ISOLATION, LONELINESS AND DISCONNECTION

A toolbox for further education and skills leaders and managers

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INTRODUCTION

Isolation and loneliness are often used interchangeably but they are distinctly different experiences. Loneliness is an emotion that many of us encounter at various points in our life. In contrast, social isolation refers to having few social relationships or infrequent social contact.

Some staff may not experience isolation or loneliness but might feel disconnected at work due to other factors, which we will explore in this guide.

For example, further education (FE) and skills staff may work from home for extended periods and feel perfectly content, while others might be surrounded by learners or colleagues all day yet feel lonely. This can often be because they feel disconnected to the people around them.

Research suggests that the biggest predictor of how mentally well we are is how well we connect with others and the quality of these relationships. A little connection goes a long way.

Therefore, it's important to know the distinction between isolation, loneliness and disconnection as it will help you support colleagues and take care of yourself.

Read on further for practical support to help FE and skills staff working across multiple settings and in hybrid environments to maintain connections, foster a sense of belonging and ultimately look after their wellbeing.

WHO IS AT RISK IN FE AND SKILLS SETTINGS?

Anyone, of any age or background, at any stage of their life can experience loneliness at work. A Teacher wellbeing index (TWIX) report by Education Support shows those working in the education sector feel twice as lonely at work than the general population (as measured in England). At work, 14% of staff working in education always, or often, feel lonely. This is twice the level of the general population of England, which is 7%. In addition, 26% of staff experience at least one of the following three indirect measures of loneliness – feeling isolated, left out or lacking companionship at work.

What the evidence at work shows:

− There are higher levels of loneliness among younger workers: research from the [British Red Cross Loneliness at Work report](link) revealed higher levels of loneliness at work among younger workers aged 18 to 29. This supports the findings of other studies.
− 22% of education staff from a global majority background said they experience loneliness always, or often, at work, compared with 13% of white staff according to [Mental health and wellbeing of ethnic minority teachers report](link) by Education Support.
− The research detailed in the British Red Cross report also found that disabled workers and those with long-term health conditions affecting their day-to-day lives are more likely to report general loneliness than those without (24%, compared to 9%).
− In general, the British Red Cross report found no evidence to suggest that one gender is more lonely than the other. Although recent data suggests that in Britain in the last few years, women have been lonelier, especially during the pandemic.

The [NHS every mind matters webpage on loneliness](link) shows that:

− Women (24%) are slightly more likely than men (20%) to feel lonely at least some of the time
− Men (32%) are more likely than women (22%) to report never feeling lonely
− LGBTQ+ people are at a greater risk of loneliness; transgender and gender diverse people are at particular risk.

Spotting the signs
According to the [NHS every mind matters webpage on loneliness](link), loneliness can affect both our mental and physical wellbeing. In fact, the risk to health that loneliness can bring is greater than those associated with many factors that currently receive substantial public health attention and resources such as obesity, lack of exercise and air pollution. If loneliness is very severe or lasts a long time, it might increase the risk of some physical and mental health conditions such as:

− dementia
− stress
− anxiety
− low mood and depression.

We often talk about feelings of loneliness, but we can also have physical symptoms of loneliness, and it can also affect our behaviour.

For example, you might notice yourself or a member of staff:

− get nervous about or avoid going to social events
− change their daily routines i.e. cooking or taking care of their appearance
− find it difficult to get to sleep or stay asleep.

WHAT ARE THE DRIVERS OF LONELINESS, ISOLATION AND DISCONNECTION IN FE AND SKILLS SETTINGS?

The recent loneliness at work report found several key factors contributing to loneliness in the workplace. Below we consider some of these factors - alongside factors that are specific to the FE sector:

- **Organisational culture:** Organisational cultures characterised by individualism, competition, and a narrow focus on performance often exacerbate feelings of isolation. When the emphasis is on individual achievement over collective success, employees may feel disconnected from their colleagues. This can lead to a lack of collaboration and communication, which are vital for building relationships.
- **Relationships at work:** The quality of interpersonal relationships significantly influences mental and physical wellbeing. Umberson and Montez argue that strong social connections at work are crucial for emotional support and job satisfaction.
- **Work organisation:** The structure and demands of work play a crucial role in staff wellbeing. High workloads and the pressure to perform can lead to stress and burnout, which are often associated with feelings of isolation. The Workload Survey 2021 Data Report by UCU showed that Staff in FE colleges are working on average 49.0 hours per week FTE. This figure is slightly lower than in 2016 (51.6), but this doesn't represent any meaningful change - staff are still working the equivalent of an additional two days unpaid each week.

