

WORKING FROM HOME DURING COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic and its far-reaching implications continue to unfold, it is natural to be worried and sometimes have negative feelings as a response to the rapid changes to our way of life in terms of work, social gatherings and restrictions.

Although these feelings can be unpleasant or uncomfortable, they are a signal from our brain to be alert, make a plan and respond quickly to threats.

The tips and exercises below will help you manage the emotional and physical impacts of stress, anxiety and uncertainty that you might be feeling during this time.

Remember, these feelings are normal

It's normal for people to experience a wide range of thoughts, feelings and reactions including:

- Feeling stressed or overwhelmed
- Anxiety, worry, or fear including racing thoughts
- Sadness, tearfulness, loss of interest in usually enjoyable activities
- Physical symptoms, such as increased heart rate, stomach upset, fatigue
- Frustration, irritability, or anger, restlessness or agitation
- Feeling helpless, difficulty concentration or sleeping and feeling disconnected from others
- Difficulty concentrating or trouble sleeping and relaxing
- Apprehension about going to public spaces

Working from home

In response to the uncertainties presented by COVID-19 and the government mandated lockdown, working from home has become a necessity for many companies.

The challenges being faced by workers, managers and businesses alike are as follows:

- 1. Lack of face to face supervision**
- 2. Lack of access to information**
- 3. Social isolation**
- 4. Distractions at home**

The unknown of the pandemic is particularly difficult. Things won't always be this way.

We need to try and keep things in perspective and say to ourselves out loud, "this is a temporary state".

Lack of Face to Face Supervision

Managers and employees often have concerns regarding the lack of face-to-face interaction.

Managers worry that employees will not work as hard or efficiently from home and employees struggle with reduced access to managerial support and communication.

Employees sometimes feel that remote managers are out of touch with their needs and so in turn are not supportive or helpful in getting their own work done.

Lack of Access to Information

Employees new to remote work are often surprised by how much more time and effort it takes to locate information from co-workers.

Getting answers to what seem like simple questions can feel difficult to a worker based at home. That's before you add in the complexity of remote-access IT systems and teething problems for new procedures or processes.



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Social Isolation

Loneliness is a common issue with remote work, with employees missing the informal social interaction of an office setting.

It is natural that extroverts may seem to suffer from isolation more in the short run, however over longer periods, isolation can cause any employee to feel less 'a part of' or 'belonging to' their organisation, including for people who identify as introverts.

The important social bonding and informal collaboration that is often achieved during office socialising needs to be supported elsewhere too. This is a two-way street that benefits workers and the business alike, and when suddenly people are unable to socialise, the impact can be felt across the organisation.

Distractions at home

Even in normal circumstances, family and home demands can impinge on remote work, but distractions are expected to be greater during this unplanned Working From Home situation, and workers will need to be supported as they make the unexpected leap into a radically new way of working.

For some, the opportunity to work from home is exciting; not having to commute or having your boss standing over your shoulder may be an appealing benefit of a COVID-19 lockdown.

Others could feel intimidated, especially those who have children staying home from school, because of the distractions at home or unfamiliarity of working remotely. This could be especially difficult for workers who live in a small apartment or in share-accommodation, for example. For some, going to work might have been the main way for them to get out of a difficult situation at home.

With the right mindset however, Working From Home is possible. The tips in this document will help you make sure that you're successful, both at getting your work done and at maintaining your mental well-being.

Get Dressed

This sounds simple, but it's crucial. It might be tempting to stay in your pyjamas all day, but getting dressed for work in the morning sends a clear signal that the day has begun.

If you don't keep this simple routine from your normal workday it can blur the lines between home and work to the point where you're slower to get started and less productive.

If working from home is something you're only doing temporarily during a COVID-lockdown, you don't want to abandon your routines and make it harder to return to normal.

Designate a work space

Try to keep your work and home lives separate as it can easily become blurry when you are working from home. If you aren't able to fully disconnect from work, your productivity for work will be affected and your home life can suffer as well.

Ensure you have plenty of good, natural lighting, are free from distractions or household foot traffic, and use ergonomic furniture that 'feels' as much like sitting down to work as the real thing. If your work is normally done at a PC, use a full size monitor, keyboard and mouse at home too.

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Keep clearly defined work hours

You need to be clear about when you are working and when you are not.

