



Mental health and wellbeing when you work from home

In these unprecedented times, we are having to alter the way we live, work, and play for the good of our collective health and safety. One of these key changes is the move to working from home. For many of us, this is a new way of working, and adjusting could have an impact on our mental health.

It's not uncommon to feel additional stress – despite the removal of known stressors, like a commute to work. Also, the isolation of remote working can add its own pressures. Working from home can turn normally optimistic, productive workers into tired, unmotivated, irritable ones. Before hitting rock bottom, learn how to spot the signs of declining mental health so you can address it in a timely way.

What are the Psychological Effects of Working from Home?

Here are the three most commonly reported issues that remote workers and digital nomads face:

LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

Remote working could mean days without talking to others – either at work or in passing on your commute. Although you bypass distracting coworkers, you do miss the social aspect of chatting and venting about work and life when you're remote. This colleague interaction doesn't always translate the same way over digital mediums. This disconnectivity from your coworkers and the rest of the world may make you feel lonely and isolated.

ANXIETY, STRESS, AND PRESSURE

When working from home, anxiety takes on many forms, including: pressure to be busy 24/7. Some may feel the need to find work, squeezing in activity whenever you can. But, without time to disconnect and unplug, you risk burning out. The boundary between work and home life blurs for people who work in the same place they sleep. You may feel pressure to be on when you should be off. You may experience stress. Working from home requires time management, IT troubleshooting, higher levels of organisation in less convenient settings, and much more. Switching between these hats multiple times a day will wear out anyone.

DEPRESSION

Depression can happen when you feel stuck and unable to see progress. Without the usual markers of success experiences in the office, such as recognition, instant verbal recognition, and the ability to see how your work fits into a bigger picture, you may not feel as if you're achieving as much as your peers. The anxiety, stress, and loneliness of working from home can lead to depression or exacerbate a pre-existing condition.

Depression isn't just feeling down. US healthcare organisation 'The Mayo Clinic' says symptoms of depression include:

- Angry outbursts, irritability, or frustration (even over small matters).
- Loss of interest or happiness in activities such as sex or hobbies.
- Sleep disturbances, including insomnia and sleeping too much.
- Tiredness and lack of energy, making even small tasks take extra effort.
- Increased cravings for food.
- Anxiety, agitation, and restlessness.
- Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions, and remembering things.
- Unexplained physical problems, such as back pain or headaches.

The good news is there are ways to mitigate a negative impact on your mental health related to working from home.

How to Take Care of Your Mental Health When You Work From Home

Taking care of your mental health is just as important as physical activity and eating nourishing food. First, it's okay not to be okay. Honour exactly where you are, wherever that may be. Second, know that it's in your power to enjoy a positive mindset by making a few adjustments:

CREATE A ROUTINE AND STICK TO THE SCHEDULE

Over 40% of people say their flexible schedule is the best part of working remotely – but it's how you organise those hours in your day that makes all the difference. Do you have a daily schedule or set routine to follow?

When you organise your tasks and outline your goals, you mentally prepare yourself for what to expect during the day. Then it's easier to work towards achieving the goals you set out, rather than vaguely meandering towards them. This scheduling also prevents tasks not on your to-do list – particularly distracting ones – from creeping into your day.

It's important to schedule analogue breaks. Set aside time to escape all forms of digital screens. Give your eyes, neck, shoulders, and back a much-needed rest! Schedule fun activities just like work tasks. All work and no play stresses all remote workers out. When you have scheduled time for fun, you have permission to break from work. Focus on hobbies, self-care, and anything else that makes you happy for a few minutes every day.

UPGRADE YOUR HOME OFFICE

You may be working from home, but do you actually like working in your home office? If you don't have a dedicated workspace, make that priority number one. Bonus points if you have an office with a door you can close to mentally and physically separate work and home life.

Next, outfit your home office to support comfort and productivity. Where possible, obtain the following:

- Wide desk. Support for your wrists, arms, and elbows will keep carpal tunnel away while you use your mouse and keyboard.
- Comfortable, ergonomic chair that supports your back. Long work hours require a supportive chair for your back, neck, and spine. Look for strong lumbar support for the curve of your lower back.

- Quality sound system (and other creature comforts). Without coworkers to annoy, you can blast your music playlists and get in the zone. Get a wireless mouse and keyboard for the ultimate tether-free work life.

GET UP AND MOVE!

Fight the urge to stay sedentary and schedule active time to get your heart pumping. Go for a walk (whilst practicing social distancing), stretch or do yoga, practice a hip-hop dance video on YouTube – whatever works for you. Exercising 20 to 30 minutes daily can significantly lower anxiety levels. You'll also boost endorphins and serotonin to flood your brain with happiness. Plus, working out distracts your brain from work issues and challenges allowing you to actually take a break.

GET OUT IN THE GARDEN

Ecotherapy treats anxiety, stress, and depression with time in nature. Studies show outdoor walks may help lower blood pressure and stress hormones. Dr. Jason Strauss from Harvard-affiliated Cambridge Health Alliance says: "Having something pleasant to focus on like trees and greenery helps distract your mind from negative thinking, so your thoughts become less filled with worry." Try exercising in nature to accomplish two tasks in one trek.

WORK AROUND OTHER HUMANS (VIRTUALLY)

Get out of your home office and venture into virtual society to interact with other people. You'll combat feelings of isolation and loneliness. Plus, studies show that ambient noise may boost creative thinking.

MAKE TIME FOR YOUR FAVORITE PEOPLE

Support from your peers is just as effective as cognitive behaviour therapy when you're down. Carve out time each week to spend with your core group of friends and family members who lift you up.

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