helpful and, in a whole variety of ways, can get in the way of us being the kind of person we'd ideally like to be.

Our judging mind

One of the simplest ways of thinking about anything is in terms of a binary. Right or wrong. Yes or no. Success or failure. In or out. Our mind finds it so easy to judge situations – real or imagined – in terms of these binaries. Good or bad. Wanted or unwanted. Our mind is continually judging and evaluating both us and what's going on around us.

The problem is that these judgements are frequently over-simplified and don't pay attention to the context we're actually in.

Take a moment to pause and consider the question: Is pie good or bad?

Was your answer one of these two options? If we think about it a little more, we need to say "It depends". It depends on what's in the pie. Is it apples or liver? It depends on who has made the pie. Our friend the chef or our brother who is a liability in the kitchen? It depends on whether we're hungry or not. It depends on whether we're trying to lose weight or fill up before climbing a mountain.

If we're honest with ourselves, the answer to so many of these binary-type questions is "It depends". It depends on the context. So, our thoughts are neither good or bad, they're merely helpful or unhelpful, depending on the context we're in.

Our problem-solving mind

If you reflect for just a moment, you'll be able to think of lots of examples of how your own mind has offered you solutions to problems. Maybe you locked yourself out of your home and your mind instantly focused on ways to get back in. "Who has a spare key?" "Have I left a window open somewhere?" "Is it likely to rain any time soon?!" The mind is an excellent problem solver.

However, our problem-solving mind sometimes treats thoughts and emotions as problems that need to be solved. Our attention is shifted to thoughts and feelings that we don't particularly like, or that induce anxiety or sadness, and the mind goes to work on 'solving' them. This can take us away from the present moment – the only place we can take helpful action – and into a struggle with our own thoughts.

The irony is, if we just let these thoughts and feelings be, they'll drift on of their own accord. There's no need to 'solve' them.

Our 'safety first' mind

The human mind has evolved over thousands of years simply to keep us safe. We mentally travel back in time to learn from experience and avoid making the same mistake twice. We travel to the future in our mind to prepare for anticipated difficult situations. Our mind very easily raises a red flag when it spots threats, real or imagined.

The problem arises when these threats aren't threats to our physical safety, but our happiness and comfort. Instead of warning us not to walk down a dark alley at night (which could be a real threat to our physical safety), our mind treats the chance to speak to a colleague with the same tone. "If they don't respond to you, that would be unbearable!"

Sometimes, our mind acts a lot like a smoke alarm. These are so helpful in our homes and workplaces, and yet they make the same screeching sound whether we've burnt some toast or the sofa is on fire. Sometimes, our mind warns us of threats that are neither dangerous or harmful – just merely uncomfortable.

9. How psychological discomfort shows up

One of the most important skills we can cultivate when it comes to interpersonal connection is dealing effectively with psychological discomfort. But what is psychological discomfort? Simply put, it's any of the psychological states we don't enjoy experiencing. This could be images of the future. Fear of failure. The awkwardness of speaking up in a meeting. The discomfort of being the focus of attention. Once you think about it for a moment, you'll realise there are so many ways psychological discomfort can show up.

Another important aspect to discomfort is that it's subjective. So what may be deeply uncomfortable for me, may be very easy and even automatic for you. And it's the same for loneliness. One person may be very happy with only one or two friends at work, whereas another person may feel the distress of loneliness if they only had one or two coworkers they could call a friend. So while there may be certain agreed contexts that are uncomfortable for the majority of us, how we feel each is subjective, as is how we respond to the discomfort.

Take a moment now to think about some of the ways psychological discomfort has made its presence felt for you over the past few weeks. What name would you give each type? How strong was the feeling? And what did you do in response to it?

Getting 'hooked' by discomfort

Psychological discomfort can frequently 'grab' our attention away from what we're doing. So, our focus moves from the conversation we're having to the discomfort that the person we're talking to may not like us. Our problem-solving mind steps in and views the discomfort as a problem to solve, meaning our focus is no longer on the person in front of us but moves inside of us, exploring ways to get rid of the discomfort. We call this 'getting hooked', because just like a fish caught on a lure, we focus on getting free.

When we're 'hooked', we do things that can bring instant relief but don't serve us well over the longer term. Instead of having a nice conversation, we focus on the thoughts our mind is giving us, we realise one way of ending the discomfort is to end (or avoid) the conversation and we do so.

No conversation, no discomfort. But of course, we've moved away from our goal, which was to connect with another human being, to an internal focus on feeling less uncomfortable.

James: “That would be awful”

After finally confessing how he feels to his flatmate, James found her to be extremely understanding and supportive. While she relished her downtime and quiet time alone in her room, she could see how he might feel lonely even though he speaks to people all day.

