

Transcription - Loneliness and Isolation At Work

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. This week we're going to talk about being human. We're going to talk about isolation and loneliness, even when you're surrounded by lots of people. So we're talking about being in the workplace and feeling that you are isolated within the team or within your organization and a feeling of loneliness.

Yes, just being surrounded by people doesn't necessarily mean that you are connected, as you would know. Let's say you're at work and within work there's different people that you interact with. You might be talking to people all the time at meetings, you might be talking about whatever aspects of business it is. That's not really just being connected. A lot of us have made friends at work and friends for life from work. (That's true.) However, sometimes you can be in a situation where you really don't know who to trust, who not to trust and who you are. Because of that, you don't connect. So you go to work, you put on your work persona, your work image and you go home thinking you are really lonely.

That's not just at work. You could be in social situations. I might come across as a person who is at work, you would think they are absolutely sociable. They have a very easy personality, everybody likes them, so you wouldn't think of them as somebody who wouldn't be lonely. And then you say, "What do you do? I play it golf on the weekend." So, there's another group, so he's got a social activity. But he just played golf. He did not connect with people either. What's important here is to connect with people in a way that is not relevant to work or the game. One can be a connection, but to take it the next step, to have timeout, to talk about another topic, nothing to do with the golf, nothing to do with work. It could be about the news, about poverty overseas, or poverty in this country. It could be about any topic that you think that you can both enjoy the discussion, maybe it can take you further into a community activity. It can take you into anything else. So, somewhere where you could talk to someone about anything without an agenda.

I'm going to interject here and encourage you all to think of this as not an internal activity. My best advice to you is to try and make a difference in someone else's life. So that might simply be that you speak to the bus driver. It might simply be that you acknowledge someone as you walk in the street, that you interact with them on a level that gives them something before you look for something for yourself. And you will find, I can tell you from experience, that when you do that, it does make a difference to you immediately because you can see that you have made a difference to them and so you get that to and fro, you get the reward for the activity that you have instigated.

I work pretty much individually these days and it would be very easy for me to become isolated. I don't necessarily travel a lot for work. I do most of it online with the technology that's available. I work with one other person in the office. We work on very different projects. We both have very different organisations that we work with and for and internally. And hours and hours can go by where we don't actually say anything to one another. And surprisingly, and I say surprisingly because my reaction to it was that I was surprised, that earlier in the year when we sat down for coffee I said, "I think I feel lonely." I said, "No, I think I feel alone." And there was a difference. I didn't feel lonely in the depressed sense that we

would normally think about it, but I did feel alone. It was more about being isolated. And the isolation, again, is something that you bring on yourself because you cut off the connections. I felt alone and it was hard for me to verbalise what it was. But I was surprised that that was how I felt. So I actively had to go out and then think about how am I going to get around this because no one can solve it for you. You've got to solve it yourself.

I think if you identify, if any of these words are resonating with you, I would encourage you to work out what it is. Which of the words is resonating for you? And what does that mean to you? And then start thinking about how can you alter that situation? How can you move from that feeling and that place to something else?

From there it was as simple as when I go to the gym in the mornings, I actually nodded at some of the other people that were there. I actually said something to a person. Now, at 6 o'clock at the gym, most of you will know, is not the period of time where people talk to one another. They're focused on what they're doing because they're already thinking about their work day. I know that I have a friend who goes to the gym in the evenings, the same gym and they have this great social conversation. He'll come back and say, "I talked to so and so tonight we talked about this." There is just no way that happens in the mornings of this gym.

Let's think about the individual words. Are you isolated? Are you feeling isolated? Are you feeling lonely? Or are you feeling alone?

I'd like to go to the bit, Kim, where you talked about connecting with someone else and how that makes you feel. I think that's the key. I've got a story to share, one of my friends and if you know her, you'll know that's just very much her nature. She was in the supermarket and she was about to get to the checkout. And an older man, I guess from what she said, 80 plus, he said, "You go first." And she said, "Oh no, no, you were in the line first." And he said, "Well, no, you're busier than I am." She turned around and she said, "No, no, that's not fair." And he said, "No, you're busier than I am. You go first. I've got nothing to do all day. This is my biggest activity of the day." She said, "Oh, thank you very much." And she got in, did her bit and waited at the other end. When he came through, he looked at her and he said, "Oh, I thought you'll be busy." And she said, "Well, I'm not really that busy today. So I thought I'll wait for you. If you're not that busy, would you like a cup of coffee? There's a coffee shop just here, right within the same complex". And he thought it was wonderful. And she said it was the best conversation she ever had because she didn't know this man and he had such a rich history. She heard things that she never heard before. So to me, that was just a natural way of connecting with someone.

Not only that, but it's inspiring because it makes you think, "How can I do that without going out to be a good person?" You know what I mean? And it's also about, I think, we live fearful. We let our lives be run by fear. But it's fear of change, fear of something that we think might happen, fear of external influences, whatever it is. And we have to dissipate that fear in some way. And we're not talking about stranger danger, we're not talking about opening your arms, opening your house, opening your social life to people that you don't know. It's about a human connection that you make. That might be as simple as nodding your head. It might be as simple as thanking the bus driver. Now, when I come here to do the recordings, I have a bit of a travel excursion before I get here. The last thing that I do is actually catch a bus. It's a bus that a lot of young school students catch to one of the local schools here. To a person,

they will thank the bus driver. It warms my heart to hear them every time I see them do it, because they are a generation where we would generally assume they don't do that. They're not taught manners these days, all of the things that we make these great blanket statements about generations that aren't ours. Here is a group of people who, every time I see them, contradict the view that I have of that particular group of people. It is rewarding to see it and to hear it. They're not interacting with me, but I see, I experience a human interaction, third party, and I feel better. I feel more connected with the general world because it all fits into the views that I have of the standards and the morals that should be happening in the world. I feel part of that human community, whether I'm actively involved in it or not.