Other factors include:

- **Lack of appreciation:** When employees feel undervalued or unrecognised for their contributions, it can lead to a sense of disconnection.
- **Lack of belonging:** A lack of a sense of belonging may be felt in some FE and skills settings, where staff may feel like outsiders, especially those new to the institution or from minority backgrounds.

We also know there are pressures that may lead to heightened stress levels among FE and skills staff, which can make them feel disconnected at work, including:

- **Redundancies:** risk of redundancy is not only a worry for FE and skills staff against the backdrop of a cost-of-living crisis. Redundancies also mean that more work is done by fewer people, some are on insecure contracts and there is less time for connecting with colleagues.
- **Staff recruitment and retention:** 96% of colleges have difficulty recruiting, with an average 25 posts per college remaining unfilled at the start of the academic year. In the Teacher wellbeing index (TWIX) report, 61% of staff had taken steps to leave their current job in FE and skills. This means remaining staff will likely be filling gaps and taking on extra work if they do leave their roles.
- **High pressure situations like inspections or reviews:** At some point in the next few working weeks, it's possible that you – and your effectiveness in your role – will be in the spotlight. It could be at your performance appraisal meeting or during an inspection. It can be difficult dealing with the stress in the lead up and aftermath of these events.

- **Compliance:** All FE and skills settings have to ensure that they are compliant with a range of different funding streams, assessment and delivery regulations, and governance legislation, in relation to the provision they deliver. This can impact on the time and prioritisation of connection with colleagues due to increased workload, short delivery timescales and high pressure decision-making.

External factors affecting FE and skills staff

- **Cost-of-living pressures and poverty:** A survey carried out by Censuswide on behalf of Mind showed that the mental health of nearly 8 in 10 people in the UK has been affected by the cost-of-living crisis. And we know that staff living in poverty or experiencing financial stress are more likely to develop mental health problems, affecting areas from their sleep, to feeling anxious, stressed, hopeless or alone.
- **Post-covid landscape:** Much has changed for FE and skills staff since the height of the pandemic. Some of the changes to working practices have been beneficial for FE and skills staff i.e. hybrid working offers more flexibility, but some staff experience loneliness, or relationships can be tricky to build with a mix of virtual and in-person meetings. Many learners have also struggled with mental health following the pandemic which has the potential to take an emotional toll of FE and skills staff as described in our guide Looking after yourself and others while supporting learners: secondary trauma.
- **War and conflict:** It is possible you will encounter colleagues and learners who have been impacted by war or conflict, or you may have been directly impacted yourself. Learners and staff affected by war and conflict may need extra support from their FE and skills setting. These divisions can also show up in FE and skills settings between colleagues, driven by external factors such as the media or societal divisions.

WHAT PRACTICAL ACTIONS CAN FE AND SKILLS LEADERS AND MANAGERS TAKE TO SUPPORT THEMSELVES AND STAFF?

The good news is, to effectively support staff and mitigate feelings of loneliness, isolation or disconnection among individuals and teams, FE leaders and managers can use these readily available suggestions below:

