

Celebrating Disability History Month

The unemployment rate for non-disabled people was 3.6% in 2024, while the figure doubled to 6.9% for people with a disability in the same period. It is clear there is a discrepancy in unemployment rates for people with disabilities compared to non-disabled people. This is discrimination and must be prevented by UK employers.

UK Disability History Month acts as a reminder of the struggles and achievements of the disabled community that have fought for a more inclusive future for everyone. However, it is also a firm reminder, as the above statistics suggest, that there is still a long way to go.

What is UK Disability History Month?

Disability History Month is an annual event that raises awareness around the stigmatised journey disabled people have had to fight for their human rights and equality. It serves as an important reminder of the struggles people with a disability have faced throughout history, their progress, achievements, and the barriers that still exist today.

It's an opportunity to talk about the history of disabled people, celebrate the positive changes, promote disabled people's rights, and discuss how we can better support people with disabilities in the workplace and the wider community.

Attitudes towards people with disabilities

Throughout history, attitudes towards people with a disability have been largely seen as unemployable. In modern times, we understand that not only is this rhetoric untrue and unfair, but extremely discriminatory.

Despite this, there is still widespread employment inequalities between disabled and non-disabled people in the UK. In 2021, 51% of disabled men were employed compared to an employment rate of 84% for non-disabled men. We can see a similar story for women, with 79% of non-disabled women employed compared to 54% of disabled women. The clear disparity in employment rates is a firm reminder of why we should remember disability history and why the fight continues.

Why do we celebrate UK Disability History Month?

History has had a complex relationship with people with disabilities, and they have not always been treated fairly or equally. Throughout history, disabled people have continuously faced discrimination and barriers that disregard them from the job market. This has left many people with a disability unable to find work because of the simple fact that they have a disability, and the stigma associated. This has left many disabled people feeling unheard, misunderstood, and lumbered with financial disadvantages.

Despite this, there have been important key milestones that have made good progress for the disability community. Since the end of World War 2, attitudes have slowly started to change. Over 300,000 people returned from the war with a disability, exposing more people to the realities of life with a disability. This

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change in attitudes was the catalyst for a more inclusive future, sparking civil protests and changes in the law to improve disabled people's standard of living and place within the working world.

Over the years, we have seen significant changes in history that have shown the slow acceptance, respect, and understanding of disabled people, including the first Paralympic Games in Rome, which is still widely celebrated today, and the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995. This act made it unlawful to discriminate against disabled people in employment, the provision of goods and services, education, and transport.

Disabled history can be difficult and upsetting to talk about for some. However, it's important to have open and honest conversations about how disabled people have been treated unfairly and highlight their achievements of progress, so we do not repeat the same mistakes.

Importance of inclusion in the workplace

The UK alone has 16.1 million people that are considered to have a disability. With such a large portion of the population who experience challenges in work associated with their disability, UK employers must build an inclusive organisation that welcome diversity, inclusion, and equality for all

Inclusion is fundamental for all organisations and leaders must take proactive steps to nurture inclusion, diversity, and equality within their workplaces. Being an inclusive employer allows you to build trust with your employees, including increasing employee mental wellbeing, satisfaction, engagement, and boosting productivity.

Having an inclusive workplace means:

- Offers different perspectives
- Healthier and happier workplace for all
- Breaking stigmas
- Boost employee engagement and satisfaction
- Attracts new talent
- Supporting Employees With Disabilities At Work

What does this mean for mental health?

In a study of 200 people, the American Psychiatric Association found that mental health recovery rates were worse if the individual had experienced stigma. Having to deal with discrimination is harmful to mental health. Being at a disadvantage due to stigma, discrimination, and prejudice because of who you are will have a detrimental effect on mental wellbeing for victims.

Disabled people may question their identity, living in a world that doesn't cater to their needs, increasing feelings of hopelessness, poor self-esteem issues, and loneliness. They may feel a loss of control and autonomy over their life, trying to navigate the world of employment with the added pressure of discrimination.

While people who face discrimination have a higher risk of having a mental health condition, it does not mean they will automatically have a mental health concern. It is always preferable to talk to the individual rather than assume.

Discover how an Employee Assistance Programme can help people with disabilities in your organisation.

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How can organisations support disabled people?

UK Disability History Month is a powerful call to action for communities and organisations to reflect on how they can better support disabled people. It's especially important for workplaces to consider this support. We spend an average of 3,507 days in work across a standard lifespan, so we organisations must take the time to remove barriers and make people with a disability feel more comfortable and safer at work.

1. Employ a disability champion

Disability champions provide confidence and understanding on issues relating to people with a disability, ensuring that all disabled employees feel comfortable, safe, and supported. They develop their knowledge, signposts to key resources, and identify good adjustments and practises organisations can use to better support people with disabilities.

2. Listen to your employees

Find adjustments by listening to the needs of people with disabilities and how you can improve their working day with possible adjustments or with a flexible approach.

By actively listening, you will be able to understand their challenges and create a long-term plan with the right support, creating a happier and healthier environment where disabled people feel included, heard, and understood.

3. Inclusion Training

Implementing mandatory inclusion training for all employees promotes an understanding and supportive environment that values respect for all. Inclusion training sets a clear expectation and precedence that intolerance of diverse people is not acceptable, compelling the right people to join the organisation who respect others and work well as a collective.