So don't take the advice or the discussion that we're having today as saying you should go out and you should buy cups of coffee for people or you should talk to everyone you see on the street. But certainly, I think, as I said before, identify what it is you're feeling and then look at the simple ways that you can start to address it.

Think about it within the workplace. Sometimes you see people that look stressed, they might look like they've been there long hours, etc. I'm not suggesting go out and say, are you okay or do you need a hand? Because that can be annoying sometimes. It says, they think I'm not coping. Are you saying I'm not coping? I think just be there and be alert. But come up with some suggestion. It might be that you are getting a cup of coffee and you'll offer the coffee. You might say, look, I grew up tomatoes and I've got some extra tomatoes. Do you want some? I'll bring some in. Even that level of doing that might be mentioned and just be sensitive about the timing and their business. Or mention something about a joke or a show you saw that resonated with you, but obviously don't go chit-chatting when they haven't got time. Let them know that there's another human being there and don't spend any more than few seconds, so that the connection has happened with that interaction. It's also sometimes in the workplace that you can ask a question. You can ask advice of where you should go to ask for some information. So it's not about asking them directly for something, but it's acknowledging that they might have more knowledge, more experience, more expertise and be able to redirect you to somewhere else. It takes them away from the focus of what they're doing and gives them a little interaction and then they can move on. It breaks the ice.

I guess that is the thing that it does. And when you think about that phrase and what that means in terms of what we're talking about today, it's so appropriate. If you think about having to break the ice, it means that something is frozen in place and that is the feeling that you might be getting if you feel isolated or alone at work. So someone's got to break that shell, break that ice. If you're on the other side, if you've got someone who comes up and says, "Oh, I just wondered if you knew where I get the staples." and you think that's such a trivial question, you know, we've worked here for all this period of time. Now your reaction to that is your protective mechanism saying, "I'm not sure about this. I don't really want to step out from here but I need to acknowledge it". Just let that all go, let that flow through and then take the next step and just look at them and you don't have to answer necessarily but if you look at them, once you've made that physical connection, then let the words come out the way they should. You know, 99 times out of 100, you're not going to say the stupid thing. You're going to react to what they've asked you if you let all of the other reactions go past first.

Find something in common to talk about. If somebody likes dogs, just say, "You wouldn't believe what my dog did this morning" or something like that. "This won't take long but I thought you'd get a laugh out of this." Keep it short. Just break the tension, break the ice, as Kim just said. Just make them smile, basically.

It was always easy with Fulyana, you only had to mention food. (See, I'm happy already.)

And don't think that you are alone in feeling the way you are. No. You might well be surrounded by half a dozen people who are feeling the same way. It is not something that we talk about. There's some stigma attached to it, some taboo that says if you're at work and you're with all of these people around you, then you must be content, if not happy, because you've got a good team working towards goals, achieving the things that we're supposed to achieve. Everything's working well, you're getting paid, you've got a good home life, you know, how could you possibly feel this way? Well, sometimes you just do. It's about your self image, your self perception, the goals that you've set yourself personally that you might feel are not being achieved, that you've put aside to do these other things. So it's all about the balance that you have within yourself about what you're doing and who you are.

Quite honestly, you're not the only one feeling that way. And you're probably not the only one feeling that way in the room that you're in now.

That's so true. As long as, whatever you do, you do it for the right reasons and you're respectful of the other person. You're not going in with the idea, I'm doing you a favour. No you're not. You're actually showing full respect and a human compassion rather than pity or favour.

I think the bottom line of what we're talking about today is that we want you to stay humanly connected and we'll let you discover what form that connection takes. But always remember that it's the human connection. It doesn't have to be in the framework of friendship. It can just be a simple connection that is eye contact, that is a nod of the head, that is a smile, that is a wave. In that sense, the connection, when we think about it is how often do you do something good when you're driving the car for another driver? How often do you get thanked? We isolate ourselves in a lot of instances as a protective mechanism and we don't know how to break out of it. So I always make a great effort to thank every other driver that ever does anything for me, even if they're forced into doing something for me, not letting me into a lane, I make a big show of thanking them because it might be the only time, it might break the cycle of their isolation, it might be the only time that anyone thanks them in a day. And why shouldn't I do it? Because I am thankful that they did what they did. So let me continue that thankfulness by paying it forward. Keep the human interaction, keep the human connection happening.

We'll be interested to hear from you because it is something that doesn't get talked about. I'm really interested to hear from you if you feel that you are struggling in dealing with those issues of isolation and of loneliness and of aloneness, drop us a line and we'll certainly see what we can do to help move you through that process. Or if you have any tips on what you use and what works and stuff like that that we can share, we can share it, put it on the website and let other people enjoy the results. (Excellent).

We shall leave it for there for today. Thanks for being with us. I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.