Mental health awareness week 2022: loneliness

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This week, 9 to 13 May 2022, is Mental Health Awareness Week, the aim of which is to provide an opportunity to focus on achieving good mental health.

Each year has a theme. Last year it was back to nature. This year it is loneliness.

The Mental Health Foundation, which hosts Mental Health Awareness Week, has chosen loneliness as this year's theme because "loneliness is affecting more and more of us in the UK and has had a huge impact on our physical and mental health during the pandemic" and "reducing loneliness is a major step towards a mentally healthy society". [1]

Some studies have found that loneliness increases the risk of certain mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. [2]

A large part of my practice as an employment lawyer involves advising clients who are experiencing mental ill health, and the corresponding impact that has on their working life. I therefore recognise that loneliness is not just something that is experienced by people in their homelife, many people often feel lonely at work. This is not confined to people who are alone (for example working from home). It also includes those experiencing workplace issues. For example, anyone struggling with their workload or relationships with colleagues can feel incredibly lonely and unsupported.

A couple of weeks ago, I received an email from the charity Mind, sent in advance of Mental Health Awareness Week. This email contained a link to the key findings of a survey Mind had conducted into how the pandemic has affected people at work. [3] 42,000 staff from 114 organisations across the UK were surveyed, including people who had been furloughed, worked from home, or continued to work on site.

Two of these findings are particularly important when considering loneliness in the workplace:

- 41% of people reported that their mental health got worse during the pandemic, but those who worked on site and felt supported by their employer were least likely to report a worsening in their mental health; and
- 41% of people found it difficult to remain motivated at work during the pandemic, with remote workers finding it more difficult than those who continued to work onsite.

By the very nature of our work, office workers were the biggest group of people who worked from home during the pandemic. We were also the last group of people to be permitted to return to the workplace.

You might assume that workplace loneliness will evaporate now that many of us are returning to the office for at least some of the working week. However, that is not necessarily the case, particularly in workforces where some people work in the office and some work from home.

Employers are under a specific duty to make reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities, but loneliness can affect all of us. Employers need to take care to ensure that loneliness amongst the workforce is not created, or exacerbated, while they adjust to the post-pandemic way of working.

My colleagues Polly Rodway and Rebecca Rubin recently hosted a webinar discussing the challenges faced by employers where their staff are reluctant to return to work. Much of the webinar focussed on the legal issues surrounding people's place of work, but, towards the end of the session, someone asked how BDBF was adjusting to the new way of working.

Although tackling workplace loneliness was not the main point of the question, it got me thinking and I realised that in managing this transition, BDBF has already got a number of

initiatives in place that have helped to reduce any loneliness experienced in our workplace.

These include:

- a flexible approach to working in the office, which allows our lawyers to choose the days on which they come in and means that there is a regular rotation of who is in the office and who works from home;
- a chart that is circulated throughout the week and a colour coded diary system so that we can easily see who will be in the office on which days;
- a group WhatsApp what where we discuss non-work-related matters;
- birthday cards and gifts sent to our homes on our birthday day off;
- weekly team meetings where every member of the firm updates the group on how busy they are, what they are working on and can raise any issues with their cases or workload;
- monthly supervision meetings with a partner to discuss the progress of current cases and workload;
- an open door/phoneline policy where team members can speak to each other in person or on a video call/phone call at any time during the working day;
- weekly communal lunches in the kitchen area for those working in the office, giving the team a chance to socialise during the day;
- regular hybrid “know how” meetings and training sessions where people are able to contribute remotely and in person; and
- quarterly whole team social events.

These are just some of the things BDBF is doing as part of our initiatives to promote good mental health.

Throughout Mental Health Awareness Week, the BDBF team will be sharing some tips that all employers could use to help reduce

loneliness within their workforce.

BDBF is a law firm based at Bank in the City of London specialising in employment law. If you would like to discuss mental health at work, or any issues relating to the content of this article, please contact employment lawyer Clare Brereton (clarebrereton@bdbf.co.uk) or your usual BDBF contact.

[1] https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns/mental-health-awareness-week

[2] https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/loneliness/about-loneliness/#:~:text=Feeling%20lonely%20can%20also%20have,sleep%20problems%20and%20increased%20stress.

[3] https://mind.turtl.co/story/mindwork-april-2022/page/5/1?utm_source=MIND%20(THE%20NATIONAL%20ASSOCIATION%20FOR%20MENTAL%20HEALTH)&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=13173102_Comms_Mind@work_Apr_29_22_manual_regular_EH&utm_content=Covid%20Insights&dm_i=CZC,7UCFI,4RQ8MU,W0H1U,1

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