You will get the best work done if you stick with your regular hours if possible and being on the same schedule as your coworkers makes everything a lot easier.

If you find yourself putting in extra hours because you don't have anything else to do or you're tempted to keep working on something until it is finished, talk to your family or housemates about setting firm times for household activities, like a firm dinner time or going to buy groceries.

By doing this at the end of each day, you will protect your mental health in the short term, but also make it easier to return to normal.

Minimise Distractions

Distraction is one of the biggest challenges that people working from home face, especially ones who aren't used to it.

You probably take breaks throughout the day at the office, which is important at home too, but try not to use this as an opportunity to clean out a cupboard or do anything else that takes a lot of sustained focus. This is a time for you to take a break and prepare yourself to do more work in a more energised frame of mind.

Communicate with others in your home in order to establish boundaries so you can minimise distractions during the workday and afterwards you can disconnect to give the people you care about your full attention.

Communicate

It's normal for there to be some bumps in the road when you suddenly go remote. Communication here is the key. Come up with a plan that lays out the expectations from all sides as to how often you should check in and how you will be communication with each other concerning work.

The plan is likely to change along the way and that is okay too. Reach out to the same people you normally would turn to for help even when not in the same building as them.

Try not to only stick to text-based or email communication, especially if you would normally have spoken to that co-worker face to face while at the office. Checking in via phone or video chat will cut down on miscommunication and break up some of the social isolation that can come from working from home.

Still socialise

When you are suddenly working from home you are cut off from a lot of casual social interactions you used to have throughout the day that would break up the monotony of work.

If you normally ask your co-workers about their weekend, continue to do this. These types of interactions go a long way. Schedule morning calls or video conferences to make space for the usual small talk and carve out time for other check-ins throughout the day. Don't just chat about a project or a TV show you're watching, really check in with each other.

Many people are feeling anxious and uncertain at the moment, and being stuck at home can amplify this.

Get some exercise

Try to get exercise and fresh air if you can find it. If you are accustomed to a daily commute to and from the office environment, you may be used to a little walking or cycling, so where possible try to keep this in your daily routine. It's important that working from home doesn't mean you become sedentary or inactive.

WORKING THROUGH THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19

Managing a team working from home

As a manager or team leader you may have suddenly found yourself managing a remote team because of a COVID-19 lockdown. This can be daunting, especially with the lack of time to prepare and if it's the first time you have experienced it.

Set yourself up for success by:

1. Having a daily check-in

Whenever possible this should be one-on-one if your employees work more independently from each other or a team check in if their work is highly collaborative. If possible, it should be conducted face-to-face via video conference and done regularly. Phone conversations and email can only go so far and it is good for your team to see one another and for you to see each of them.

2. Communicate a lot

Regular communication with your team is vital. One of the hardest things about transitioning to a working from home environment, especially when you are used to an office environment, is the sense of loneliness and isolation that can set in.

Be open in order to maintain good lines of communication. It takes effort to be on the same page all the time so it is best to err on the side of over-communication and is why you should reinforce the message that you are always contactable.

Maintaining transparency through a crisis with frequent updates is the ultimate expression of good faith, empathy and genuine concern for your team.

3. Offer encouragement and emotional support

It is important in this abrupt shift to remote work that managers acknowledge stress, listen to employees' anxieties and concerns, and empathise with their struggles.

Ask how they are doing especially if you notice an employee struggling but not communicating.

Even asking 'how is this remote work situation going for you so far' can give you information you might not otherwise hear. Listen carefully to their response and allow it to be the focus of the conversation.

4. Gauge stress, and engagement levels

Make it clear to your team members that your main concern is their well-being. Take the time to monitor their engagement by periodically asking them on a scale of zero to 10 to rate their level of stress they are currently feeling. Do the same with their level of overall engagement. Your intuitive sense of the employee may be wrong, so it helps to get such responses.

5. Be flexible, empathetic, trustful and patient

Understand that in the current environment your team has a lot going on. While this isn't an excuse for not getting things done, it is a reason to recognise what productivity means.

Regular work hours are probably difficult for many people so instead trust your team, give them freedom and flexibility to get the work done on schedule. This will help them be the most productive.

Empathy in team management is about collaboration and working side-by-side with the ability to place yourself in the shoes of another in order to have success in teamwork.

