

# The loneliness of the long-distance teleworker

As millions more people make the switch to working from home, one freelance warns of the psychological dangers of isolation. By Neil Crossley

"WELL, IT all sounds like the beginnings of classic anxiety/depression to me," said my GP triumphantly. "Tell me, are you looking forward to the future?"

It was November 1998, three years after my partner and I left our nine-to-five existence in London and moved to a thatched cottage in Devon. I started work as a freelance journalist and, with the car fumes and monotony of commuting behind me, life started to look pretty good.

Until last autumn. I suddenly started feeling tense and depressed for no particular reason. Things which usually inspired me held no appeal and I'd find myself staring numbly at the wall. Soon, I found it hard to concentrate on anything but why I felt so wretched.

My GP referred me to a counsellor. At the end of the second session, the counsellor leaned forward in his chair and delivered a bombshell. While it wasn't the only reason for my symptoms, he said, the isolation of working from home was a major factor. And if I didn't radically change my working lifestyle, things would only get worse.

Much has been made of the prevailing shift towards "teleworking", work via the phone, modem and computer from home. There are 1.3 million people in the UK working full-time or part-time from home and this is expected to rise to 3 million by



Neil Crossley, alone in his cottage, turns to his guitar for a commercial break



Marc Hill/David Huriker

2004. Some health professionals believe many people cannot cope with the isolation of working from home. They say teleworkers are prone to a range of psychiatric illnesses.

"If people are deprived of human interaction, they will undoubtedly become depressed and disturbed," says Professor Michael West, psychologist at Aston University business school.

"Work colleagues spend a huge amount of time gossiping and kidding with each other and discussing their families or what was on TV.

such times, I wouldn't leave the cottage for days. I was prescribed an anti-depressant, which my GP warned me I would probably feel worse before I got better.

He wasn't wrong. Mornings became like battles of survival as I tried to mentally dissect myself from the crushing melancholy. Work represented my one tangible piece of reality, a vital distraction from confronting my symptoms head on. If I let my mind wander, the symptoms intensified and I would worry about it. Then I would worry about

A report to be published next year

by the Health Education Authority, shows social isolation can also lead to heart disease, a weakened immune system and numerous minor physical symptoms. The report will focus on mental health. And it stresses that a strong network of supportive friends is essential to mental well-being.

Dr Crown echoes the importance of friends. He has no doubt people who work from home are more susceptible to psychiatric illness but agrees it is alarmist to suggest this will inevitably happen.

Many people thrive on working from home and some studies suggest the lack of distractions can result in up to a 40 per cent increase in productivity. Dr Crown believes people who plan their work well are more likely to lead well-balanced and healthy lives.

Occupational psychologists say the most successful and likely home-working practice will be to spend at least one day a week in the office. For self-employed freelancers like myself this is not an option. What I had to do was keep regular working hours and get out of the house to meet people as much as possible.

For freelance illustrator Angus Summer this self-help approach resulted in a part-time waiting job at a south London restaurant. Not because he needed the money, he says. But because he was "beginning

to go in on myself, wallowing in trivial problems that I wouldn't normally care about". As the trend for home-working gains momentum, it seems likely new communities will develop with social meeting centres. "Lunch clubs" are already springing up around the UK.

Two weeks into December 1998, my condition started to improve. I began to notice I was interested in things around me. Friends, family, music, films and books slowly filtered back into my thoughts. Christmas, which I'd been dreading, now seemed an appealing prospect. But it was a gradual process and I did not feel truly recovered until February.

With the help of my GP and counsellor, I spent this period re-evaluating my priorities. I learned the simple but highly effective rule of saying "no" to commissions when I already had work piling up.

I regimented my working day, always stopping for a one-hour lunch break. I arranged regular mid-week nights out with friends, and weekends away with my partner. And, putting my cynicism and better judgement aside, and on the advice of my counsellor, I joined a gym.

Work, which for so long occupied a central role, has been compartmentalised to fit within my life. "You manage the work and don't let it manage you," one psychologist told me. That's how I plan to keep it.