

Guidelines for looking after mental health whilst working from home



In these unprecedented times, working practice has had to adapt and change exceptionally fast. Working from home is the new normal but whilst it saves hours in the day in commuting to work and between client meetings, it brings with it a number of challenges.

General

However, tempting it is to roll out of bed in your pyjamas and straight onto your computer, maintaining a routine is really important, both psychologically and physiologically. You need to keep your circadian rhythm intact and functioning as normal.

- Aim for 7-8 hours sleep between 10.30pm - 8.00am.
- Set an alarm and get up at the same time every morning.
- Go to bed at a reasonable time each night.
- Get dressed – casual clothes are fine, just differentiate between day and night.
- Eat regular meals – again it maintains your regular circadian rhythm.
- Differentiate between work and home.
- Don't feel obliged to eat lunch with your partner / children. You wouldn't normally and it's ok to maintain that.

Isolation

This is going to be a problem and in particular for any of us who live alone or care for elderly or vulnerable relatives. With social outlets and leisure activities shut, mental health is going to be a significant issue generally. To aid staying connected:

- Regular phone calls to give everyone a chance to speak to someone / someone different.
- Video calls in place of phone calls to increase face-to-face connection.
- Meetings by Zoom – clients and teams.
- Virtual, 'drinks' using Zoom.
- If you struggle to focus on work and find yourself easily distracted at home arrange a 'focus mate' who will touch in online with you regularly throughout the working day and you keep each other focused.
- Schedule check-ins with a colleague or team mate to help stick to goals and deadlines as well as maintaining support.

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Anxiety

Most people will experience anxiety over the coming months and for many, they will experience very high levels of anxiety which can interfere with:

- Sleep.
- Appetite.
- Concentration.
- Focus.
- Productivity.
- Mood.
- Health.

There are many ways to manage anxiety and some take more explanation than can be given here, but the basic strategies are as follows:

- Check the news to stay in touch with developments (which are fast moving presently) but not constantly... or just once a day if you don't need to be totally up-to-date for clients.
- If checking the news makes you anxious do it at the end of your working day so that it doesn't interfere with your work.
- Talk to family, friends, colleagues and share your worries.
- Do not withdraw – this can feel the natural thing to do, but it makes anxiety worse, so do the opposite.
- It's easy to get lost in your head and thoughts. Giving yourself discrete, focused tasks where possible of a reasonably short duration help to manage this.
- Build as much social contact into your life as possible.
- Reduce your focus to the things in your life that are within your control and try only to control those.
- Accept that much is out of your control and you can do nothing about it other than tolerate the uncertainty and discomfort.
- Challenge yourself by asking whether the worrying can change an outcome – if so, effect that change. If it doesn't, be rigorous and tell your mind to STOP! The worry is not helpful.
- Build exercise into your schedule, wherever you are.
- Make sure you eat healthily.
- Prioritise sleep – sleep deprivation causes anxiety and makes already present anxiety worse.
- Allocate a certain time in your day to think through your worries, with a limited duration. Then metaphorically lock them in a box.
- Keep up with hobbies wherever possible.
- Do dinners with friends over Zoom / FaceTime. Be compassionate to yourself, your family, friends and colleagues. These are tough times and everyone will struggle at some point. It's natural and normal.

I'm well aware these techniques are often easier said than done, but if you can do them they really do help.

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Conflict at home

Going to work provides a useful outlet for stress due to home life as well as a source of focus and an identity. Working from home can lead to a loss of identity and the demands on people to do chores, make meals or look after children can lead to a reduction in the ability to focus on work and increased demands on time. Relationships can become increasingly strained and conflict frequent. To help with this:

- If you have a room that can become a home office, set it up as such and use it for work.
- If not, find a designated end of the table or space in the house that you can use as your work space.
- Differentiate between work space and home space.
- Be clear about the hours you will work.
- Be clear about what help you'll be able to offer with children / chores during working hours as well as outside of working hours.
- Avoid working in busy communal areas of the house.

Looking after children

This is a job in itself and if you are now working from home as well as looking after children you will need to be more flexible in your approach to work than previously.

Most of the guidelines above apply here:

- If you have a partner at home then divide the childcare between you so that you have designated working hours and childcare hours.
- Collaborate with colleagues where possible to manage expectations.
- You can't be parent, teacher, nanny and professional all at once so use TV / iPads where necessary and don't beat yourself up about it.
- Use Audible stories for kids (free whilst no school).

For all of these issues, having support resources available, with family, friends and colleagues is essential at this time.

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