Having a concrete plan is a must and building trust is essential.

WORKING THROUGH THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19

Mindfulness and Meditation

Mindfulness is the ability to maintain a real-time, moment by moment awareness of our thoughts and emotions, our body's reaction to stress and the environment, and an overall awareness of our health and mental health.

This helps us to focus on the present moment, and avoid being preoccupied with past events or fears for the future. By concentrating on the things and people around us and the present moment, we will reduce stress and improve our outlook on the world.

There are a lot of great free apps you can use to guide you through breathing techniques and meditation that can help ease your anxiety and clear your mind of anxious thoughts.

Also, trying yoga as a way to relax and as gentle exercise can boost your mood.

Meditation Example

Find a place where you can sit quietly and undisturbed for a few moments. To begin, you might want to set a timer for about 10 minutes, but after some experience you should not be too concerned about the length of time you spend meditating.

Begin by bringing your attention to the present moment by noticing your breathing. Pay attention to your breath as it enters and then leaves your body.

Before long, your mind will begin to wander, pulling you out of the present moment. That's ok.

Notice your thoughts and feelings as if you are an outside observer watching what's happening in your brain. Take note, and allow yourself to return to your breathing.

Sometimes you might feel frustrated or bored. That's fine-these are just a few more feelings to notice. Your mind might start to plan a weekend, or worry about responsibility.

Notice where your thoughts are going, and accept what's happening.

Whenever you are able to, return your concentration to your breathing.

Continue this process until your timer rings, or until you are ready to be done.

Body Scan

During the *Body Scan* exercise you will pay close attention to physical sensations throughout your body.

The goal isn't to change or relax your body, but instead to notice and become more aware of it. Don't worry too much about how long you practice, but do move slowly.

Begin by paying attention to the sensations in your feet. Notice any sensations such as warmth, coolness, pressure, pain, or a breeze moving over your skin.

Slowly move up your body-to your calves, thighs, pelvis, stomach, chest, back, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, neck, and finally your head. Spend some time on each of these body parts, just noticing the sensations.

After you travel up your body, begin to move back down, through each body part, until you reach your feet again.

Remember: move slowly, and just pay attention.



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Mindfulness and Meditation

Five Senses Exercise

Use this exercise to quickly ground yourself in the present when you only have a moment. The goal is to notice something that you are experiencing through each of your senses.

What are 5 things you can see?

Look around you and notice 5 things you hadn't noticed before. Maybe a pattern on a wall, light reflecting from a surface, or a knick-knack.

What are 4 things you can feel?

Maybe you can feel the pressure of your feet on the floor, your shirt resting on your shoulders, or the temperature on your skin. Pick up an object and notice its texture.

What are 3 things you can hear?

Notice all the background sounds you had been filtering out, such as an air-conditioning, birds chirping, or cars on a distant street.

What are 2 things you can smell?

Maybe you can smell flowers, coffee, or freshly cut grass. It doesn't have to be a nice smell either: maybe there's an overflowing rubbish bin or road fumes.

What is 1 thing you can taste?

Pop a piece of gum in your mouth, sip a drink, eat a snack if you have one, or simply notice how your mouth tastes. 'Taste' the air to see how it feels on your tongue.

The numbers for each sense are only a guideline. Feel free to do more or less of each. Try the exercise while doing an activity like washing dishes, listening to music, or going for a walk.

It's okay to reach out for help

We often tell ourselves things like, *"I feel sad, but I shouldn't feel that; other people have it worse"*.

We can and we should stop at the first feeling: *"I feel sad."*

Your work is to feel your sadness, fear and anger. Fighting it doesn't help because your body is producing the feeling. If we allow the feelings to happen, they'll happen in an orderly way, and it empowers us.

Verbalise what you are feeling. It's okay to tell co-workers that you are having a hard time. It's okay to tell your loved one that you cried last night. It's important that we acknowledge what we are going through and articulate it to others.

What Hunterlink can do

We know it can be a daunting process to pick up the phone when you are already in distress, but please know that we are here for you 24/7 with our fully qualified and registered counsellors ready to help you anytime of the day or night.

We provide **confidential** telephone or face-to-face support sessions, as well as access to these services for immediate family members.

Remember, you don't have to be in a crisis situation to contact Hunterlink.

