



CAREERS

How can I feel less isolated from colleagues?

For some doctors, professional isolation has been a long standing concern, while for others self-isolation has only recently separated them from their colleagues. **Abi Rimmer** asks experts how to deal with it

Abi Rimmer

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“Keep in touch and chat as usual”

Steve Miller, a consultant psychiatrist, says, “The first thing is to ensure that you aren’t isolated even if you’re forced to be alone: use Facebook, WhatsApp, or FaceTime to keep in touch with as many colleagues as possible, past and present. Talk to each other as you normally would when in each other’s company. Sharing can increase a sense of togetherness and lessen isolation. It’s also important to keep up your continuing professional development, reflection, and supervision, this will keep you on top of things and lessen any worries about coping with a backlog on returning to normal working.

“When working, plan your day and maintain a routine, sticking to normal work times where possible. Don’t forget to schedule breaks and always plan something pleasant for them. Make sure that you don’t spend all your time working. Now is a good time to read that novel you’ve never had time for, to watch that box set, or to start a new hobby.

“When not working, try to keep fit by doing some exercise, there are free instructors on YouTube, and try not to increase your alcohol consumption. If you drink, do so socially with family or friends over Facetime or Zoom.

“Limit yourself to checking coronavirus updates once or twice daily. Actively seek good news and positives to balance out negatives. Humour can be helpful in tough times, try Googling some jokes to share with your family, friends, and colleagues. Don’t forget to get some fresh air and stay safe.”

“Seek non-clinical opportunities”

Charlotte Hall, an anaesthetic registrar, says, “Covid-19 has brought anaesthetists to the frontline. ‘Ventilator’ has become a household word and their availability is a daily debate. Now is the anaesthetist’s time to step up and shine, so how does one cope when they’re unable to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with their peers?

“Losing three pregnancies last year, one at 20 weeks, meant that finding out I was pregnant again at the start of the pandemic was joyful but anxiety provoking news. Deemed a high risk pregnancy already, the option to work at the coalface was swiftly dismissed by our obstetrician.

“Adapting to working from home has been a steep learning curve but one that has become rewarding in distinct ways to

clinical practice. The opportunity to tap into my educational skills has arisen as I lead online tutorials for redeployed junior doctors set to enter the world of critical care. Providing pastoral support—by taking responsibility for daily welfare check-ins with sick and isolating trainees—has ensured that I have stayed in regular contact with colleagues in their own time of uncertainty.

“A concern for trainee welfare, teaching, and regular contact with frontline colleagues has made the days fly. Although I miss patient interaction, these changeable times have assured me that intubating isn’t the only skill an anaesthetist has. Drawing on my years of clinical experience has provided a great sense of purpose and worth.

“My humble advice to those working from home: seek non-clinical opportunities that are meaningful to you, stay in constant touch with peers, support them, and make each day worthwhile. Remember this pandemic is transient and, although it brings unease, it also presents valuable opportunities to grow as a well rounded clinician.”

“Harness technology”

Joshua Getty, a GP registrar, says, “First of all, it’s important to remember that you’re not alone. Your colleagues (regardless of grade) are likely feeling similar emotions. Finding a shared time and space to debrief can be invaluable. With trainee doctors’ educational sessions being suspended to focus on patient care, feelings of isolation can increase by being separated from your peers.

“Free platforms such as Zoom can be a great way for groups to meet and share experiences and viewpoints, as well as to facilitate peer support. In our local training group, we host a weekly evening Zoom drop-in for trainees, which the majority have found useful and supportive. We’ve also invited our programme directors to participate, which has given the opportunity to directly ask how rotations, training, and exams are being affected.

“At my GP surgery, we’ve been using Microsoft Teams to host a daily lunchtime video meeting for the medical team, which can alleviate the isolation of telephone triage and distancing from colleagues. The Team Channel function also has potential to be used to engage with others, with some practices developing wellbeing focussed channels to support their staff.

“WhatsApp groups are also a great way of sharing information, experiences, and humour among peers, which can all help those who are feeling isolated. On a larger scale, Facebook groups such as Tea and Empathy can help form broader peer support networks.

“When using a method like those above, it’s valuable to establish some common rules and a clear purpose. For example, having time limits on meetings can help keep them focussed and people engaged. Regularity can be helpful but changing time and day can encourage others to join who might not have been able to before. Fundamental to all of this is the idea of reaching out to connect with others, and knowing that while distanced, we are not alone.”

“Maintain a routine”

Sarah Grobiski, a nurse advisor for FirstCare, says, “Moving to working from home was a huge change for me when I joined FirstCare. My background is in intensive care and high dependency units. I’ve found, however, that working from home really suits me.

“If you’re new to working from home, keep yourself in a routine—get dressed and ready for work. Spend time you would have spent travelling to do something you enjoy or take up a new hobby. Maintain a healthy diet, exercise, and maintain communication with loved ones with technology—video call, texting, phone calls. There are also huge amounts of online courses for healthcare professionals that can be completed for continuing professional development.

“Communication and support are important. FirstCare has a software tool that we use to communicate during our day for help and support—I feel that this is essential. That support network is important for productivity and morale and ensures we feel part of a team. In addition, as healthcare professionals, it’s important to be able to have that second opinion or discussion at times.

“Most importantly, remain positive. We are proud healthcare professionals and we are all doing our bit during this outbreak.

“Finally, a huge thanks to all the frontline staff who, daily, are face to face with covid-19.”