



Exploring the relationships between
**perceived isolation,
loneliness and
resiliency**

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CEO Health + Safety Leadership Network Psychological Safety Blog
Special edition: Mental Health Research Insights
By Dr. Bill Howatt Founder of www.howatthr.com



INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is a global issue that poses a significant risk to a growing percentage of the population. In the 2017 article, “[How Loneliness Begets Loneliness](#),” published in The Atlantic, University of Chicago professor, John Cacioppo, noted that approximately 28 percent of the population is experiencing loneliness—a jump of three to seven percent over the last 20 years.¹

[Prior to the pandemic, approximately 25 to 30 percent of Canadians reported they felt persistent feelings of isolation and loneliness.](#)²

[Loneliness is a unique condition in which an individual perceives themselves to be socially isolated even when among other people.](#)³ [Individuals can experience loneliness in the workplace, at home, and in the community, and the absence of meaningful social connections can, over time, affect mental health.](#)⁴

A recent Mental Health Commission of Canada and Nanos study reported that 21 percent of Canadians who report their mental health has worsened since COVID-19 attribute this decline to the fact that they have not been able to do regular activities or socialize, and have generally felt isolated.

If left unchecked, feelings of isolation and loneliness can exact a heavy toll on an individual’s health and life expectancy. [Where obesity reduces longevity by 20 percent, drinking by 30 percent, and smoking by 50 percent, loneliness reduces it by a whopping 70 percent.](#)⁵ In addition, like other mental health issues, loneliness can be a major contributor to premature death. [By 2030, it is predicted that mental health problems will be the leading cause of mortality and morbidity globally.](#)⁶



¹<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/04/how-loneliness-begets-loneliness/521841/>


²<https://www.rcinet.ca/en/2018/01/19/health-risk-alone-lonely-canadians/>

³<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/531897cde4b0fa5080a9b19e/t/5ab52956352f534a09fea2c6/1521822038969/the-growing-problem-of-loneliness.pdf>

⁴<https://www.thechronicleherald.ca/business/local-business/howatt-leaders-can-influence-employees-by-talking-about-the-mental-fitness-algorithm-409896/>

⁵<https://hbr.org/2017/06/burnout-at-work-isnt-just-about-exhaustion-its-also-about-loneliness>

⁶[Jaman, P. and Staglin, G. It's time to end the stigma around mental health in the workplace. World Economic Forum, May 9, 2019.](#)



However, there are steps that can be taken to mitigate this risk. Access to psychologically safe social support networks and healthy social environments helps individuals develop meaningful social connections—personally, professionally and in the community.

In fact, the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) says social support networks and social environments are among the key factors that determine the overall health of Canadians.⁷ Others include income and social status; education; employment/working conditions; physical environments; personal health practices and coping skills; healthy child development; gender; and culture.

Leaders who understand this and choose to foster resilience and address the risk of loneliness and perceived isolation, can have a significant impact on their employees' wellbeing, and by extension, productivity in their workplaces.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Sample size (n) =226

In February 2020, HowattHR, in partnership with The Globe and Mail, launched the [Perceived Isolation - Loneliness Effect survey](#), a study to explore the impact of perceived isolation, isolation, loneliness and resiliency on employee productivity in the workplace.⁸

The survey, designed to measure employees' experiences at work and outside of the workplace, was created to answer three core research questions.

- 1 What are the differences in Canada for employees who have high perceived isolation compared to employees with low perceived isolation with respect to productivity?
- 2 What are the differences in Canada for employees who have high loneliness compared to employees with low loneliness with respect to productivity?
- 3 What is the relationship between perceived isolation loads, resiliency and loneliness?

It also includes specific questions pertaining to sick time, discretionary effort and presenteeism. The results will help employers draw a comparison between employees with low and those with high perceived isolation and loneliness profiles in aid of decision making and planning.

⁷ <https://cbpp-pcpe.phac-aspc.gc.ca/public-health-topics/social-determinants-of-health/>

⁸ <https://www.howatthronline.com/loneliness/>

SUMMARY OF KEY INSIGHTS

While the full report won't be available until the survey closes in the fall of 2020, these preliminary findings indicate that, increasingly, employees are experiencing feelings of loneliness and perceived isolation and this is having an impact on productivity in the workplace.

