

Tips to Survive and Thrive Working from Home during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Routines, we take them for granted. At times, we resent them. We take vacations to break our routine. Despite our love/hate relationship with routines, they organize our days and actually contribute to our overall sense of control as well as emotional and physical wellbeing.

Work is perhaps the most defining routine in an adult's daily life. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unprecedented disruption and uncertainty into our lives by forcing countless employees to telework from home. As we all settle into telework from home, new routines that contribute to both wellbeing and productivity must be established.

Here are tips for working well at home.

Set a Daily Schedule. Don't put away your alarm clock. You may not be commuting but maintaining a personal schedule is key. Get up at your "regular" time, partition the day, beginning, and ending the day just as you might when *going* to work. Setting and keeping a schedule contributes to a sense of order, normalcy, and personal control while managing uncertainty.¹ Let others at home know your schedule so they understand that days at home are not unstructured days of vacation. Discuss with members of your household your new schedule. Explain how certain times of day you are not likely to be available even in plain sight – clearly communicate your scheduled work hours so that everyone understands that even though you are home, you are also at work.

Maintain Your Personal & Professional Self. Maintaining a routine of personal care is not just about physical health, it is about creating a structure that gives you a sense of control in a time of uncertainty – get up, make your bed and get dressed and prepared as you normally would for work. But remember, while you may not be commuting to work, you are working. What you typically wear at work is your unspoken uniform representing your professional self. Dressing appropriately is not just for appearances on videoconferences, but to remind yourself that you have objectives to achieve that day.

Define a Workspace. Working at home does not mean that you should choose your favorite comfy chair or take up the kitchen table with your projects putting your work at the center of the lives of your family. Moreover, there may be others in the household now having to work at home. Physical space, and the professional space necessary to have a videoconference, a spirited phone call or to spread out paperwork may be at a premium at home. Reach a consensus defining workspaces – your *office* at home. It may be a corner, a side table, or for

¹ Bandura, A. (1982). The self and mechanisms of agency. *Psychological perspectives on the self*, 1, 3-39.

some, a separate room. And, when your workday is done, close the door, or leave that corner of your home, making a clear delineation between work at home and living at home. This is not just to moderate interruptions from young children, it is to establish boundaries between the professional you and the family you. Even without the anxiety caused by COVID-19, research suggests that working from home often results in higher levels of work-family conflict contributing to stress, emotional fatigue, and unhappiness.²

Set Daily Work Objectives. Flexible work is not just about working from home, for many, it means newfound freedom to set work objectives. However, that freedom demands structure to feel in control. Research suggests that our level of life satisfaction and reducing burnout is often correlated to what we can achieve daily, not in the long-term, but everyday.³ If there were regular staff meetings at work, begin conducting routine virtual meetings from home. Keep meetings going at the appointed times, on video, on calls, but establish a new routine even if the mode of communication has changed.

Switch Off. Everyone is worried about both their physical and economic wellbeing. Employees, small business owners, even those responsible for divisions of large enterprises are feeling a loss of control and economic viability. That said, it is important that working from home does not mean 24/7 work. Switching off and ensuring adequate downtime is critical not just to your own mental and physical wellbeing but to maintaining healthy relationships with your partner, spouse, and children.^{4 5}

Reach Out and See Someone, Virtually. Humans are social beings. Voice communication from home conveys interaction, but not complete communication. Research indicates that connection and communion is primarily through body language. Estimates suggest that the total impact of a message is about 7% verbal (words) and 38% vocal (e.g., tone of voice, inflection) and a full 55% nonverbal, such as facial expressions.⁶ While video is a poor substitute for being truly present, seeing another person's facial expression, or seeing a group of people together, helps to keep you fully engaged. And, as countless young people know, videoconferencing is not just for work, it is for friends as well. Having a virtual cup of coffee, dinner, or ongoing commentary on a sports event helps bring connection to isolation. Moreover, using video may compel you to clean up, dress up, and get up online.

Eat, But Eat Healthy. Telecommuting or telework was introduced decades ago to introduce new work schedule flexibility and to address traffic congestion.⁷ Although working from home may reduce time in traffic on certain days, it also increases waistlines. Studies indicate that working at home promotes us to grazing – after all the refrigerator is always there.⁸ Instead of

² Song, Y., & Gao, J. (2018). Does telework stress employees out? A study on working at home and subjective well-being for wage/salary workers. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 1-20.

³ Barros, A. S. S. (2017). Subjective Well-being (Sb) and Burnout Syndrome (BnS): Correlational Analysis Teleworkers Education Sector. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 237, 1012-1018.

⁴ Cooper, C. L., & Lu, L. (2019). Excessive availability for work: Good or bad? Charting underlying motivations and searching for game-changers. *Human Resource Management Review*, 29(4), 100682.

⁵ Dugan, A. G., & Barnes-Farrell, J. L. (2017). Time for self-care: Downtime recovery as a buffer of work and home/family time pressures. *Journal of occupational and environmental medicine*, 59(4), e46-e56.

⁶ Mehrabian, A. (1971). *Silent messages* (Vol. 8, No. 152, p. 30). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

⁷ Tajalli, M., & Hajbabaie, A. (2017). On the relationships between commuting mode choice and public health. *Journal of Transport & Health*, 4, 267-277.

⁸ Laguipo, A. (2016). Working from home can sabotage your health: Ways telecommuting can make you ill. Tech Times, 4 January.

grabbing a salad on the go at work, many grab a full sandwich and leftovers from dinner the night before. Rather than the usual so-so cup of office coffee to snap afternoon fatigue, at home you grab leftover brownies and a soda. Eating well at home, combined with regular exercise, is critical to physical health as well as reducing anxiety in the face of COVID-19.

Move, Move Often. Social distancing and working from home can make it easier to be sedentary. You also are less likely to have the ergonomic set up for work that you may have at the office. Make a point of standing and moving when you can. For example, stand during phone calls, and walk around, if possible. If you have a fitness tracker, set it to prod you to get up and move at least once 30 minutes. While an exercise is crucial to health, it is important to also recognize the need to move continually throughout the day. And, try to do more than move – exercise. Vigorous exercise is not just good for you physically but vitally important to managing stress and anxiety



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