

That cushy work-at-home job can lead to social isolation, mental and physical health risks

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Americans are getting lonelier and jeopardizing their health as more join the gig economy or skip the commute to an office, a report out Thursday

found.

The percent of people classified as lonely increased from 54% in 2018 to 61% in 2019, according to the report commissioned by the insurer Cigna. The company, which released its first research in 2018, decided to focus on the workplace because Americans spend so much time toiling—about 90,000 hours in a lifetime.

Cigna's 2020 Loneliness Index surveyed more than 10,400 adults using the University of California, Los Angeles Loneliness Scale, a 20-item questionnaire to assess self-reported, subjective feelings of [loneliness](#) or social isolation.

Loneliness is a growing concern in healthcare as it can compromise both mental and physical health. Along with contributing to depression and [suicide risk](#), loneliness can lead to [heart disease](#), diabetes and dementia, said Dr. Doug Nemecek, Cigna's chief medical officer for behavioral health. It increases the risk of death by the same amount as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, he noted.

The findings have big implications for employers. Lonely workers are twice as likely to miss a day of work due to illness and think about quitting their job more than twice as often as non-lonely workers. More than 1 in 10 lonely workers say their work is not as good as it should be.

"It's important that we remember to give employees the opportunities to engage with others, to make sure we're not creating work environments that make loneliness worse," said Nemecek.

Among the findings:

- Entertainment industry workers in music, publishing, film and sports, and the gig economy were loneliest.

- Entry-level and senior executives were most likely to report no one really knows them well. Often-maligned middle managers with long tenures typically were the happiest.
- The younger, the lonelier. Nearly eight in 10 Gen Zers and seven in 10 millennials reported being lonely, vs. half of Baby Boomers surveyed.
- Hispanic respondents were the loneliest, followed by those who listed their race as "other" then black respondents.

Mathilde Weems of Long Beach, California, stepped away from her work as a clinical psychiatrist in 2013 to pursue her passion for design. But that meant working alone and moving from northern to southern California to be closer to the fashion industry.

"I'm pretty comfortable spending time alone," said Weems, whose owns Belle Neptune. "I tend to get really drained being around people for a long time as I'm intuitive and absorb other people's energies."

But she also knows how to combat isolation. Walking or hiking with her dog, Skopey, taking classes and her new sublet studio have increased the face-to-face connection with others. Her new studiomate doesn't speak English, but "we keep each other company," said Weems.

Technology tends to get a bad rap, but the news isn't all negative. Nemecek said he encourages his Cigna co-workers to use video conferencing when available to at least see colleagues. If workers think technology is fostering "meaningful connections," their loneliness scores were four points lower, Cigna found.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, Doug Harris has been working at home for an e-newsletter company for more than five years. He conceded it isn't for everyone. It helps, he said, that his employer also "does a good job of making sure remote workers are engaged and included."

"At times it can get lonely, but I don't think I'd trade the freedom and flexibility to go back to an office," said Harris. "I'm okay in solitude, but there are times when I run out of the house like my hair is on fire after work—usually to the gym."

Nemecek recommends employers encourage "affinity groups" for people with similar interests and help workers make social connections through volunteer or community events.

To help combat the effects of loneliness Cigna announced it's expanding its network of mental health specialists to make it easier for customers to make appointments in person, over the phone or virtually. The Cigna Foundation also is donating \$3 million for school mental health resources to address early risks that can lead to loneliness, stress and depression.

"If we can reduce loneliness, we can help people live more connected, fulfilling lives, and improve their overall health and vitality," , said Cigna CEO David Cordani.

If you or [family members](#) are struggling with issues mentioned in this story and you would like to connect with others online, join U.S. TODAY's "I Survived It" Facebook support group.

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