

NEXT



UNDERNEATH LONELINESS

**AT WORK AND IN
OUR COMMUNITIES**

Tidal Marks 1 by Marilyn Wallace-Mitchell

THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES THE IMPACTS OF LONELINESS AND EXTREME SOCIAL ISOLATION.

People experiencing homelessness are vulnerable to loneliness and extreme social isolation, often aggravated by mental health diagnoses, addiction or both. I see this first hand as a Director at Wayside Chapel in Sydney - an organisation which helps people confronting these issues, and a community partner of KWM.

Wayside exists to provide essential services and support, unconditional care and compassion and an invaluable safe place to talk and connect with community – all without judgment. Creating spaces where vulnerable people can connect and feel supported both in terms of their physical but also emotional needs is crucial—whether in community settings like Wayside or in everyday workplaces.

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I see the value of that safety daily in my work as an employment lawyer, helping clients safeguard the psychosocial wellbeing of their workforces by fostering safety and connection among their people. This is true for KWM and all employers – recognising that loneliness is not just a personal struggle but a material issue affecting their people and the ecosystem in which they operate. For law and other professional services organisations where the people are the product, the stakes are high: loneliness can undermine employee well being, productivity, and retention. Nurturing connection and ensuring wellbeing have become increasingly important for employers to attract and retain talent. The intersection of issues people face today - particularly following the post COVID-19 shift in how we live and work - is significant.

Many businesses are aware of the complexity of issues people face - loneliness, increased stress levels, decreased downtime to disconnect, busy minds due to social media use and constantly being “on”. Happily, many firms and businesses are taking steps to address them. This includes building awareness, offering targeted support services, and collaborating with community organisations like the Wayside Chapel to gain insights and develop more impactful responses for the benefit of their people and communities. Together, businesses and community groups are forging a path forward to combat loneliness by creating inclusive environments where the impact of loneliness is genuinely understood and supports are established so everyone feels both valued and better supported.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Loneliness has emerged as one of the most pressing yet overlooked challenges of our time. Often described as the “silent epidemic,” loneliness transcends age, gender, and socioeconomic status, infiltrating every corner of society. Its effects are profound - poor mental and physical health, increased psychological distress, reduced productivity, and a diminished quality of life. Yet despite its prevalence, loneliness remains largely misunderstood and stigmatised, with many hiding their struggles.

This article delves into the complex landscape of loneliness in Australia and the steps community organisations and businesses are taking to connect with their people and tackle loneliness. As the ways we live and work continue to evolve, fostering genuine connection has never been more critical. Tackling loneliness requires not only awareness but also concerted efforts from both community leaders and employers to create environments where people feel seen, heard, and valued.

Loneliness affects different people and groups in different ways. From young people navigating transitions in life, to First Nations communities grappling with disruptions to social and cultural connections, the impact of loneliness is far-reaching. HeadSpace, Australia’s National Youth Mental Health Foundation, calls out the rise in young women experiencing loneliness. They say this is linked to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition from study to work, social media and lack of connection to communities as part of the cause of loneliness in young women.

For First Nations people, disruption to family and kinship connections is a contributor to loneliness and feelings of disconnection and social isolation for many. The government’s Institute of Health and Welfare identifies social and emotional wellbeing as the foundation of physical and mental health for First Nations people. Importantly, this recognises its holistic nature - encompassing the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality, and ancestry, and how these affect the wellbeing of the individual and the community (Gee et al. 2014).

There is hope. Positively, the research points to engagement in paid work, community activities, caring for others and participation in clubs and sporting groups as examples of effective buffers against loneliness.

HOW IS KWM APPROACHING THE CHALLENGE?

