

A hand is holding a tablet that displays a video conference grid. The grid shows several participants, mostly men and women, who are smiling and clapping. The background of the entire image is a solid blue color with a subtle texture.

# NURTURING SOCIAL WELLBEING WHEN WORKING REMOTELY

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KONTERRA  
RESILIENCE

# ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Working remotely offers many benefits, including flexibility, reduced commuting time, decreased distractions, and a more comfortable working environment. However, it can also pose significant challenges to social wellbeing. This resource offers tips for nurturing social wellbeing and navigating common communication challenges when working remotely.

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# HOW WORKING REMOTELY CAN IMPACT WELLBEING

When the COVID-19 virus swept around the globe, millions of people had their normal routines upended and suddenly found themselves working remotely. And while some people have returned to in-person work, many others are still working from home at least some of the time, and connecting with colleagues and clients virtually.

Working remotely offers many benefits, including flexibility, reduced commuting time, decreased distractions, and a more comfortable working environment. However, it can also pose significant challenges to social wellbeing. Human beings are pack animals. We are hard-wired to want to near other people. (Yes, even the introverts among us need that.) Having few face-to-face connections isn't good for our wellbeing over time, and it can complicate communication and working relationships.

Here are a few of the ways in which remote work can be detrimental.

## Isolation and loneliness

Remote workers often miss out on the spontaneous conversations and social interactions that occur naturally in an office environment. This lack of face-to-face interaction can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Over time, those working remotely may find it difficult to maintain social connections and feel part of a community.

## Communication challenges in virtual teams

The virtual workplace has some unique characteristics.

1. **Lack of physical interaction:** We miss out on all the physical interaction (handshakes, hugs) that typically communicate trust, connection, and willingness to cooperate.

2. **Miss some visual cues and non-verbal communication:** When our primary communication is virtual (even when we use video) we also miss a lot of visual cues and non-verbal communication. Normally, at least half of what we communicate happens non-verbally. Think about what a confused expression, looking disengaged, or someone shifting uncomfortably in their seat can signal in a meeting. It's a lot harder to pick up on those signals via video, and even more challenging on a phone call.
3. **Reduced organic flow of information:** We also miss out on a lot of the natural information "flow" that happens around a shared workspace. When we share a common workplace we typically pick up a lot of information about on what others are working on, how busy (or not) they are, and a lot of big picture "team" stuff. A lot of this sort of "incidental learning" doesn't happen naturally in virtual teams.
4. **Delayed responses:** Asynchronous communication in virtual teams and across time zones can result in delayed responses and make it harder to have real-time conversations and quickly resolve issues or seek support.
5. **Weakened collegial relationships and team bonds:** Building and maintaining strong relationships with colleagues can be more challenging when interactions are limited to virtual meetings. The lack of casual, informal interactions can make it harder to develop positive social history, trust, and camaraderie.

As a result of these communication challenges, it can be easier for virtual team members to:

- Feel disconnected from colleagues
- Feel out-of-sync with colleagues of company mission
- Experience miscommunications
- Experience delays in workflow that requires collaboration and input from others
- Feel decreased motivation and engagement

# NURTURING SOCIAL WELLBEING WHEN WORKING REMOTELY

Here are some practical tips to help you stay connected and socially engaged while working remotely.

## Establish a routine

- **Consistent schedule:** Maintaining a regular work schedule can help you create a sense of predictable normalcy and structure in your day.
- **Designated workspace:** Having a specific area for work can help you mentally separate work time from personal time.
- **Regular breaks:** Incorporate breaks into your routine to avoid overload and give yourself time to recharge.

## Video over voice, and virtual hangouts

- **Video calls:** Whenever possible, opt for video calls instead of emails or chat messages. Seeing faces and hearing voices can significantly reduce feelings of isolation and reduce miscommunications.
- **Virtual hangouts:** Organize virtual coffee breaks or happy hours with colleagues to mimic the social interactions you would have in an office setting.
- **Social media:** Use platforms like LinkedIn, Twitter, or professional forums to stay connected with industry peers and join discussions.

## Build connections with colleagues

- **Regular check-ins:** Schedule regular check-ins with team members and your manager to discuss progress, challenges, and general well-being.
- **Informal communication:** Create/use informal chat channels for non-work-related conversations. Sharing personal updates and light-hearted content can strengthen relationships, team bonds, and positive culture.