She had quite a few suggestions for how he could reach out to his colleagues for more contact, but James could see the risks with each. He would be judged. He would be rejected. Or he’d feel humiliated when they didn’t reciprocate.

While loneliness was awful, he could see the inherent ‘awfulness’ of all the options they discussed together. It all seemed too risky and uncomfortable. Secretly, he just wished someone would notice how he felt and make the first move.

10. How we deal with uncomfortable thoughts

Our responses to uncomfortable thoughts and feelings can take many forms but they all have one thing in common: we are trying to take control of our thoughts.

And as outlined above, that's not something that we can do without making sacrifices to our attention and focus on what's happening around us.

> *“…because we are so accustomed to controlling the environment around us, it’s only natural that we would seek to control our inner environment: thoughts, emotions, memories, mental images, and the like.”*
>
> Kevin Polk, (2016)

Trying to remove or suppress thoughts

We might try to get rid of thoughts or push them away. We’ve probably all tried that at some point. But just like trying to push a beach ball beneath the surface of the water, thought suppression is possible – but only if we don’t attempt anything else at the same time. While I’m wrestling with my thoughts and pushing them away, I’m not paying attention to you or the task I’m trying to complete. So it comes at a cost. And as soon as I take my hands off that beach ball, it comes right back up to the surface, as do our thoughts. Therefore, it’s not a great use of my energy in the long run – and can make us feel more alone when the thoughts bounce back.

Trying to change thoughts

We might find ourselves engaging in an internal debate, particularly when the discomfort takes the form of self-criticism or judgement. We can attempt to replace the unwelcome thoughts with something more positive or comfortable, but sadly our minds don't work like that. The human mind isn't a neat set of filing cabinets, where we can insert and remove contents as we wish. It's more like a messy network – a spider's web – and by trying to replace one thought with another, we're merely making a stronger connection between the two.

We don't replace 'bad' thought with 'good' thought – we just make it more likely that by thinking the new thought, we'll activate the old one.

Avoiding activities and contexts

Of course one way to avoid uncomfortable thoughts and feelings is to identify the situations that lead to these thoughts and feelings, and avoid those situations. So if I feel anxious when speaking to strangers, the sensible thing, if I don't want to feel anxious, is to avoid speaking to strangers. Of course this reduces our opportunities to speak with people and make valued connections. By focusing on avoiding situations where we might feel discomfort, we are missing out on everything good that could come from these situations. And as the research showed earlier in this guide, most people feel better after they have struck up a conversation with a stranger.

It boils down to this: would you rather avoid a few moments of discomfort or avoid everything positive that could come from exposing ourselves to the risk of discomfort?

Reflect for a moment on all the discomfort you've persisted through so far in your life. We have not met, but I'll bet you've persisted through psychological discomfort when it came to navigating your education journey. Maybe it was the discomfort of missing out on social activities while studying for an exam, or the fear of failure associated with assessment.

In the world of work, you've almost certainly experienced the discomfort of getting something wrong in front of your peers. Or the uncertainty when applying for a new role. In your personal life you've persisted through the risk of rejection to reach out to loved ones and form new, important relationships.

We all have the capacity to persist through discomfort. We just need to see it for what it is – a temporary experience, that's not dangerous – while also having a good reason to continue feeling uncomfortable. In the next section, we'll explore how we can see thoughts for what they are and end the struggles outlined above.

11. Learning to see thoughts for what they are

Thoughts can often show up claiming to be something they're not. Thoughts can appear like demands, ultimatums, facts or even threats. They can sound inflexible. They can appear as 'common sense' or the only way to behave. But, with practice, we can cultivate a new relationship with the thoughts our mind gives us.

The technical term for this skill is 'Defusion' but it's easier to think of it as looking at your thoughts, not *through* your thoughts.

A thought is just a thought

Rather than 'dealing with' or struggling with the thoughts our mind gives us, we can learn to remember that a thought is just a thought. You can't pick up your thoughts. You can't weigh them. You can't even touch them. For something so intangible, we often give thoughts far more attention than they deserve. The first step to seeing thoughts for what they are is just to remember they're that: thoughts.

This simple mantra fits on a post-it note. You might like to make a note of that and put it somewhere obvious, like your bathroom mirror or the fridge.

Simple thinking skills

While it's very useful to remember thoughts are just thoughts, we can take it a step further with some thinking skills that enable us to get a little distance from unhelpful thoughts about connection and loneliness.