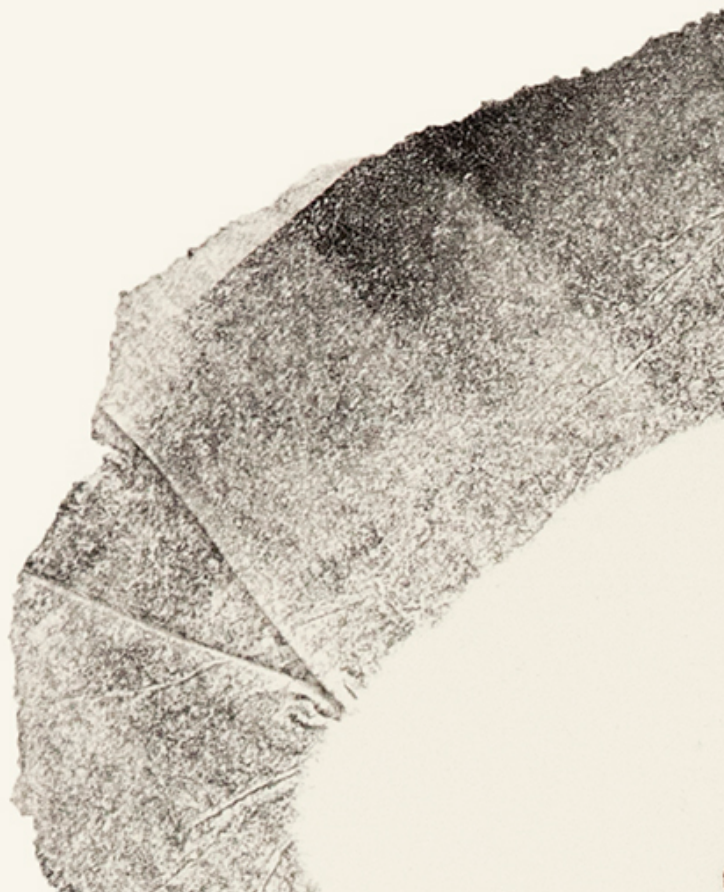
Measuring the impact of connection initiatives can be complex, but we know it is worthwhile - because sense of connection helps us to build more meaningful relationships, supports our wellbeing and is a powerful driver of employee engagement. When we listened to what our people had to say, we learned that our people were not feeling as connected to one another as they did before the pandemic. We learned that we were not alone and that this is a common challenge across organisations.

As a first step, KWM focused on a campaign of education and awareness, initially through 'Stronger Together 24,' a transformative two-week program designed to bring people together both in-person and online. The program encouraged participants to explore new approaches to leadership, working styles, and connection with clients and colleagues. It looked at neuroscience and the chemical effects of connection on our brain and bodies, how to use better quality questions to create connection and digital communication etiquette to enhance connections developed online. Building on Stronger Together 24, KWM continues to prioritise shared learning and opportunities for our people to build connections, through a variety of programs.

We have several leadership programs that span all levels and roles within our firm that give our people the opportunity to learn and connect. We invest in our people networks - employee-led groups focused on building inclusion and belonging. These groups strengthen connections through education and storytelling. Our client programs also prioritise connection by providing practical tools to manage relationships as well as deepening our knowledge of our clients. Probably the most important aspect of what we do is keep seeking and listening to feedback from our people - none of this is 'set and forget' - we must constantly keep evaluating what is working and what is not. Alleviating loneliness through genuine human connection requires a cultural shift post-pandemic, grounded in intentionality, respect and presence.

A shared imperative

The [Ending Loneliness Report](#) urges Australians to break the silence around loneliness and make it a part of everyday conversations. At KWM, we're taking on this challenge by weaving discussions about loneliness and its wide-ranging impacts into our policies and workplace culture. Loneliness is a daily reality for many, including many within our own firm, and it has only been intensified by the changing nature of how we live and work, particularly in our increasingly digital lives. Addressing this issue goes beyond surface-level initiatives; it requires a profound commitment to fostering genuine connections and creating environments where people feel truly supported. It's about understanding that combating loneliness is not just a personal journey but a collective responsibility—one that demands the highest quality services, thoughtful policies, and unwavering support from businesses and communities alike. By joining forces, we can build stronger, more connected workplaces and communities where stigma is reduced, and people are comfortable to talk about their experience and reduce the prevalence and impact of loneliness.



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