Image 1: Scales Used in the Survey

Scales of measured used in survey	Average Score	Confidence Interval (CI)
1 Isolation (low = good, high=bad) 1-75	31.84	[29.83,33.86]
2 Loneliness (low = good, high=bad) 2-81	39.65	[37.38,41.93]
3 Resilience (low = bad, high = good) 0-100	61.00	[58.38,63.61]

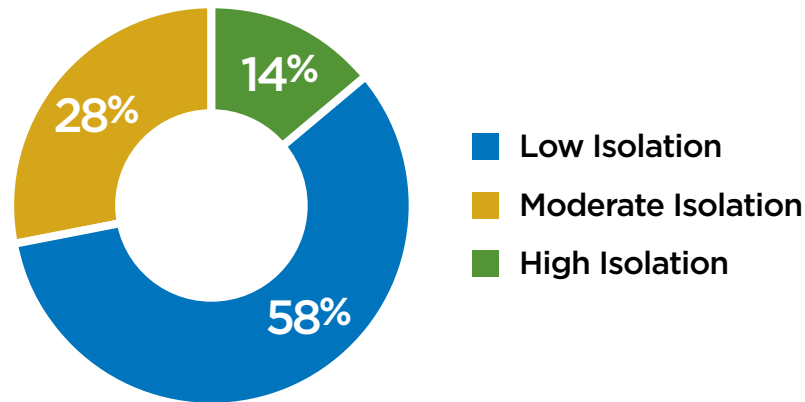
Image two shows that 42% of respondents have a moderate or high perception of isolation at work and in their personal lives. Employees who report this are more likely to have a negative experience in the workplace, and may be more prone to create barriers, such as:

- Not coping well with relocating to a new community for work
- Difficulty fitting in when starting a new job
- Feeling concerned about psychological safety and quality of employee-manager relationships
- Experiencing physical limitations
- Worrying about financial health
- Feeling discriminated against
- Suffering from chronic disease

The more barriers that are perceived, the greater the likelihood that an employee will be lonely, take sick time, or alternatively, come to work when they feel unwell (presenteeism). They are also less likely to exert discretionary effort on behalf of the employer.



Image 2: Perceived Isolation Frequency Distribution



It is important to pay attention to the relationship between social isolation and loneliness scores. Typically, as one increases, so does the other.

Image three illustrates that a significant proportion of respondents (60%) report moderate to high loneliness scores. Feelings of loneliness and social isolation breed a variety of negative emotions, such as emptiness, feeling disconnected and devalued.

Image 3: Loneliness Frequency Distribution

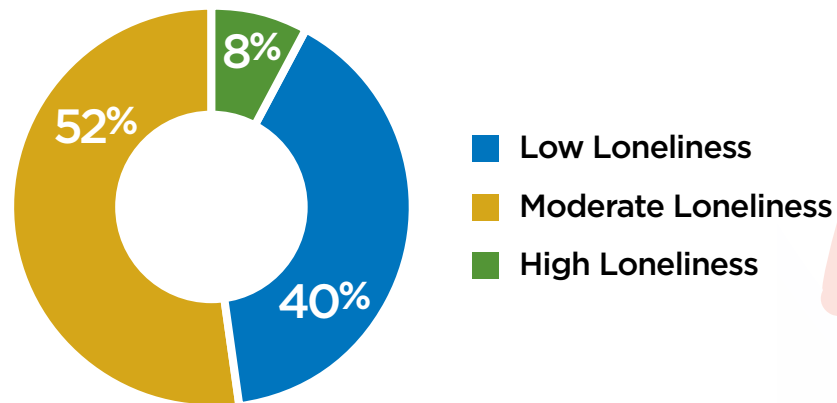
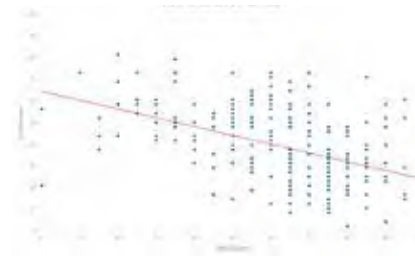