1. Noticing and labelling

Picture yourself watching the 'thinking engine' in your head, observing the various kinds of thoughts it produces. Rather than our typical evaluation of the thoughts ("good" or "bad", "happy" or "sad") you can practise labelling them in terms of the *type* of thought they are. Moving away from automatic evaluations helps us minimise any struggle with these thoughts.

We can apply labels that represent the categories we could put the thoughts into. Thoughts about the past, no matter how welcome or unwelcome, are simply memories. For example, a memory of how a colleague previously turned down your invitation for lunch. Thoughts about the future, no matter how scary, are predictions. For example, thoughts about how awful it will be to approach a new colleague for a chat. Thoughts about new ways of doing things are simply ideas.

Labelling in terms of type minimises the chance we'll end up struggling with a thought once we've evaluated it.

2. Naming the story

Sometimes, thoughts about ourselves and our abilities appear again and again. It may take the form of self-criticism or harsh judgement of our abilities. Nobody enjoys these, but we've already outlined how thought suppression and avoidance just don't work. So what's the alternative?

If we see these repeated thoughts as stories, we can give them a name and see them for what they are. Imagine you've heard a story countless times before. It's just a repeat. You'll learn nothing new by listening to every word. So we can simply say to ourselves "Oh, this is just the 'I'm not good enough' story" and continue with what we're doing.

Take a moment to identify some of the 'stories' your mind has been giving you about yourself, along with the names you could give each.

3. Thanking your mind

Now this might sound very counterintuitive, but an effective way of dealing with unwelcome or unhelpful thoughts is to thank your mind for them. If we remember that our mind has evolved to keep us safe, we can look at some of these thoughts through this lens. "Oh thanks mind – I can see you're trying to keep me safe from embarrassment." "Oh thanks, mind – I've noticed you're trying to keep me safe from disappointment".

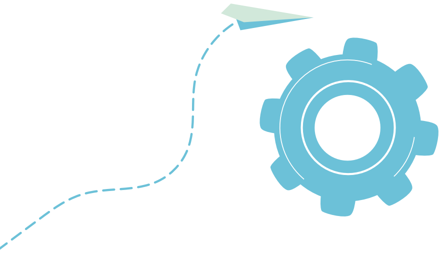
No need to struggle with these thoughts – we just look at them as some of the many varied ways our mind tries to keep us safe and away from threats.

Putting these into practice

It's important to practise these skills so they're readily available when you need them. Look for opportunities in your routine when you can spend a few moments on each. We have plenty of 'Gaps' in our schedules where this is possible:

- Waiting for the kettle to boil in the morning
- Waiting on a train or bus
- While our computer starts up in the morning
- In between meetings with colleagues or clients

When it comes to practising these skills, doing so little and often is both accessible and impactful.



James: "A thought is just a thought"

After looking online for some resources on the topic of loneliness, James found some blog posts and podcast episodes - and quickly realised what a common experience it is! James started to consider the role his thinking was playing in all of this. He noticed that when he thought about reaching out to colleagues, his mind gave him thoughts and images of how it would end in failure and ridicule. He noticed how he felt those emotions in the here and now, even though it hadn't happened.

With some practice, James began to put some of the thinking skills into action. He started to notice thoughts and label them, rather than respond to them or see them as a problem to be solved. Looking at his computer monitor, he saw the post-it note he'd written for himself. It read "A thought is just a thought." He found this little mantra to be really helpful.

He realised that all this time, he'd been waiting for thoughts about the discomfort of judgement from others to just evaporate. He had told himself he needed to feel comfortable before taking any action. But now, he could see that this simply held him back from doing something helpful.

With the help of his flatmate, he made a list of some possible things he could do to improve his situation. This included arranging an online coffee break with a trusted colleague; speaking to his manager about how he felt; suggesting an after-work social the next time some of the team were together in the office. Together, they looked at how each could be something to bring him closer to what was important to him: connecting with his colleagues.

Whenever he got 'stuck' on how uncomfortable something would feel, his flatmate would ask him: "What are you focusing on? Feeling comfortable or doing what's helpful?" This really helped him spot thoughts about discomfort and remind him of the direction he wanted to head.

12. Accepting the discomfort

The word ‘acceptance’ can often indicate a passive acceptance of how things are. In psychological terms, what we mean is acceptance of the discomfort, but very much moving and taking action to get to where we want to be.

When we practise acceptance, we acknowledge that doing meaningful and important things means we’ll sometimes feel uncomfortable. And, rather than try to minimise or avoid this discomfort, we make space for it in our lives. We see discomfort as part of life, not something to fear or feel bad about.