1. **Prioritise conversations about mental health:** Creating a culture where mental health is openly discussed is vital. Our guide How to talk to FE colleagues about mental health can serve as a valuable resource for initiating these conversations.
2. **Don't shy away from conversations about suicide and suicide prevention:** Read our guides Supporting learning communities following suicide and suicide prevention and Managing challenging conversations around mental health.
3. **Encourage understanding and compassion:** Educate staff about the diverse manifestations of loneliness, and consider marking awareness days, such as Loneliness awareness week to promote understanding and compassion.
4. **Cultivate psychological safety:** Establishing a workplace where staff feel safe to express their feelings without fear of judgment is essential in the fight against isolation, disconnection and loneliness. Read our guide Psychological Safety in further education settings for practical advice.
5. **Foster healthy relationships:** In FE and skills settings, where teamwork and collaboration are essential, fostering healthy relationships can mitigate feelings of loneliness and enhance overall morale. Learn more in our guide for FE and skills staff Building collegiate relationships.
6. **Show appreciation:** Celebrating achievements and providing regular feedback can help create a more supportive atmosphere in FE settings. Take a look at this resource on how to show appreciation for staff authentically.
7. **Belonging for everyone**: Consider how you help both onsite and remote staff to forge quality connections with colleagues. Research indicates that remote workers often desire more opportunities for socialising than their onsite colleagues. Read our guide Psychological safety in a hybrid workplace for practical advice and explore Brene Brown's theory on cultivating meaningful connection and a sense of belonging within teams.
8. **Role-model healthy behaviours:** Showing how you take care of yourself can send a strong message to colleagues. Read our guide for FE and skills leaders on taking care of you and what 'role-modelling' looks like in practical terms.
9. **Practice vulnerability:** Sharing your own experiences can help destigmatise feelings of loneliness. Consider the power of vulnerability and how it can help your team to stay better connected.
10. **Promote work-life balance:** Evaluating how work is organised to ensure staff have manageable workloads and opportunities for collaboration is important. You can also read our guide on helping FE staff balance work and life.
11. **Share mentoring programmes:** Regularly share mentorship opportunities, particularly for less experienced staff, to help facilitate connections and provide support.

12. **Promote relevant networks:** Actively encourage participation in and share professional networks, especially for staff from underrepresented backgrounds. This can enhance inclusivity and combat feelings of isolation, as noted in [Education Support's mental health and wellbeing of ethnic minority teachers](#) report.
13. **Promote volunteering**: For example, [Men's Sheds](#) targets men's connection, while other groups focus on bringing women together, like [London Lonely Girls Club](#). Some settings offer a volunteering day each year to allow staff to get involved in a charity or community group of their choice.
14. **Utilise Professional Supervision**: [Professional supervision for FE college leaders](#) provides a much-needed outlet for sharing experiences and reducing feelings of isolation at senior management levels. Hear from two FE college leaders, [Helen](#) and [Rosie](#) who took part in funded professional supervision with Education Support at no cost.

By addressing these drivers and implementing supportive measures using these readily available suggestions and resources for FE and skills leaders and managers, you can cultivate a more connected and resilient workforce, ultimately enhancing the educational experience for both staff and learners.

Finally, consider using these three practical tools from Education Support:

1. [Staff wellbeing survey template:](#) It is important to understand what is driving good and poor mental health among staff. Use this survey template by Governors for Schools to gain insight and inform your wellbeing strategy.
2. [Staff mental health and wellbeing plan](#): Developing a staff mental health and wellbeing plan is a great place to start when outlining your commitment to prioritising the wellbeing of FE and skills staff. You could include a section on building team connection as part of the plan.
3. [Staff wellbeing audit](#): This tool will also help you identify any gaps and areas for improvement using a simple traffic light system.

TYPES OF LONELINESS

[Researchers have identified seven different types of loneliness](#) as listed below. It can be helpful to understand the differences in order to spot them in yourself, colleagues or your team:

1. **Emotional loneliness.** Dr Becky Spelman says this kind of loneliness "comes from within." It doesn't matter where you are or what you're doing; there is always this deep-seated disconnection. Perhaps a traumatic childhood experience or an early separation or dramatic life change lies at the root. Whatever the cause, you might benefit from counselling, group therapy or cognitive behaviour therapy.
2. **Situational loneliness** is based on our circumstances changing or no longer meeting our needs. There is evidence that loneliness is linked to life changes – such as becoming a parent, starting a new job, retiring, or moving home. These changes might also impact the social isolation someone experiences.[1]

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[1] *Jopling, K., Sserwanja, I. (2016) Loneliness across the life course: a rapid review of the evidence,*

3. **Existential loneliness** is a sense of feeling disconnected from others, as though life is empty and lacks meaning. We may find it difficult to connect with others and the world outside and feel isolated, empty, or abandoned. Sometimes we can feel this when we are in times of crisis or experiencing traumatic events.

