Aspect Mental Health

BEYOND AWARENESS

Staying Mentally Healthy While Working From Home

As many Australians and people around the world are now working from home, we have to make a more conscious effort to stay physically and mentally well under quite different circumstances.

The new normal

For many modern professionals, occasionally working from home is common practice. Yet during the current unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic for most of us, working from home every day will be a completely new experience.

There are definite pros and cons to working remotely. In the office environment our well-meaning colleagues can often be a distraction, disrupting our productivity. Many of us can relate to the unhelpful impact of a "quick question" posed by a colleague which pulls us out of the task we were focusing on. The positive effects of socialising at work are that we feel a sense of connection, are able to bounce ideas off others and have small, necessary breaks throughout the day.

The novelty of this new way of working will wear off quickly and if we are not careful cabin fever will set in. So here are some practical tips for maintaining good mental and physical health while working from home:

Stick to a routine

The mental association you make between work and being in an office can make you more productive, and there's no reason that this should be lost when working remotely. When working from home, do all the things you would usually do as part of your morning ritual: Set your alarm, make a tea or coffee, and wear nice clothes. Although working in your PJs may be tempting it's important to stick to helpful patterns that your brain usually associates with getting ready to work, in the long term you will be more productive and feel better.
To stay on schedule, segment what you'll do and when over the course of the day. Try to set up any meetings for first thing in the morning, this minimises the temptation

for a sleep-in and gets the day started in a productive way. Utilise your calendar to create personal events and reminders that tell you when to shift gears and start on new tasks.

Set up a dedicated workspace

Just because you're not working at an office doesn't mean you can't, well, have an office. Rather than cooping yourself up in your room or on the couch - spaces that your brain associates with leisure time - dedicate a specific room or surface in your home to work. Make sure that this space is set up well for you to work comfortably (e.g. a good chair, your computer screen at the right height, natural light if possible) to minimise fatigue and muscle pain at the end of the day. Many great tips for office ergonomics can be found online.

Get up and move

It can be so easy to get "in the zone" when working in isolation, that you forget to have breaks altogether. Don't let the guilt of working in the building you sleep in prevent you from taking time to relax. Rather than watching the news on COVID-19 or spending time on social media, use your breaks to move and get away from your desk. Stand up and stretch, go for a walk outside (if permitted) or spend time with others who might also be in the house.

Stay connected

Working from home might help you focus on your work in the short term, but it can also make you feel cut off the rest of your team and organisation. Instant messaging and videoconferencing tools can make it easy to check in with co-workers and remind you how your work is contributing to the big picture. Research has shown that social isolation and loneliness can be a significant risk

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(continued)

factor leading to mental health issues. So maintaining a sense of connection and belonging will be vital. If you are feeling overwhelmed or lonely, share your concerns and how you are feeling with a friend or family member.

Invest in healthy habits

Try to eat healthy well-balanced meals, drink water, exercise regularly, and get plenty of sleep. Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. During periods of high stress we are more likely to gravitate towards our 'quick fix' coping mechanisms but these are not always the most helpful. Although things like comfort food and alcohol may offer short term relief, they also increase the risk of weight gain, health issues, monetary problems and are actually more likely to increase rather than decrease our levels of cortisol, a key hormone involved in our physical stress response.

Reach out early and communicate

If you are struggling, make sure to talk about your experiences and feelings with loved ones and friends. Also ask your employer what supports they have in place for those who are struggling with their mental health during these challenging times. Talking to a Counsellor or Psychologist can be incredibly helpful, as they can provide practical tools on reducing stress and building resilience.

Find out more

📄 Tip sheet 15 – Supporting Your Team Remotely

📄 Tip sheet 16 – Take the Panic out of Pandemic