> “*Acceptance does not mean putting up with or resigning yourself to anything. Acceptance is about embracing life, not merely tolerating it. Acceptance literally means “taking what is offered.” It doesn’t mean giving up or admitting defeat; it doesn’t mean just gritting your teeth and bearing it. It means fully opening yourself to your present reality - acknowledging how it is, right here and now, and letting go of the struggle with life as it is in this moment.*”
>
> Russ Harris, ‘*The Happiness Trap*’

Acceptance as an activity

At work, there are boundaries around what is possible and realistic in terms of having social connections. In accepting these in-built limitations, what social aspects of work do you enjoy and could cultivate even though they may be uncomfortable to begin with?

What aspects of your work could be more social (such as a shared purpose/goal with a colleague) even if it means accepting potential failure? What are your expectations of social connection in your current work environment versus what is possible in terms of relational depth? What automatic thoughts are you having when you think about these questions?

Dealing with ‘the swamp’

One way to visualise our psychological discomfort is as a swamp. A mucky, stinking swamp. Our goal in this moment is located on the other side of this swamp and there’s no other way to reach it.

So if we want to reach this goal, we need to wade through the swamp. It’s uncomfortable, it’s not enjoyable and it’s something we’d ideally avoid. But the goal is more important than the avoidance of discomfort. So we wade in and start to push through the swamp.

The awkwardness of reaching out to others is a great example of the swamp of discomfort. If we're clear on why we're doing it (our values) and what we hope to gain (our goal), then we can persist through the swamp. We can see it as temporary and necessary if we want to make progress.

And when we find ourselves in a swap – when we become aware of discomfort – we can quickly remind ourselves of what matters (our values) and why we stepped into the swamp in the first place.

Reflecting on discomfort and acceptance

When you think how important connection with others is to you – what kind of psychological discomfort are you prepared to accept as you make new connections with other people?

Notes

13. Clarifying what matters

When we can successfully get some distance between us and unhelpful thoughts about connection and our relationships, we can use something else to guide our behaviour: our values.

Values can be best thought of as the important personal qualities we want to bring to life. It's important to understand that values are all about how we want to behave, not how we want to feel, so the emphasis is very much on putting them into action.

You may not have given much thought to your values before now – and that's absolutely fine. We often concentrate more on our goals – the things we want to achieve in life. While goals are important, values can't be 'achieved' in the same way. They are enduring qualities we want to experience and bring into the world. Values can be thought of as an inner compass, setting our valued sense of direction.

The role of our personal values

- They clarify what's important to us in life
- They help us making decisions
- They can guide our behaviour in everyday situations
- They help us persist through psychological discomfort

Getting clarity on our values

There are many different ways we can get clear on what really matters to us in life. One is to picture our 'perfect day'. Take some time to work on this exercise, as the clarity of values it brings can support you in embracing the discomfort of trying new things.

Values reflection

Take a moment to think about your perfect day. make a note of what occurs to you here and see which of your values become clear.

Notes

Picture your perfect day at work. Writing in the present tense, explore the following aspects of your day, from the moment you wake up until your close your eyes that evening:

- Where are you?
- How do you start your day?
- How does it feel to start your day this way?
- How do you spend your journey to work?
- What kind of colleagues do you have?
- How do you spend your time working with them?
- What skills and knowledge do you use in this job?
- How do you feel when you're wrapping up your day at work?
- What accomplishments can you point to?
- How do you end the day with your colleagues?
- How do you spend your journey from work to home?
- How do you spend your evening?

Once you've answered this in as much detail as you can, review it for the important words that jump out at you. What personal qualities are you bringing to life? How do relationships with other people feature in your perfect work day? Remember anything can be a value, as long as it's not a goal. We achieve our goals, we continue to put our values into action.

14. Doing what matters

Values are most useful when they're put into action. It's important to understand that this doesn't mean big, disruptive or significant activities – it's more to do with the everyday. We put our values into action by getting out of bed and going to work. We put them into action by greeting our colleagues. We live our values when we answer colleagues' questions or volunteer for a new responsibility.

When we're living our values, we're not listening to unhelpful thoughts, or working hard to avoid discomfort. We're doing what matters to us, even though it can be difficult.

We earlier outlined how it's unhelpful to rely on over-simplified binaries – e.g. rejected versus included – when it comes to our thoughts. Ideally, we do the same when looking at our behaviour. We can use a simple 'towards' or 'away' distinction, which is more flexible and takes account of the context we're in.

Towards moves

Anything we do that is in line with our values and moves us towards what's important. We can look at our options and ask whether what we're about to do is a 'towards' move, even if it's challenging or uncomfortable.