## Get up and get out

- **Get up and get out:** Too many of us sit too much, and for too long. During breaks, get up from your desk and get out of your office (and, if possible, out of the house). Do something that can bring you into contact with other people like neighbors or shop assistants, even if only briefly. Research suggests the more diverse social connections you tend to have during the day, the happier you are and the higher your wellbeing.

## Participate in Online Communities

- **Professional groups:** Join online communities or forums related to your field. Participating in discussions can help you stay informed and connected.
- **Interest-based groups:** Engage in groups or clubs that focus on your hobbies or interests. This can provide a social outlet that is unrelated to work.

# NAVIGATING COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

Here are just a couple of tips on communicating well and building strong relationships during virtual interactions. A lot of these tips will sound basic. That's because they *are*. When you're communicating virtually, it helps to be intentional, thoughtful, and clear. Just like self-care and stress management, the basics are where much of the power lies.

## Ensure everyone has an opportunity to contribute to discussions

We've all been in meetings where one or two people completely dominated. If you're having a lot of virtual meetings, especially team meetings in groups, make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak. If you're facilitating, consider putting a structure of process in place to help make that happen, and/or actively invite team members to contribute ideas, thoughts, and concerns. (Just try to do this in a way that doesn't

make people feel like they're being put on the spot—for example, cue them in advance that you will ask them to share on a particular topic.)

## Actively invite/request colleagues and team members to ask questions

We generally ask a lot of questions of each other in day-to-day conversation. Managers need to be tuned in to questions their team members might have, but are sometimes more hesitant to articulate virtually than they would be in-person.

## Listen carefully, clarify, and confirm shared understanding

Text messaging and chat applications allow for quick and easy communication, but the lack of context and other verbal/visual cues can cause messages to be more easily misinterpreted, leading to confusion, frustration, and even resentment. We need to strive to make our thoughts clear, and to listen closely in order to ensure we're understanding and reading other team members accurately!

## Build a relationship beyond work

One of the biggest challenges with virtual teams is cultivating the social bonds that make everyone feel like they're connected and part of something valuable. A close-knit team with a sense of camaraderie will function more resiliently and effectively than one without those connections. So cultivating positive interactions between team members. Some ways to do encourage this include:

- **Informal chat channels:** Dedicate specific channels for non-work-related conversations to foster a sense of camaraderie.
- **Virtual coffee breaks or lunches:** Schedule casual virtual meetups to mimic in-office social interactions.
- **Personal check-ins before meetings:** Take a couple of minutes on the front end of meetings for a personal check in.

# ASK YOURSELF THIS

Ask yourself the following questions:

## 1. Do I feel isolated or lonely?

- Assess your feelings of isolation or loneliness. If these feelings are prevalent, consider ways to increase social interaction.

## 2. How often do I communicate with my colleagues beyond work-related tasks?

- Reflect on the frequency and quality of your social interactions with colleagues. Are you making time for casual conversations and building personal connections?

## 3. Do I feel heard and understood in my remote communication with colleagues?

- Assess whether you feel your messages are effectively communicated and understood by your colleagues. Are there ways to improve clarity or seek feedback to ensure better understanding?

## 4. How diverse is my social portfolio?

- Reflect on how many different types of connections and interactions you have? Do you regularly interact with people close to you *and* with those who are less close?

## 5. What activities outside of work do I engage in to support my social wellbeing?

- Think about the non-work-related activities you participate in that support your social wellbeing. Are you making time for hobbies, community involvement, and interactions with friends and family?



## ABOUT KON TERRA

At KonTerra, we specialize in supporting clients that operate in complex and high-stress environments where organizations and their staff face difficult challenges.

When staff work in high-pressure roles or locations with elevated exposure to threat, suffering, graphic content, or conflict, they are at risk of experiencing overload, attrition, and stress reactions such as burnout. The KonTerra Group works directly with individuals, leaders, and teams to equip them with tools to better understand and manage the challenges they face.

Providing support in a meaningful way is only possible with the right people. The experience and sensitivity of our counselors, trainers, and coaches allows us to work with clients in a way that is unique. Our specialists all share two attributes which equip them to deliver excellent support: all are veteran mental health clinicians (master's or doctoral-level); and experienced supporting staff in high-stress and high-stakes environments and roles.



### **Services delivered by our uniquely positioned professionals include:**

- Individual Counseling and Coaching
- Virtual and Onsite Training and Educational Events
- Staff Wellbeing Assessments
- Manager Support and Consultations for Organizations and Leaders
- Critical Incident Response Services

If you are interested in learning more about any of the above services, please contact your KonTerra Account Manager or email: [info@konterragroup.net](mailto:info@konterragroup.net).