Image 4: Greater Resilience = Lower Perceived Isolation and Enhanced Productivity

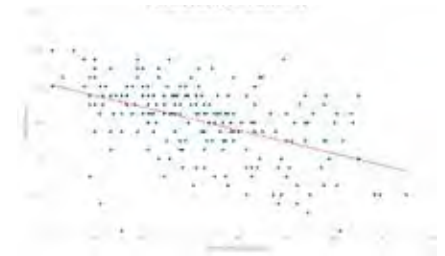
Perceived Isolation vs. Loneliness



Resilience vs. Loneliness



Perceived Isolation vs. Resilience



The American Psychological Association (APA) describes resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress—such as isolation and loneliness, family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors.⁹

Resiliency can be a predictor of positive mental health.¹⁰ Individuals who self-report higher scores related to resiliency skills are more likely to have the ability to remove barriers, close social connection gaps and minimize risk for experiencing loneliness.

⁹ <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>

¹⁰ <https://www.hrreporter.com/focus-areas/wellness-mental-health/linking-resiliency-to-health-engagement-and-productivity/299172>

The following two tables illustrate the connection between perceived isolation and loneliness and productivity costs, using three common variables: self-reported sick days, average days of feeling unwell per year (i.e., presenteeism) and average daily percentage of effort (i.e., discretionary effort). To calculate cost, we used the [average Canadian salary \\$55,806.40 per year for a 40-hour work week](#).¹¹

Image 5: Comparing Low perceived isolation to high perceived isolation and average costs to productivity

	Average # of sick days	Average unwell/year	Average % effort at work	Average cost to productivity
Low Perceived Isolation	2.1	17	82	\$9,663.82
Moderate Perceived Isolation	3.4	35	78	\$12,147.14
High Perceived Isolation	4.6	57	73	\$15,103.55



Image 6: Comparing lower loneliness scores to high loneliness and average costs to productivity

	Average # of sick days	Average unwell/year	Average % effort at work	Average cost to productivity
Low Perceived Loneliness	2.2	18	83	\$9,559.10
Moderate Perceived Loneliness	2.5	19	81	\$10,462.50
High Perceived Loneliness	3.9	49	75	\$13,965.66

Organizations that help employees forge social connections stand to gain significantly in productivity. Where employees have low perceived isolation and loneliness scores, there is at least a 30% lower average cost to productivity.

¹¹ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410032002>

CONCLUSION

Leaders should pay attention to psychological safety in the workplace, and should not minimize the importance of fostering resilience and creating opportunities for employees to forge quality social connections.

Under these conditions, employees are less likely to report feeling isolated and lonely, and will have greater capacity for contributing in the workplace. They will be more apt to expend discretionary effort on behalf of the organization, and less likely to take as much sick time and engage in presenteeism.

It's Not Too Late to Participate

The survey, will run throughout the summer, and the final report will be released in the fall of 2020. By completing the survey, employers and employees can capture a baseline in aid of understanding the strength of employees' social connections at work and home. [Go directly to the survey](#), or read the Globe and Mail kickoff article, ["Understanding the difference between isolation and loneliness at work."](#)¹²



If you would like more information about this survey, or would like to get a copy of the final report, please contact:

Dr. Bill Howatt is founder of [Howatt HR Consulting](#). He has published numerous books and articles, such as *Stop Hiding and Start Living*, *The Coping Crisis*, *Pathway to Coping*, the Wiley Series on addictions, *The Human Services Counseling Toolbox*, and *The Addiction Counselor's Desk Reference*. He is a regular contributor to *The Globe and Mail* 9 to 5 and Leadership Lab columns and *The Chronicle Herald*.



[The CEO Health + Safety Leadership Network](#) is a distinguished group of leaders who share a commitment to building sustainable businesses and communities. Members understand they are in a position to positively influence health and safety in Ontario and beyond. They include CEOs, directors and senior executives who are stepping beyond the bounds of their own organizations to spur transformation on a much larger scale.

¹² <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/careers/workplace-award/article-understanding-the-differences-between-isolation-and-loneliness-at-work/>

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