Noticing a new colleague in the office, you realise you haven't spoken to them yet. You could walk over and introduce yourself, but that could be uncomfortable and they may not respond in a friendly way, and so you might feel rejected or embarrassed. How uncomfortable would that be?! But reaching out to people and making new connections *is* in line with your values, especially the one you refer to as compassion. Considering their perspective, they might feel lonely or excluded and you want to help them with that.

So, even though it might be awkward, you walk over and introduce yourself. You've acted in line with your values and persisted through the discomfort. A great example of a towards move.

Away moves

These are the things we do when we're focused on minimising or avoiding discomfort. We make away moves because they bring us relief from the discomfort or even the chance that we'll experience it. Away moves are often attractive because of this relief, but over time they usually cause more problems than they solve.

In the same scenario as above, you may decide that the risk of feeling rejected is too high and you keep to yourself. You notice the new colleague spends their morning alone at their desk and you begin to feel even worse. Yes, you avoided some potential discomfort, but also the opportunity to express compassion to someone and potentially establish a new relationship in the workplace.

Noting our options, in context

Framing our options in terms of 'towards' and 'away' ensures flexibility. The actions are a function of the context we're in, not to avoid discomfort, or taking the form of rigid mental rules. So the same behaviour could be a towards move in one situation, while it could be an away move in another situation.

This might sound a little complicated, but it boils down to this: if you can notice the options in front of you, and explore what's motivating you to choose one over the other, you can lean towards options that bring you satisfaction, rather than relief.

Here we see the benefits of being present in the here and now, to better understand the context, the power of stepping back from thoughts, and the use of values rather than discomfort to guide behaviour.

James: Moving towards what matters

After some reflection, James decided to message one of his colleagues to arrange a quick virtual coffee break. He had noticed all the reasons his mind gave him not to do this – and labelled each of them as 'predictions' or 'doom and gloom'. He realised that he might not get the response he was hoping for, but at the very least, he was doing something to improve his situation.

Moments after sending his message, he got a reply: "Not today – too much on!" His heart sank and he slumped in his chair. Then another notification: "Tomorrow afternoon at 3pm is much better. Looking forward to catching up!"

15. Dealing with setbacks

No guaranteed success

All of this can make us more likely to choose options that bring us satisfaction and closer to what's important to us. That said, there are no guarantees that you'll be successful with every attempt. When our attempts to connect with others – or to try anything a little uncomfortable – we can be tempted to give up the first time it's not successful.

It's important to recognise that building connections with others can take time and 'success' isn't a one-time thing. What's important is that we keep trying, that we move towards connection, despite the discomfort, and recognise our efforts – not just our successes.

Social connection as a journey, not a task

How we visualise our efforts can make a big difference here. Rather than seeing connection with others as a task to be completed – something you can cross off your list at the end of the day – it's more useful to see it as a journey.

You're clear on the ultimate destination you want to reach. However, you may have to try different routes to get there. And you may have to overcome obstacles on that journey. Sometimes, progress towards the destination may not be as quick as you'd like. Ultimately, it's the direction of travel that matters the most. Moving towards connection, no matter how slow and deliberate, is better than avoiding potentially uncomfortable situations and missing the opportunity to connect.

James: Small steps towards change

During his virtual coffee with his colleague, James shared how he felt a bit 'out of the loop' and missed the chats he used to have with his colleagues. Eric, his colleague, confided that he'd noticed the same since working from home most of the time. A busy family life didn't leave him with much time to ponder on it, though. They agreed to schedule a quick virtual coffee each week and got into the habit of updating each other on how their day was going over Slack.

Buoyed by this 'success', James tried the same approach with some other colleagues. Some weren't interested in setting up something regular, some thanked him but said they were too busy, but some others thought it was great to recreate the 'coffee machine' moments they had previously enjoyed.

James realised that while not every approach worked, he felt good about contacting his colleagues like this. He was doing what mattered to him, no matter how concerned he might feel about being rebuffed. And while he hadn't recreated the buzz of his former team, he was taking steps towards the kind of relationships he really wanted at work. After a few weeks, he realised that he had a virtual coffee catch-up scheduled for each day and noticed how much he was learning about both his colleagues, the business and their technology.

He approached his manager and suggested that, as new people join the team, they get some unstructured coffee catch-ups in the diary with team members, so they could get to know everyone. He described just how much he had learnt about the team and the business and his manager agreed it would be a helpful thing to do.

James: An epilogue

This fictional case-study isn't unrealistic or unusual. We hope it has illustrated just how easy it is for us to feel lonely even though we're in contact with lots of people at work. But also how small steps in the direction of what really matters can make such a big difference.

Resources

You can find a range of helpful resources on our website.

Simply visit worklifepsych.com/connectandthrive.

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