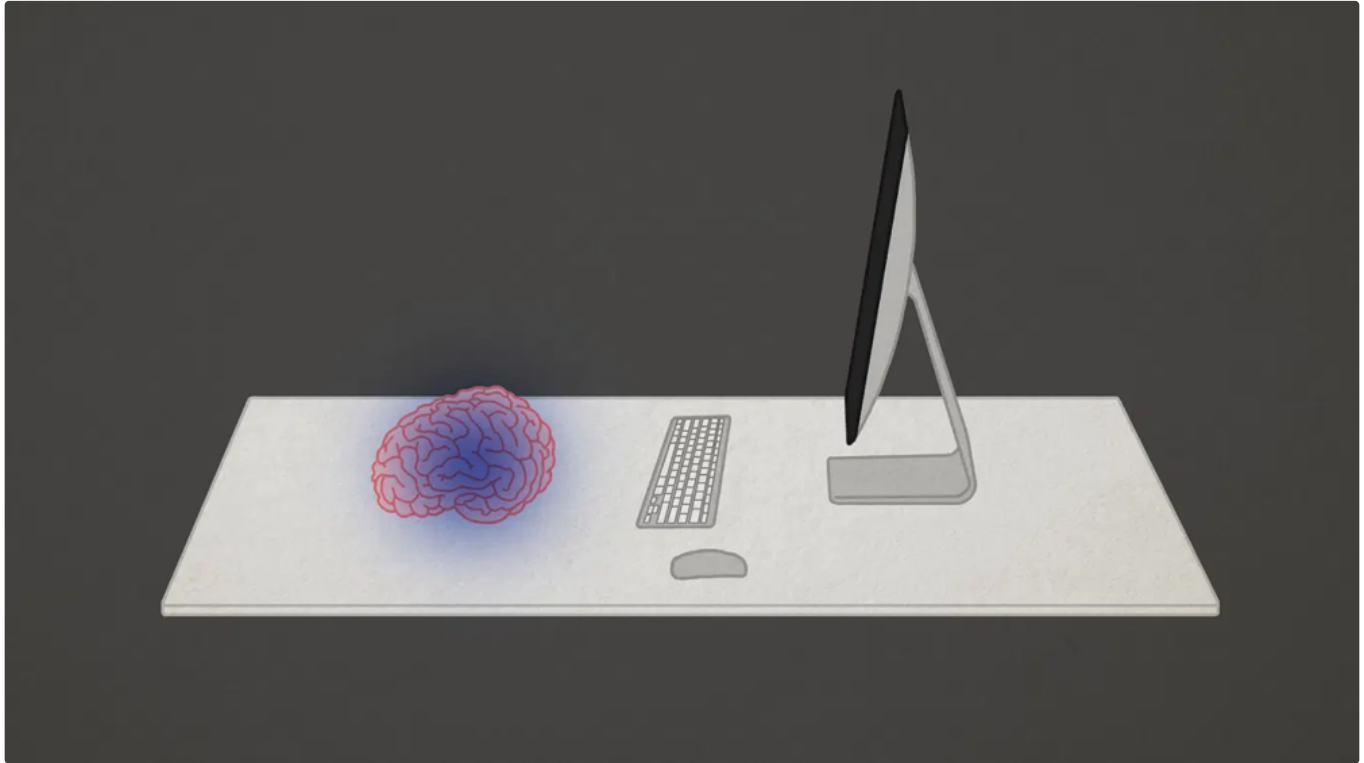




# The “modern” workplace doesn’t just make us lonely, it can make us physically ill



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By **Vivian Giang**

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Who are the people we think of as lonely? At one time, they were the outcasts—the mentally ill, the poor, the elderly, the isolated—anyone considered *outside* of society. But today, extreme loneliness has become much more pervasive, fueled by new technology and the rise of the freelance economy.

As more and more workers make the switch to the freelance

life—currently 53 million people in the US workforce are freelancers, according to a 2014 survey by Edelman Berland—they’re often unaware of the solitude that can accompany the lonely business that is a freelance career. Eventually, the lack of social interaction—everything from small talk to brainstorming sessions to just running into someone on the way to the bathroom—can wreak havoc on your body and brain. This raises an interesting question: many people tout the flexibility and innovation of the new gig-based economy, but could this “modern” workplace model also be making people sick?

