

Toolbox Talk

Loneliness & Isolation



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help workers recognise how working away from home, travelling long distances and spending extended periods alone can affect their wellbeing and encourage simple ways to stay connected and reduce isolation.

Imagine finishing a long day on site, driving back to a hotel, grabbing something to eat and then sitting in your room for the rest of the evening. You might scroll through your phone, watch something on television, speak to someone at home for ten minutes and then do exactly the same thing again tomorrow. For some people in construction, that's not an occasional night away. It can be their normal working week. You can spend the whole day surrounded by people and still feel lonely when you get back to an empty room at night. That's something we probably don't talk about enough in our industry.

Why It Matters

Construction often takes us wherever the work is. That might mean long commutes every day, staying in hotels Monday to Friday, working nights, moving between projects or spending weeks away from partners, children, friends and the routines we normally rely on. At first, working away can even feel like a change of scenery but when it carries on for weeks or months, the distance can start to take its toll. You miss ordinary things: eating dinner with your family, walking the dog, putting the kids to bed, seeing your mates or simply sleeping in your own bed. You might be earning good money and working with a great team while still feeling disconnected from everything happening at home. Loneliness isn't always about having nobody around you. It's about feeling disconnected from the people and things that matter to you and when your routine becomes work, hotel, food, sleep and repeat, it's surprisingly easy to become isolated without really noticing it

Signs To Look Out For

Isolation can creep up gradually. You might start spending every evening alone in your room because you can't be bothered going anywhere. Calls home become shorter or less frequent, not because you don't care but because you're tired and don't feel like talking.



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You might find yourself endlessly scrolling through your phone, staying up far later than you should or feeling particularly low when everyone else seems to be getting on with life back home without you. Some people become quieter on site or stop joining the rest of the team for breakfast or dinner. Others become irritable, lose motivation or start relying more heavily on alcohol because having a few drinks feels like an easy way to fill the evening or switch off. You might also notice the opposite when somebody gets home. Instead of enjoying their time with family, they're exhausted, frustrated or feel strangely disconnected because it takes time to settle back into home life again. Everyone needs time alone sometimes. The thing to notice is when being alone stops feeling like a choice and starts leaving you feeling cut off from other people.

What Can Help

If you're working away, try to create some routine outside the working day rather than letting every evening disappear inside a hotel room. That could be finding somewhere to walk, going to a local gym, eating with a workmate occasionally or simply getting outside for half an hour after work. It doesn't need to be exciting. The aim is to give yourself something between finishing work and going to sleep. Stay connected with people at home as well but try to make it meaningful. A quick message is better than nothing but where possible make time for an actual conversation. Phone your partner, speak to your children, call a mate or video call someone while you're eating dinner. It can be easy to tell ourselves we'll catch up properly at the weekend, only to realise we've barely spoken to anyone all week.

The people you're working with can make a difference too. If several of you are staying away, don't assume everyone wants to disappear to their own room every evening.



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Ask someone if they fancy getting some food or going for a walk. You don't need to become best mates with everyone you work with. Sometimes just having someone to sit with for half an hour makes the evening feel completely different.

It's also worth paying attention to how you're switching off. Having a drink after work isn't automatically a problem but if alcohol is becoming the main way you deal with lonely evenings, boredom or missing home, it's worth noticing that change and if working away is genuinely starting to affect you, say something. That might mean speaking to your supervisor about the rota, travel arrangements or whether there are opportunities to spend more time closer to home. Not every situation can be changed but people can't understand what you're dealing with if nobody knows.

Discussion Questions

- What do you think is the hardest part of working away from home or travelling long distances for work?
- What helps you stay connected with family and friends when you're away?
- What could we do as a team to make working away feel less isolating for the people doing it?

Takeaway Message

Working away from home can be part of construction but that doesn't mean loneliness has to be accepted as part of the job. Being away from the people, routines and places that matter to you can affect anyone over time. Stay connected, build some routine outside work and pay attention if you notice yourself becoming increasingly isolated. Sometimes the answer isn't a huge change. It might simply be getting out of the hotel room, making the phone call or having dinner with someone instead of eating alone.



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Action

If you're working away at the moment, think about one person you've not properly spoken to for a while and give them a call this week and if you're working alongside someone who's away from their family, don't assume they're enjoying the peace and quiet. Ask them how they're finding it or whether they fancy grabbing some food after work. A small bit of company can make a long week away feel very different.



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