

FIFO Life: Loneliness

Loneliness is often not discussed for FIFO workers. Even as children, it's deeply ingrained in us that admitting to feeling lonely is a weakness – declaring that you are a 'Norm No-mates' is like wearing a big "L" for Loser on your forehead!

So, we hide our feelings and pretend we don't need or want anyone else. But if not addressed, feelings of loneliness can have a big impact. Research that has shown reports of loneliness and feelings of isolation among FIFO workers can trigger poor mental health issues including depression and substance abuse.

What is loneliness exactly?

Loneliness is not the same as being alone. Loneliness can be thought of as an imbalance between amount and quality of social interactions we need, and what we are currently receiving. You can be surrounded by people such as your workmates and get along fine with them, and still feel lonely and unconnected. On the other hand, you can also be alone yet not feel lonely, if the level and type of social interaction you need has already been met.

The magic factor that helps us avoid suffering from loneliness is having quality relationships. Unfortunately, it is challenging for some people in the FIFO space to build quality relationships for a number of reasons:

- Shift work has made them too exhausted afterwards to socialise
- They hold senior roles and don't feel it appropriate to mingle with their crews after work.
- Relationship problems and disconnection when at home, due to the pressure of FIFO work.

These situations can all contribute to social isolation, which can have psychological impacts. If you are suffering from regular feelings of loneliness, it's important to look for ways of developing quality relationships.

Early Warning Signs of Loneliness

Human beings are designed to feel as though we have a purposeful existence – that others need and depend on us – or simply like being around us because we contribute to their happiness.

When we experience feelings of pain, whether physical or psychological, we have to understand that it is an early warning mechanism. Your body is telling you that there is something wrong and please do something before it harms you further – for example, take your hand off that burning stovetop. Feelings of loneliness are a type of pain – a social pain that spurs us into action to make some connections to improve our wellbeing.

You may recognise the following feelings associated with Loneliness:

- Perpetually feeling like your relationships are hollow
- Feeling like you're missing some meaning in life
- Withdrawing or not engaging with people to avoid rejection

When we lack quality relationships in our life, we can feel like we feel like we're not important or worthy enough, and that can get you down. Then again, if we admit that we're lonely and have no friends, we're painting ourselves as a bit of a loser which can cause feelings of shame.

Choosing not to do something about it because of the stigma attached to admitting loneliness in our society can lead us into self-preservation mode. While this sounds like a positive step to take, with loneliness the self-preservation mode may actually be quite unhealthy.

Some of these self-preservation reactions to loneliness including:

- Getting on the defensive and rationalising that you don't want to hang around people anyway, because you have nothing in common, or they are immature or irritating.
- Starting to create a distorted perception of ourselves including believing that perhaps we really are undesirable and will be rejected if we try to participate in any social interactions.

Both of these responses have caused you to remove yourself from social scenarios that might actually help elevate the loneliness.

How to alleviate Loneliness

Like most issues, the first step to addressing loneliness is to recognise it. Begin to take note of your psychological health and acknowledge if you feel like your relationships don't have meaning or if you feel isolated from everyone else.

Next, understand what that feeling is doing to your brain, body and your behaviours (the self-protection mode). Let's get this clear, feeling lonely doesn't make you lose friends, it's the actions you take as a result of feeling lonely, that can impact on whether people want to be around you or not.

Finally, take steps to build better, quality connections and relationships.

There are three main components you can work on:

1. Intimate connections

Your intimate connection is with your spouse or someone you can feel vulnerable with. If you aren't partnered, it could be someone like a brother or mate you feel comfortable with. Stay in frequent contact by email and other communication channels available these days. When you are home, book a babysitter and have date nights to reconnect (and try not to use these to deal with household matters or talk about work). This doesn't have to be every swing but it's important that there is some regular time set aside just for this relationship. Think about improving your intimate relationship.

Develop routines and guidelines with your family. Be aware that partners and kids can also have similar feelings of loneliness or isolation. Talk as a family and ask for their suggestions about how you can connect better. Sometimes very simple and easy things can make a huge difference. Schedule regular phone or Skype / FaceTime calls, ensure you talk to both partner and kids.

Plan activities on R&R in advance, to have something to look forward to, but don't forget the daily-to-day type activities are just as important as the fun ones. If possible, book in some one-on-one time with each child separately to do their favourite activity such as bike riding or skate boarding, going to the movies or

the zoo. Organise some family activities such as going to the beach, taking a bush walk or having a picnic at the park.

Have a special family dinner on the night before you head back to work...at a favourite restaurant or at home. If you are staying home, turn off the TV and electronic devices so that everyone can talk.

2. Relational connections

This is your wider support network such as friends, extended family and also workmates.

If you have missed out on any important occasions while you are away, such as a friend or family member's birthday, make a time to catch up and have your own celebration.

At work, find people who might share similar interests and do things together afterward a shift – walking, riding and squash. Plan things to do when you get home – perhaps even family catch ups with workmates (especially those on the same swing) so partners and kids feel connected and can develop networks with others in a similar situation whilst you are away.

If you don't have a wide network of friends or family where you live, think about taking advantage of social clubs and online groups such as meetup.com, which lists different social occasions according to interests and can be a good way to make new friends.

3. Collective connections

We humans are designed to live with the help of others, and becoming involved in something bigger than yourself can be very good for your mental health. Volunteer or get involved in a community related project – for instance planting trees, clean-up days, participating in club or school fundraising, or helping those less fortunate. If it is not possible to find something, you can look outside of yourself by recognising and helping others in your workplace that might be experiencing the psychological wound of loneliness.

Don't ignore loneliness

Loneliness is a complex issue and despite our increasingly 'connected' world, many people experience loneliness at some time. Ignoring or denying loneliness is a trick of self-preservation that can actually make the problem worse. There are ways to address loneliness, the most important of which is forming quality connections at different levels of relationships – intimate, relational and collective – that can help you feel much less isolated.