4. Develop understanding and awareness

To have an inclusive workplace, leaders must understand the challenges disabled people face in the workplace. 24% of people in the UK have a disability, yet many of us don't fully understand their struggles. By building and developing your understanding of disabled people and their struggles, those individuals will feel understood and comfortable discussing their challenges with you, so you can better support them.

It is important to remember that not all disabilities are visible, so understanding the wide scope of disabilities is key.

Health Assured is here to help you

At Health Assured, we take diversity, equality, and inclusion seriously and strive to promote inclusion for a better future for all. Disability can leave a person questioning their identity, who they are, and how they fit into a society that does not cater to disabled people. So, finding the right support is essential.

With our award-winning Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), your people can access a 24/7, 365 days a year helpline where expert counsellors are on-hand to discuss any challenges they are facing.

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How to deal with loneliness

Loneliness can affect anyone. Experiences of loneliness can vary, but its effects can be profound and wide-ranging. It is considered by many to be one of the largest public health challenges we face.

In 2022, 49.63% of adults in the UK reported feeling lonely occasionally, sometimes, often, or always. Around 7% of adults (4 million people) experience chronic loneliness, meaning they feel lonely often or always.

As the weather gets colder, and the nights draw in, many of us will spend more time at home during the winter months, which can create the conditions for social isolation. Additionally, the rising cost of living is leading to more people feeling lonely and isolated from their loved ones because of increased financial pressures.

Loneliness and mental health

Loneliness is not a mental health problem in and of itself. It is, however, closely linked to poor mental health. Constant feelings of loneliness can lead to mental health problems such as depression, stress and anxiety.

Prolonged loneliness and social isolation can also lead to chronic stress, high blood pressure and inflammation, which can significantly promote physical disorders. For example, poor social relationships are associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.

Causes of loneliness

Many of us feel lonely from time to time. Feelings of loneliness are personal, so everyone's experience will be different.

Research from Harvard Medical School shows that social media usage is linked to feelings of loneliness and wider mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. This will be especially prevalent amongst younger people, however, there are many reasons why someone could be feeling lonely:

- Leaving home and transitioning into higher education
- Adapting to full-time employment and adult life
- Living alone
- Chronic health issues
- Bereavement
- The end of a relationship
- A job loss or job change
- Retirement

Tip:

If you're struggling to identify the cause, try writing down how you feel. Writing down emotions can help you to gain some perspective on things.

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Signs and symptoms of loneliness

The signs and symptoms of loneliness vary from person to person. Sometimes it is hard to identify when loneliness is the emotion you're feeling. You might think it's just a low mood or you've been feeling lost. Here are some of the identifiers of loneliness:

Sleep: when people feel lonely, they tend to experience a change in their sleeping patterns, feeling more tired than usual.

- Spending money: people who are feeling lonely may spend money on 'unnecessary' things to fill the void.
- Eating habits: over-eating or under-eating are closely linked to depression. Some people would console themselves by eating too much, while others would lose their appetite and find other ways to make themselves feel better.
- Communication: inconsistency in communication patterns such as phoning and messaging more or less frequently.
- Physical health: aside from sleep deprivation, loneliness can also lead to poor heart health and a weakened immune system.

How to cope with loneliness

It is possible to overcome loneliness, but it does require effort on your part for changes to happen. In the long run, taking that first step will help you feel happier and healthier. Below, we have provided 5 tips to help you overcome loneliness and social isolation:

- Volunteering

Helping a local charity or community group is a fantastic way to combat loneliness. In a recent study involving 10,000 volunteers, 68% of participants agreed that volunteering helped them feel less isolated. The same study also found that 77% of participants agreed that volunteering had improved their mental health and wellbeing. As a result, volunteering can help reduce the negative feelings associated with loneliness and give you a sense of purpose as you help those in need.

- Talking therapy

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- Stay connected

It's essential to stay in touch with your friends and family during the winter months. These individuals play a vital role in protecting your mental health by fostering a sense of belonging and purpose. Whenever you feel lonely, you should call your friends or spend quality time with your family. They'll appreciate it as much as you do.

- Keep yourself busy

During the winter months, and with the rising cost of living, more and more people are choosing to stay in and avoid social activities. Keeping yourself busy can be an effective way to combat loneliness. It doesn't have to cost anything; it could involve learning a new skill, taking time out for self-care or hanging out with friends or family. These moments of enjoyment offer opportunities to distract yourself and make social connections.

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- Celebrate yourself

Remember, you are not alone. 1 in 4 people feel lonely and are trying to find the best ways to overcome these feelings. All you need to do is give yourself constant encouragement. These can be verbal reminders, like saying something positive to yourself each morning, or physical reminders, such as leaving positive notes on your desk at work. These small moments of positivity can help cheer you up and help you stay motivated.

Summary

Loneliness can leave people feeling isolated and disconnected from others. It is a complex state of mind that can be caused by life changes, mental health conditions, poor self-esteem, and personality traits.

Chronic loneliness may lead to mental and physical health issues. Connecting with others and practicing self-care may help. You can seek help for loneliness by talking with a healthcare professional or contacting our 24/7, 365 helpline for in-the-moment support.

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