The problem of loneliness: learning that we're not alone

General Features



22 April 2022

This year’s Mental Health Awareness Week will focus on the issue of loneliness, which affects millions of people in the UK. We examine what we can all do to overcome loneliness in both our working and personal lives.

We have all needed to face the impact of Covid on both our working lives and personal lives. Whether we live on our own or have had to fight for a quiet corner amidst the rampages of our noisy offspring, many things have never been the same since the early months of 2020. The sudden shock of lockdown brought separation from family, friends, safe places and social networks. While we are starting to return to normal, it can still be a struggle to regain some of that comfort and familiarity.

The structure of work has also changed fundamentally for many of us. Some offices are now requiring employees to return to pre-Covid working patterns. Many, though, have actively embraced a hybrid model, where staff may come into the office for one or two days a week and work from home for the rest of the time.

The UK's leading loneliness charity, the Marmalade Trust, states that chronic loneliness is one of the biggest health concerns we face. Nine million people in the UK – more than the population of London – are always or often lonely.

It is perhaps no wonder that the Mental Health Foundation has selected the issue of loneliness to be its target for this year's Mental Health Awareness Week, running from 9 to 15 May. The week will explore the experience of loneliness, its effect on our mental health and how we can all play a part in reducing loneliness in our communities.

See www.mentalhealth.org.uk for more information.

The scale of the problem

Loneliness affects millions of people in the UK. The Mental Health Foundation has been tracking levels of loneliness in the UK during the pandemic and found that they have been much higher than previously, with devastating impact. Covid-19 has been an important factor contributing to higher levels of distress, resulting from people's sense of isolation and reduced ability to connect with others.

Mark Rowland, Chief Executive of the Mental Health Foundation, said: 'Loneliness has had a huge impact on our physical and mental health during the pandemic. That is why we have chosen it as our theme for Mental Health Awareness Week 2022. Our connection to other people and our community is fundamental to protecting our mental health so we much find better ways of tackling the epidemic of loneliness. We can all play a part in this.'

The statistics bear this out. The Campaign to End Loneliness analysed data gathered by the ONS Opinions and Lifestyle Survey. In December 2021, levels of loneliness in Britain had still not returned to pre-Covid levels, and 3.3 million people (6.3%) said they were 'chronically lonely' during September to November 2021, even though lockdown restrictions had eased.

Robin Hewings, Programme Director of the Campaign to End Loneliness, said: 'These figures highlight that even when restrictions lift, our feelings of loneliness do not quickly go back to normal. Loneliness can have a hugely damaging impact on our mental and physical health. Chronic loneliness is hard to get out of and it will take time and support for people to recover and rebuild their social connections up again.

‘Concerted action will be needed – from national governments, charities, local government and communities – to put in place the structures and support that is needed to alleviate the impact of loneliness on our mental wellbeing. As individuals, we can also reach out to families and friends who we think may be lonely too.’

Taxing times

Last year’s *Tax Adviser* readership survey revealed that almost exactly 50% of our readers are sole practitioners or work in a single office practice. While many thrive in this environment and have actively chosen to work alone, the tax industry must be alert to potential problems. The need to find our place in a community is crucial to our social and our professional wellbeing.

The tax world can provide a vital network for its sole practitioners, as we hear regularly from our members. Chris Brydone formed Brydone & Co in 2004. ‘The main problem with being a sole practitioner in my experience is that “company” – in the form of work colleagues – is not there. To replicate that experience requires making an effort to meet people – clients, fellow practitioners, former colleagues and friends.’

Day and weekend courses and CIOT conferences have allowed Chris to meet younger people new to the profession, as well as older practitioners with their varied experience. ‘This sharing of experience enables me to assess my own approach and to learn alternative ways of dealing with difficulties, as well as offering my own thoughts to others to assure them. In the main, I come away with a very positive outlook from these meetings.’

Melissa Dunkley, director of MD Advisory, has been a sole tax practitioner for 17 years, working from home. She enjoys working alone and thinks she would rather struggle now to work in a busy office environment. But she is honest about the need for a network. ‘There are times when you can feel a little isolated, whether you’ve got a particular problem or you’ve been having a bad day and want to rant about the latest industry mess! Or perhaps you want a second opinion on something technical, or how to manage a particular client. You need some way of getting support and connecting with other people. It is very possible to do that. You should have a network of people around you.’

CIOT and ATT Branch Network

The CIOT and ATT Branch Network has over 30 local branches (see tax.org.uk/local-branches) which allow tax professionals to join their local community and seek out support and companionship.

Keith Bell, who is a retired CIOT council member and was chairman of the CIOT Branches Committee, remembered his own reasons for first joining his local branch. Having moved to set up a tax department in a firm where he was the only dedicated tax person, he was initially looking for some technical input. It soon became apparent to him that there was more to gain than technical support, though. 'It meant that you were mixing with like-minded individuals. There is a camaraderie among people in the tax world that I believe has prevailed all the way through my working career.'

The tea or coffee (or beer) that so often follows on from the technical lecture means that you can build up relationships with people, he explains. 'You realise that they've all got similar problems. All of a sudden, you don't feel like you're fighting the war all by yourself. You find everyone else is pretty much in the same boat.'

The collegiate nature of the tax community means that there will always be people there to help if we need support or guidance. That can be about aspects of business management, as well as technical issues. Melissa Dunkley had a lot of questions when she was starting up as a sole practitioner – on issues as varied as pricing structures, administration, anti-money laundering requirements, engagement letters and professional indemnity insurance. 'People gave me support and help,' she says, 'so I'm happy to do it if someone calls me for advice.'

