Self-compassion can lessen feelings of work-from-home loneliness, finds study

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The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is keeping millions of Americans from their usual offices, as they find themselves still working at home. Even with the vaccine now being distributed, working from home may still be the future for some, and new research suggests the resulting work loneliness negatively impacts employee well-being.

Stephanie Andel, an assistant professor of psychology in the School of Science at IUPUI, along with collaborators at York University and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, recently published a study finding that feelings of work loneliness during the pandemic were associated higher depression and fewer voluntary work behaviors. The research appears in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*.

"We wanted to understand what factors are driving feelings of work loneliness, and to understand how this work loneliness influenced employees' psychological health and work behaviors," Andel said. "We looked at three different factors that we thought might drive work loneliness: perceptions of job insecurity, telecommuting frequency and insufficient communication from their companies about how they were responding to the pandemic.

"We found each of those factors contributed to feelings of work loneliness, and we also found that work loneliness was associated with depression and fewer voluntary helping behaviors at work."

Participants in the study came from a wide range of industries including manufacturing; technology, such as computer programming; retail; and education. The results are based on weekly surveys of these individuals from mid-March to mid-May 2020.

When people feel lonely, the study found, they experience more depressive symptoms, and they are less likely to go above and beyond in their jobs, such as helping a co-worker—something many organizations may have hoped their employees would do during the pandemic.

But there is hope—in the form of self-compassion. Andel and colleagues found self-compassion, or being kind to yourself during times of suffering, can mitigate some of the negative effects of work loneliness.

"We found that self-compassion helps protect employees from some of the negative effects of work loneliness," Andel said. "We suspect this is because self-compassion leads individuals to be kinder to themselves, makes them more likely to recognize that they are not alone in their feelings and helps them to be aware of—but not consumed by—their negative feelings."

Individuals who reported having higher levels of self-compassion exhibited fewer depressive symptoms following feelings of work loneliness in comparison to those with lower levels of self-compassion. But they also engaged in fewer helping behaviors, which surprised the study's authors.

"We originally thought if you were more self-compassionate, you might have the energy and mental resources to engage in more helping behaviors at work," Andel said. "However, it turns out that the pattern is opposite of what we expected. Instead, those who were higher in self-compassion were more likely to give themselves a necessary break. We suspect that this may ultimately help them to feel better and help more in the future."

Although self-compassion has been studied quite a bit in the field of clinical psychology, it has rarely been examined in the workplace context. Andel is optimistic about its potential to enhance the health and well-being of employees.

"It will be very interesting for future research to continue investigating the power of self-compassion in the workplace," she said. "For instance, it would be great to see if managers who promote self-compassion at work foster a better working experience for their employees. Ultimately, my collaborators and I hope to develop self-compassion interventions that can be utilized by companies to help their employees feel and perform better at work."

For companies that want to help their employees struggling right now with work loneliness, Andel provides the following suggestions:

- Provide consistent and clear communication regularly to employees regarding the company's response to the pandemic and be transparent about structural or financial changes that may affect employees' job security or income.
- Host virtual social gatherings for employees. These should not be mandatory, but rather voluntary social activities aimed at enhancing employee morale and promoting a sense of belonging among employees.
- Create an organizational climate that promotes and encourages employee self-compassion.

For individuals who want to take the initiative themselves to enhance their own self-compassion,

Andel suggests that in times of perceived failure or suffering, one should try to avoid negative self-talk and instead, give the same kindness and compassion to oneself that you would give to a good friend.

"This is an exciting and important step in bringing self-compassion to the organizational literature, and my collaborators and I look forward to building on this research," Andel said.

Provided by Indiana University

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