

# Dealing with Isolation When Working from Home

By BNET Editorial

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When people first work from home, they often feel isolated and miss the social life they enjoyed at their workplace. What sometimes looks like a great benefit may, ironically, become a disappointment. Sure you're glad to give up the commute and business attire, but you also give up the camaraderie and sharing gossip at lunch. Here are some tips for coping with the reality of working from home.

## What You Need to Know

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### Does everyone feel like this?

Because of the Internet, communicating with the office is now so easy and convenient that more and more people are working from home. The trend will continue. If you have worked in a busy office, you're bound to feel alone at times when working alone at home. But today you are no longer restricted to a desktop computer at home, you can take your laptop out to a restaurant or coffee shop! The change of scene replicates the workplace environment without the obligations and constraints of being supervised at work.

Give yourself a regular "sanity check" by setting aside some time each week to get the human contact you need before minor feelings of loneliness turn into a real depression. Learn how to get the support you need to fight off feelings of isolation.

### I miss the background office noise. What can I do?

*Make* some noise! If you're not enjoying birdsong from the garden, or the traffic on your street, play some music or turn on the radio.

## What to Do

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### Keep Connected With Others

Even if you're someone who likes the peacefulness of working from home, always being on your own can be lonely. It's important to keep in touch with colleagues when you work from home. The key is to create easy ways to connect.

The more connection methods you have and the easier you make contact, the more likely people will get in touch and keep in touch:

- Keep separate home and business telephone lines. The message on the telephone answering machine should be friendly and encourage people to leave a message.
- Have a reliable broadband Internet connection so that phone calls can be answered while you're online.
- Your e-mail signature should also include complete contact information, so that every message reminds people of alternate ways they can get in contact.
- Having a mobile phone that receives a strong signal at home and wherever you may be during the workday, with instant messaging capability, also increases chances of keeping connected.
- Teleconferencing and videoconferencing make group work possible, too. Update your contact details with your network at least once a year.

## **Attend Social Events and Training Programs**

Keeping in touch can be fun, too. Attend office social events; they're a great way of staying visible. Go to as many events as you can. Holiday parties, product launches, and celebrations are a perfect opportunity to meet new employees in a relaxed situation. In this way, staff turnover won't contribute to any feelings of isolation you may have.

Also, it's a good idea to attend relevant training sessions and to visit the office now and then just to stay in the loop. Remind your colleagues to invite you to important meetings and, if you can't attend in person, ask them to arrange a teleconference so you can call in.

Take initiative to find out about company events and to attend the ones you can. Remember, no one will look out for you as well as you can.

## **Contact Support Workers Regularly**

In an office environment, when you work under pressure, your colleagues can sympathize with you and spread out the workload. Delegation is possible and being in the same boat with others can have a positive psychological effect. That considerably reduces the burden. Feelings of isolation are most likely to arise when you come under pressure in your home office. If the pressure is self-imposed, learn how to recognize the symptoms.

You can overcome the barrier of distance. Be friendly with your team and colleagues in regular, positive phone calls or e-mails. Encourage them to share their ups *and* downs with you and offer support and some laughs in return.

By keeping connected in this personal way, you learn what's going on in the office and you keep your office-based colleagues mindful of you. This is especially important when you need their help. If you've got into the habit of touching bases and supporting others by phone, you will feel less alone when *you* are the one needing help or a friendly ear. Besides, connecting often reassures former colleagues that you are not on vacation and helps reduce their possible jealousy of you.

## **Find Other People in Your Neighborhood Who Also Work From Home**

Whether working in a home-based business or telecommuting, if you don't know others in a similar situation, build your own network or join a local group of similarly situated people. Perhaps just hanging out at the local coffee shop can put you in touch with others. As more people switch from office to home-based work, they tend to gravitate to local restaurants and coffee shops to meet others. Vary your visit times. You'll meet a variety of people. If you need something more energetic, join a local gym. You may be pleasantly surprised to find others equally interested in building their support networks. You can also develop friendships and career-builders at such gatherings.

## **Don't Be Too Hard On Yourself**

Some people are very self-reliant and resourceful in doing their work. They prefer to solve their problems alone. If you are like this, you may also recognize the inclination to accept all the pressure and to "be strong." This can give you a lot of stress, so confide in people you trust and recognize you may occasionally need help—this isn't a sign of weakness. No one can handle excessive stress all the time, so why add an unnecessary hassle to your workload?

## **What to Avoid**

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### **You Overtax Your Partner**

If you work at home and you have a partner or housemate who works in an office environment, you may find your needs at the end of the day are out of sync. You may have spent the day without anyone to share your thoughts, and look forward to a good conversation. But your partner might be feeling drained by the demands of others in his or her workplace and may just want to be left alone. Talk to your partner and figure out a new way to meet each other's needs at the end of the day.

## You Become Too Distracted

Your efforts to stave off isolation may result in too many distractions. Now that people know you're at home they may turn up too often and stay for too long. The best solution is to find a balance. For productivity's sake, create a few expectations about your use of time; you want to reduce excessive disturbances without discouraging them completely. Learn about personal time management techniques to help you set appropriate boundaries.

## You Create an Email Nightmare

You've been successful in making the transition. Now everyone knows you work from home—the neighbors, friends, co-workers, and every spammer on the Internet. The Internet can be great for connecting with the office, others in your field, and other home-workers, but this level of interaction creates a pile of emails that can become too distracting. Sometimes they will replace a telephone call and result in endless volleys of messages when a simple call would do. Remember, even though you can control when you respond to emails and they appear easy enough to manage, they will never replace real one-to-one human communication. Basic transactions are easy with email but most complex issues are settled faster and more amicably face-to-face. Even if you're pushed for time, it's well worth making the effort to talk to people face-to-face regularly.

## Where to Learn More

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### Books:

Orend, Jane, *Making Working From Home Work*. Working Lifestyles Research & Training Inc, 2006.

Bredin, Alice, *The Home Office Solution: How to Balance Your Professional and Personal Lives While Working at Home*. Wiley, 2001.