Professional support

The CIOT and ATT offer more than just a chance for companionship, however. There are times when we can feel alone as professionals. Branch events, webinars, workshops, training and conferences all provide opportunities for us to join together to strengthen our technical skills and meet the annual requirement for CPD. The various technical committees are always keen to hear from potential new volunteers.

For those of us feeling professionally isolated, it can be very reassuring to remember that the CIOT and ATT work to build a better and more efficient tax system for everyone – providing views and analysis to tax policy makers; providing commentary on changes to the tax system; and providing guidance to members on procedural

matters.

Keith Bell commented on the role that CIOT and ATT play in members' lives: 'What members get out of it primarily is a voice in the tax world. Most people who qualify in tax believe in the tax system. It ought to be fair and apply equally across the board. And they respect the representation being made by the Institute at government level to make the tax system fairer and more manageable.'

We all have a voice in the tax world and we are not alone. One other opportunity is to use our own tax experience to provide help to others. Tax charities TaxAid and Tax Help for Older People are always delighted to hear from volunteers. As well as the satisfaction of helping those needing our expertise, the resulting companionship may be a real benefit to those of us who are suffering from loneliness.

Embrace social interaction

There are things we can do to build our network and break out of the cycle of loneliness. Sometimes, though, we need to take the first step and embrace these opportunities.

Keith Bell acknowledged the huge convenience that online training offers to tax advisers by minimising the time required and reducing travel costs. But he believes that attending courses in-person can meet broader needs. 'The branches were formed to actually get together like-minded professional individuals. I still think that face-to-face contact allows you to sit down, have a chat, talk about your holidays, drift off into some tax issue you're dealing with. It's about that human contact. I think that gives you a comfort factor and I would suggest that really does help with your mental health.'

Melissa Dunkley agrees: 'I think you sometimes have to remember to do these things. I think people are going to have to force themselves to get back out to live events and make the effort. But I do think that it's worth it. We all get stressed; we all get wound up. And with the best will in the world, while there are people out there that do support you, you have to look after yourself. Sometimes we're better at that than other times.'

And finally…

I would like to end this article with a caveat. Loneliness can have a significant impact on both our mental and physical health. It has been linked to early deaths and an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, depression, cognitive decline and poor sleep.

If you have *any* concerns about your own wellbeing, seek out help. Contact one of the many helplines. Make an appointment with your GP. Most important, though, is to tell somebody – and remember that, even though it may feel like it, you are not alone.

Image

SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE TO COMBAT LONELINESS

The Marmalade Trust is a UK charity with a very clear mission: to create a society which recognises that loneliness exists and where we can support each other to find new social connections. It wants to encourage people to see loneliness as a blank canvas on which they can fill their lives with new friends and experiences.

By building our understanding of loneliness, we can help ourselves and others to manage the feeling. Here is some advice from the Marmalade Trust to overcome loneliness:

- Acknowledge loneliness and don't feel embarrassed. It is a very normal human emotion and most of us will experience loneliness at some point in our lives, regardless of age, circumstance and background.
- Think about how you describe loneliness. We still use words like 'admitting' to and 'suffering' from, which can add to the belief that something is wrong with us. There is absolutely no shame in feeling lonely.
- Reach out and tell someone. Look at your life and try to identify the areas where you do have support or someone to talk to. Can you talk to a family member or a friend? Is there someone at work or in your community you can reach out to?
- Try to remember that it's not that people don't care or aren't there for you. It's more likely that they don't know how you are feeling. Once you start reaching out to people, they will respond accordingly and your social network can start to flourish.
- Use technology proactively. Social media is a great way to connect with others but notice how it makes you feel when you use it. Do you feel happier and more connected, or the opposite?
- Try swapping communicating via a screen for a real life interaction. Meet up with a friend or call someone for a chat, rather than WhatsApping or emailing them.
- Most places have opportunities to meet new people. Could you start a course, or do some sort of physical exercise, or take up a new hobby as a way to meet like-minded people who have similar interests?
- Volunteering is also a great way to meet new people and feel part of a cause or community. Research shows that being kind to others increases our own levels of happiness as well as theirs.
- Finally, it's important to distinguish between being alone and feeling lonely. Many people are happy with their company and find it to be a positive experience. We all need enough beneficial alone time!

Image

USEFUL CONTACTS TO TACKLE LONELINESS

- **The Marmalade Trust:** A charity dedicated to raising awareness of loneliness and helping people make new friendships: www.marmaladetrust.org
- **The Campaign to End Loneliness:** Information, advice and research on loneliness, in a campaign to inspire everyone to connect and bring communities together across the UK: www.campaigntoendloneliness.org
- **Mind:** Information about dealing with loneliness and tips and advice on coping with these feelings: www.mind.org.uk
- **The British Red Cross:** Its 'Tackling Loneliness Digitally' programme has developed resources to help build confidence, coping skills and connections for adults and young people: www.redcross.org.uk
- **NHS:** Site includes tips, advice, local support, toolkit and resources: letstalkloneliness.co.uk
- **Do-it.org:** A UK wide database of over 50,000 opportunities to volunteer, where you will find a cause or activity that matters to you: www.do-it.org
- **Meetup:** Find meet ups in your local area. Most events and activities are either free or low cost: www.meetup.com

Image

2 million

the number of over-50s predicted to be experiencing loneliness by 2025/6.

Source: Age UK

45%

of adults feel occasionally, sometimes or often lonely in England

Source: Campaign to End Loneliness

£32 billion

the potential cost of disconnected communities to the UK economy every year

Source: Eden Project