4. **Social loneliness** is related to a perceived deficit in the quality of social connections. This might be exacerbated by feelings of social anxiety, shyness or low self-esteem. Even if you are part of a team working on-site it's not to say everyone automatically feels connected. It can be difficult to see other staff forming closer relationships, even friendships, when you don't feel like this mirrors your own experience.

5. **Transient loneliness** describes short-term periods of feeling lonely that usually occur when we may experience a temporary change in our circumstances, environment or relationships. Sometimes, even when this change may be positive, such as a promotion at work, we may still experience feelings of loneliness as we adjust to the change.

6. **Chronic loneliness.** Although often triggered by transient or situational bouts of loneliness, chronic loneliness defines experiences of loneliness that persist over a long period and become a defining state of being. Chronic loneliness can be exacerbated by financial distress, medical issues, mental health problems, and experiences of abuse. It is important for to reach out for support - don't dismiss it.

MYTH BUSTER

Myth: Loneliness is about isolation.

Truth: Loneliness is not the same as being alone; it is a feeling of disconnection. Loneliness can occur regardless of being alone. You might find yourself in an office full of colleagues and still feel lonely or disconnected.

Myth: Only older people feel lonely.

Truth: Loneliness can affect anyone, regardless of age. Research from the British Red Cross Loneliness at Work report that 20% of 18-29 year olds often feel lonely at work, compared to 12% of those aged 30-54 and 8% of those 55 and older. This supports the findings of other studies, which indicate higher levels of loneliness among younger workers.

Myth: Staff working from home feel lonelier.

Truth: There is no evidence that home or hybrid working increases workplace loneliness and little indication that more colleague contact reduces loneliness. These findings align with broader evidence indicating that loneliness differs from isolation.[2]

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation; Kantar Public (2016) Trapped in a bubble: an investigation into triggers for loneliness in the UK, London: British Red Cross and Co-op
[2] Loneliness at work report, British Red Cross, January 2023

Myth: I'm surrounded by colleagues and learners all day – I shouldn't feel lonely!

Truth: If you feel like no one around you understands you or that you don't have meaningful connections at work then you can feel lonely. Remember it's okay to feel what you feel.

Myth: I enjoy my own company and don't feel lonely or disconnected. There must be something wrong with me.

Truth: There is nothing wrong with being comfortable in your own company. Everyone will have a different 'social battery' or tolerance for social interactions before they need to recharge or take time to gather their thoughts.

Myth: If I admit feeling lonely or isolated at work it is a sign of weakness.

Truth: It might feel vulnerable to talk about how you feel. But [researcher Brené Brown](#) teaches that vulnerability is a good measure of courage as it allows us to gauge someone's fearlessness. She argues that we can measure how brave someone is by how vulnerable they're willing to be.

Myth: Loneliness is a 'bad' emotion.

Truth: While feeling lonely can be upsetting, John Cacioppo, a social neuroscientist, suggests that [we evolved to experience loneliness](#) in order to prompt us to maintain our connections with other people. He says for many thousands of years humans stayed safe by living in groups, so it makes sense that we have this survival instinct.

Reaching out for support

Education Support is the only UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff, including those working in the FE and skills sector. You don't need to be in crisis to talk with qualified counsellors about anything you are experiencing. You can call their free and confidential helpline 24/7 on 08000 562 561. Or you can [download the helpline poster](#).

Sources

- [A guide to loneliness for teachers and education staff by Education Support](#)
- [Campaign to end loneliness](#)
- [Age UK: loneliness and isolation](#)
- [Loneliness and mental health at work, Mental Health UK](#)
- [Loneliness at work report, Red Cross](#)
- [Five myths about loneliness article, BBC](#)
- [The power of vulnerability in leadership, Education Support](#)
- [Loneliness, NHS every mind matters](#)
- [Leading through crisis guide, ETF](#).

Thank you

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