# The differences between isolation and loneliness at work

**H**AVE you recently felt socially isolated or experienced feelings of loneliness?

If you have, you're not alone. It's estimated that 25 per cent to 30 per cent of the Canadian population is experiencing loneliness. In addition, the long-term health risks associated with social isolation and loneliness are comparable to the dangers of smoking and obesity, increasing mortality risk by as much as 30 per cent.

One observation I am making more as I engage with organizations about their employee mental-health strategies is that isolation can be a barrier and that a core pillar of mental health is authentic social connections. It is important that employers proactively look to their employees' mental health and psychological safety, and even more important that they understand what could be contributing to loneliness in the workplace.

## AWARENESS

In my experience, the terms social isolation and loneliness are often used interchangeably. But my research suggests that, although these two terms have strong interactions and relationships, some specific distinctions can be made.

- **Perceived Isolation:** Our experience in the workplace can create barriers that can influence our perceptions around social isolation. Examples include how well we cope with relocating to a new community for work, fit in beginning a new job, navigate working in open-space concepts, fit in with work peers or manage working remotely, along with how concerned we are about psychological safety and quality of our employee-manager relationships. Any of these barriers can contribute to levels of perceived social isolation. Additional barriers may include physical limitations, financial health, feeling discriminated against and chronic disease. The higher the level of perceived isolation, the more likely we will experience loneliness.

- **Loneliness:** The result of perceiving social isolation or barriers, leading to a variety of negative emotions such as emptiness, feeling disconnected and devalued. These feelings can lead to shutting down, resulting in more social isolation and being driven to escape these feelings through distraction. For exam-

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**Share your experience about loneliness in the workplace**

*Complete the*

## Perceived Isolation-Loneliness Effect Survey

Compiled results will be published in a future column

ple, it's not uncommon for a person experiencing loneliness in a marriage to hyper-focus on work to the point of becoming a work addict in an attempt to escape feelings of loneliness.

One challenge with why so many people experience mental-health issues and never get the support they need is a lack of awareness of what's happening to them, or a frame of reference as to what can have a positive impact to improve their situation.

When we feel trapped and empty, negative emotions associated with loneliness can drain our sense of hope and over time erode our mental health.

## ACCOUNTABILITY

One way to move past loneliness is to recognize perceived isolation barriers and identify what's within our control and what options we have to remove or reduce the impact of those barriers.

"Employees' mental health is affected by their sense of belonging in the workplace," says Linda Weichel, vice-president of initiatives at CivicAction, a non-profit that organizes MindsMatter, a workplace mental health program. "If someone needs to take time off due to a mental-health issue, the support of senior management and co-workers is critical."

Employers also have a role in helping employees make those changes. Just because we don't see there's anyone who could care for us, or any way to remove barriers that are making us feel socially isolated, doesn't mean there are no options.

"It can be isolating to be away from work," Ms. Weichel says. "Just the act of checking in to see how a co-worker is doing, like you would when someone is off for a physical reason, will go a long way in helping someone feel like they still belong to that community."

## ACTION

One way to have a positive impact on perceived isolation and loneliness in the workplace is to complete a self-evaluation. Even if you're not concerned at this time, getting your baseline and exploring what kinds of things may be draining your energy and resources for enjoying social interactions at work and at home to the fullest can be helpful.

Keep in mind that we all have periods when we feel lonely. Loneliness is much more chronic and intense when it affects not only emotions but also thinking and behaviours. In fact, a core pillar for our mental health is having in place healthy social connections.