

# LONELINESS

Technology: the cause of loneliness or a potential solution? with Dr. Doug Nemecek and Dr. Stuart Lustig



Loneliness affects a lot of people in various ways. Levels of loneliness can be influenced by age, family status, living circumstances, and employment situation, as well as lifestyle factors such as quality and quantity of sleep and level of physical activity. Technology use can also play a part.

Somewhat a double-edged sword, technology can be used to connect people virtually, enable continuous communication, and facilitate interaction. However, it also runs the risk of replacing face-to-face interaction and having a negative effect, on both loneliness levels and life satisfaction in general.<sup>1</sup>

Technology is present in both our personal and professional lives, and how we use it should be considered by individuals and businesses alike. At a recent Wellbeing Insights Forum, Dr. Stuart Lustig, National Medical Executive for Behavioral Health, commented on recent Cigna research on the connection between technology and loneliness.

The type of site or platform in question has been found to play a role: “If you are using a platform where you could interact fairly extensively, you were a little bit less likely to lonely,” commented Dr. Lustig. This coincides with findings that technology that facilitates interaction – such as email and online video services – can help decrease loneliness levels.<sup>2,3</sup>

Conversely, however, findings suggest that limiting social media use can have a similar effect.<sup>2,3</sup> In the Cigna Loneliness and the Workplace: 2020 U.S. report, personal opinion about how much constitutes “too much” social media was also found to be relevant.<sup>4</sup> “When we did a deeper analysis, it’s quite nuanced,” continued Dr. Lustig. “There are a number of balance questions – asking whether people were using too much, too little, or the right amount of social media. It didn’t matter if they were heavy users; it was the people who said they were using social media “too much” who were lonely.”

Today, with isolation, long-distance communication, and remote working more prevalent than ever, the use of technology is increasingly significant. The research regarding loneliness among remote workers and how it can be avoided warrants further discussion. “The findings about where you work are robust. People who telecommute do tell us that they are more likely to feel lonely,” commented Dr. Lustig. “Being mindful of who these people are that might be lonely and then finding ways to stay connected is important. You don’t necessarily know that someone is lonely by looking at them. There may be other subtle clues, as well as whether they’re living alone – if they linger a bit longer in a conversation, for example.”

During the discussion at the Wellbeing Insights Forum, Dr. Doug Nemecek, Chief Medical Officer, raised the question of facilitating connection among colleagues while working remotely. “Thinking about work and the workplace culture, how do we make sure we give people the opportunity to make connections?” he mused. “Video can help us feel more connected, more engaged, and part of what’s going on.”

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“It is extremely important to see people’s faces,” agreed Dr. Lior Baruch, also present at the event. “And we see a tiny piece of everybody’s house on our screens. I can see everybody’s decoration, and that gives me a little bit of information about every one of you. And I can get a perception of who you might be outside of that screen and outside of that work box.”

It comes with a note of caution, however. “Similar to lots of other things in health at work, balance comes into play here,” Dr. Nemecek affirmed. “The answer is not let’s be on video all eight hours a day with everybody in the office. It’s about using it in the right way, the right amount, to make sure the connections that we do make are more appropriate and more likely to build into connections.”



Research regarding fatigue during video calls supports Dr. Nemecek’s viewpoint. The requirement to be on display, constantly concentrating, while simultaneously being aware of how we are coming across, via our thumbnail in the corner of the screen, can all contribute to fatigue. While video calls can improve connection compared to voice calls, they still fall short of face-to-face meetings. A lack of full visual cues and body language – that are out of frame – require us to work harder to read signals from those we are talking to,

and concern about connections affecting rhythm and responsiveness are relevant.<sup>5</sup> The use of video calls with people you would normally see on a daily basis in a workplace setting can also reiterate feelings of loneliness; they are a reminder of how interactions may otherwise be.

Technology has become an important, relevant tool integral to modern society; for both personal and professional use, and it has been proven to contribute to reducing loneliness when used correctly.<sup>6</sup> The various technological advancements of recent years offer great opportunity for us to communicate on a global scale; to stay in touch with old acquaintances, work internationally, and maintain long-distance connections. However, the side effects and potential repercussions of its use, including exacerbated loneliness, should not be ignored, and need to be factored in when we decide – both personally and professionally – how to use technology in our day-to-day lives.

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With special thanks to:



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#### Sources:

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