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Opinion | We Ran the Numbers. Remote Work Is Bad for Us.

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Most Americans say they love working from home. They can skip their commutes, dodge their snippy co-workers and evade their micromanaging bosses. In 2024, nearly 80 percent of workers said they would be happiest if they could work remotely.
Both of us have experienced the advantages of remote work, especially when battling morning sickness or caring for a sick 6-year-old. But on some days, we wouldn't venture outside or speak face-to-face with another human. We started to wonder whether we — along with the roughly 35 million other Americans who work from home — had stepped into an enormous social experiment. Was remote work as liberating as it felt?

We searched for answers in troves of data, unsure of what we would find. Surveys of over half a million Americans from the last decade and a half revealed an uncomfortable truth: Despite its advantages, remote work has significantly deepened Americans' isolation and distress. Our estimates, published in Science this month with our collaborator Amanda Pallais, indicate that remote work explains a third of the deterioration in mental health over the last 15 years. Our research doesn't suggest that work can occur only in the office. But it does mean that employees and companies should make a greater effort to prioritize face-to-face time with colleagues.

Our study compares workers in jobs that could be done remotely, such as finance and software engineering, to workers in jobs that must be done in person. People in remote-capable jobs worked from home three times as often in 2024 as in 2019. As they did, their days became far more solitary. Eighty-four percent of remote workers spend their workday entirely alone. Over half report feeling less connected to their colleagues. Even when communicating online, people working from home receive less feedback from their co-workers and contact fewer people outside their immediate teams.

These workers did not compensate by socializing more outside

work. More days passed with no social contact of any kind. No hello from an office mate, no idle chitchat with a barista, no nod to a fellow commuter. These lost interactions are not trivial. In one study, when commuters were instructed to connect with a stranger near them, they reported being happier than those who continued in silence as usual, much to their own surprise.

With fewer social encounters, workers in jobs that can be remote saw steeper increases in distress, mental health visits and prescriptions for antidepressants than other workers did. This increase in depression does not seem to reflect more recent fears, such as A.I. displacement. It began in 2020 and has not abated, which points to remote work as the driving force.

The pain was not evenly shared. People who lived with their spouse and kids saw their mental health hold fairly steady, while those who lived alone experienced a 20 percent decrease in mental well-being. Overall, we found that the rise of remote work increased distress by 7 percent, which accounts for a third of the total increase from 2011 to 2024.

So why do so many people like remote work, even saying they would accept pay cuts of 4 percent to 10 percent to keep it? One reason is that remote work's costs are subtle and slow. When loneliness sets in gradually, it is natural to blame other life changes: a new job, a breakup, a fight with a friend, aging. Another reason that some people like remote work is that a half empty office is not an attractive alternative.

We don't need to accept this new status quo. The office has been the No. 1 place adults form friendships, outranking houses of worship, children's schools, neighborhoods and sports teams. Forming and sustaining these friendships almost always requires in-person time: Our brains are wired to connect face-to-face, and even the most advanced digital tools are a poor substitute. To maintain this critical source of connection, workers need doses of in-person time with one another.

Yet the prepandemic norm of being in the office every hour of every workday often crowded out time with friends and family. So, for many of us, the solution is not to rewind the clock to our 2019 ways. Instead, we can form strong bonds by being more intentional about how we work.

Employees can take the initiative to invite colleagues to lunch or organize a happy hour. Of course, structural issues may limit what they can do, especially if some of their colleagues live halfway across the country. And often, individuals' efforts go unrewarded.

But employers can make it easier to connect. In researching a forthcoming book, we found companies rethinking how to bring people together. Some revamped performance reviews to better reward the too-often invisible work of connecting teams. Others reorganized coffee spaces, replacing atomized coffee machines with centralized hubs that brought colleagues together. Some turned managers into mentor matchmakers setting up weekly one-on-ones for co-workers to analyze their recent wins and frustrations. Such interventions can foster lasting connections, give employees new skills and improve companies' bottom lines.

Twenty-six years after Robert Putnam warned that Americans were bowling alone, many of us are now typing alone. To ensure that work remains a source of connection, we must change not only where we work, but how we work, so that our jobs continue to bring us together.