## **The lethality of loneliness**

In a 2013 essay titled, “The lethality of loneliness,” The New Republic calls loneliness a “health crisis.” While a sensational title like that doesn’t do its subject many favors, isolation—in its most severe form—actually can help kill you. Not only has extreme loneliness been shown to shorten lifespans, it destroys the brain’s potential and lowers intelligence.

According to a 2010 study conducted by researchers from Brigham Young University, a lack of interaction with others has detrimental effects comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

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Loneliness also affects your hormonal signals, throwing your system out of whack. Extreme isolation is believed to cause or exacerbate the body's vulnerability to infections and diseases. It raises the risk of high blood pressure, disrupts sleep patterns, impairs logical reasoning, and leads to the irregular release of stress hormones. The Brigham Young paper concludes that "people with stronger social relationships had a 50% increased likelihood of survival than those with weaker social relationships."

Then there are the intellectual costs. Decreased socialization and interaction has been found to reduce intelligence scores and the ability to perform cognitive tasks. There is even evidence that decreased socialization can negatively impact a specific oxytocin receptor gene—often referred to as the "love hormone" or the "cuddle chemical"—that keeps humans feeling calm and happy.

"[Socialization] directly relates to intelligence because it is agreed by all psychologists that vocabulary breadth and ability to communicate is an essential part of intelligence," Leslie Sherlin, a psychologist and the cofounder of the "brain training" company SenseLabs, tells Quartz. "Social interaction is key for the generating of cognitive process" (i.e. idea sparking), and our ability to refine our thoughts through sharing and interacting with others.

As technological interactions on social media continue to replace human interactions and as our work veers away from the traditional office setting, it's important that we deliberately take steps to prevent loneliness from destroying our brains and bodies.

**Commit to reaching out**

Josh Davis, author of *Two Awesome Hours*, a book about science-backed strategies to getting things done, advises reaching out to others when you're taking a break. "When you do take breaks, understand that you may be particularly starved for emotional contact," Davis tells Quartz. "There's research showing that [human connections] is a strong predictor of happiness."

For those working remotely from small office outposts or from home, it's even more important to remain conscious of your social needs.

"If you don't have that interaction, recognize the importance of that and when you do have downtime, commit to reaching out to people," Davis says.

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Consider calling a friend, for example, or video chatting with a loved one. Not only does doing this help your brain, it also regulates your emotions. This has a huge impact on what Davis calls “mental energy,” or the ability to perform specific tasks. When interacting with others, neurochemical releases of dopamine and endorphins occur, especially when positive feedback is received. This creates a reward system in our brain. The reward loop, Davis explains, is part of what gives us the push needed for tackling higher levels of tasks.

Social interaction is also needed to keep our brain active, says

Sherlin, something as important for freelancers as for workers sitting in their assigned cubicles.

“By interacting with colleagues, we continue to process thoughts which spark new ideas and for many ignite the creative process,” he explained. “Simply having a conversation with another and telling them about our thoughts or ideas forces us to think through a particular problem and articulate it in such a way that we often further refine or develop the idea. It’s happened to all of us at some point where we find benefit from sharing our idea with a friend, even though we know they have no interest or expertise in our work.”

## **Checks and balances**

Humans have long thrived on group interactions. Our desire to be social is a large part of what drives our cultural institutions, from book clubs to professional sports leagues to office culture. Our work lives have a particularly huge degree of influence in this realm, as they take up so much of our time.

The merits of working remotely or freelancing are part of an ongoing conversation over what the “future of work” will look like. The one thing we do know for sure is that as technology increases in sophistication, the office is going to take on a much more flexible definition. But it’s important to remember that humans require social interactions, whether those are in-person or potentially virtual, to ward off intellectual, emotional, and physical stagnation.

Consequently, we shouldn’t think about social interactions simply as obligations filling up our social calendars, but rather as essential opportunities for psychological well-being. Leaving your cubicle behind doesn’t have to mean increased

isolation, but we need to stay realistic about the benefits—and the challenges—of our modern workplace.