

# Loneliness in the workplace is greatest among men with traditional views about being the breadwinner

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Loneliness affects everyone at different times. Although it is well documented men are less likely than women to talk about feelings and to

[seek help](#), our [research](#) found men's work arrangements can be a significant contributor.

We found loneliness was highest among men in their late 40s but it also occurred at other times, often shaped by how they perceived their careers and income.

This suggests the workplace and societal expectations around work are important in men's experiences of loneliness.

## **Measuring loneliness**

Our findings are based on an analysis of yearly data from 12,117 Australian men, aged 15 to 98, collected for over 19 years for the Household, Income and Labor Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) [Survey](#).

We measured loneliness by examining men's responses to a question asking whether they agreed with the statement: "I often feel very lonely." The responses range from one (completely disagree) to seven (completely agree).

We then used statistical techniques to ensure we were measuring loneliness and not similar constructs, such as [social isolation](#).

We also used methods that examined how much of men's loneliness was uniquely due to their social relationships (for example, their romantic relationships or friendships), versus other aspects of their lives, such as their living situation or their working arrangements.

## **The role of work**

Given loneliness is a social problem, we were not surprised to find

problems in men's social relationships, particularly their [romantic relationships](#), friendships and family relationships were linked with loneliness. However, we were surprised to see work also played a significant role.

Men who were unemployed or in insecure jobs experienced more loneliness than those with stable employment. Job loss can impact a person's identity and [limits the social connections work typically provides](#). Unemployment also limits income, making it harder to afford [social activities](#). Insecure "gig" work, with its often unpredictable and long hours spent alone, disrupts [work-life balance](#) and can isolate people.

Our research suggests societal expectations also worsen loneliness for some men. We measured the degree to which men agreed with the statement: "It is not good for a relationship if the woman earns more than the man."

Men, particularly middle-aged men, who believed they should be the main breadwinners in a household were lonelier than those without this belief.

This suggests traditional views around work in the context of heteronormative relationships can be damaging to social connection.

This once mainstream view not only [harms relationships](#) but is also unrealistic when surviving on a single income is increasingly difficult for many households.

Improving men's personal relationships is only one way to reduce male loneliness. The work sector and social pressures around work should also adapt.

## **Shifting social norms**

Public stereotypes that make men feel solely responsible for household income need to shift. Public awareness and education campaigns [can help shift gender norms and stereotypes](#) by building knowledge and awareness, and may therefore reduce loneliness.

Helping men attain better work-life balance can help everyone. Such change, however, requires major cultural shifts which take time. A shorter term solution, particularly for men at retirement age, is volunteering.

Volunteering provides purpose and opportunities to socialize, although [recent evidence](#) suggests volunteering has not returned to pre-COVID levels.

## **How governments can help**

Increasing casualisation of the workplace and the growth of the gig economy offer flexibility but also decrease job security. Our research shows job insecurity or unemployment rates contribute to male loneliness.

Government amendments to the Fair Work Act should help reduce job insecurity by allowing the Fair Work Commission to set fair minimum standards, including access to dispute resolution for "employee-like" workers, such as Uber drivers, who work through a digital platform.

Governments can also support activities of interest to men by ensuring regular funding for programs like [Men's Sheds](#) or opportunities to [work with animals](#).

[Social prescribing](#)—where a GP or other health worker links patients with resources and activities to improve health and reduce

loneliness—can also involve men in roles which best fit their needs and interests.

## How employers can help

Thankfully, workplaces can do a lot to reduce [loneliness](#). A recent [review](#) suggests employers can:

- 1) Create opportunities for social connection, for example, dedicating time for non-work activities such as designing communal areas in offices to support connection.
- 2) Support flexible and remote, potentially isolated workers by fostering workplace connections using virtual spaces such as online dinners, while still encouraging work-life balance.
- 3) Foster a people focused culture by building employee autonomy, tolerating mistakes and providing mentoring opportunities.

The relationship between managers and workers is [especially important](#) for well-being, because managers can shape working conditions, model positive behavior and improve staff knowledge, but few interventions target this area.

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