

How to work productively from home during lockdown

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Has the COVID-19 lockdown forced you to work from home? Social isolation impacts on everyone's wellbeing and mental health. This is particularly true for everyone from adult workers, adolescents and young learners who were previously used to spending a substantial part of their day in the company of others. Virtual interactions are no replacement for spending time in the company of others face to face, however they can help to maintain some balance and keep up one's spirits. Here are some of the tips I found researching on the topic to stay happy, healthy and productive.

Working from home is not so enjoyable. As the world adjusts to the coronavirus pandemic, one of the biggest changes is enforced home working. Staying motivated, retaining work-life balance and video conference etiquette are just some of the challenges. But science is here to help.

Even before quarantines and social distancing measures became the norm, researchers debated what remote working does to your mental health and productivity. So we conference-called leading psychologists to ask them how best to thrive in the shadow of COVID-19.

1. Organise and minimise your inbox

Spend 15 minutes deleting and filing emails. You'll be amazed at how much you can lighten your inbox in a small amount of time. For bonus points, do this every day for a full week.

1. Dress for the job you still have

Fashion doesn't really exist when the world is on lockdown, but psychologists recommend you get dressed for work rather than joining those video calls in your PJs. More than just keeping up appearances, it helps to put your brain in work mode.

In a 2012 paper in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, researchers use the term "enclothed cognition" to describe the way that clothes can affect the wearer's behaviour. In the study, participants who wore a white lab coat performed better in tests of their attention, for example.

Dress as though you're going to the office, and you might find your attention improves. If you would normally wear a shirt to work, wear one in the home office too. "Get dressed in the morning, make yourself feel like you're going to work," says Professor Cary Cooper, an occupational psychologist at Manchester Business School. "But be comfortable."

Don't skip the shower, either. There's bracing evidence to suggest that a cold shower can boost your mood and attention.

1. Structure Your Day Like Normal

Routine and structure are crucial to making the quarantine period tolerable, and that starts with your sleep. Resist the urge to hit the snooze button. In what was described as the largest sleep study ever conducted, researchers at Canada's Western University found that oversleeping can dampen your cognitive function just like sleep deprivation can.

“Research shows that keeping routines, but with some variation – having different exercises and tasks at different times – is really important,” says Jo Daniels, a clinical psychologist at the University of Bath.

Do something positive with the time you saved from your commute, such as cooking a healthy lunch or going for a jog.

Then work according to your own circadian rhythms. “Structure your workload depending on whether you're an owl or a lark,” says Cooper. “Do the most important work when you feel most energised, unless it has to be done before. If you're a slow starter, doing menial tasks first and important tasks later is maybe the way to go.”

You can also create a more effective list of priorities by making a weekly to-do list, rather than a daily one – the truly important jobs will jump straight out at you.

1. Protect your mental health

As if a lethal pandemic wasn't enough to trigger anxiety and depression, research suggests that remote workers can also be prone to bouts of poor mental health. A UN report in 2017 found that remote workers are more likely to experience high stress levels than office workers: emails are misinterpreted, work bleeds into family life and remote workers often clock more hours.

As well as switching off the laptop at the end of the day, make sure you do pleasurable activities for mood elevation, says Daniels. “If you feel yourself becoming anxious, switch to exercise, reading, listening to podcasts, creative pursuits, intellectual pursuits.”

Also take this time to catch up with friends and family and get to know them like never before. “It's important that we stay in touch with people but also that it's not just a touch-base focus on the coronavirus. Actually show interest in the other person,” Daniels says.

She adds that if you suffer acute moments of panic or anxiety, practising breathing techniques can help, as can talking about your emotions. Otherwise, try to look for the benefits of being at home. “For me, I don't have to travel miles to work every day and that's great.”

1. Create boundaries

Do what you can to physically separate your working space from your living space, especially if you have kids at home. Even the shortest distraction can kill your productivity. Research at Michigan State

University found that a three-second interruption can double the number of mistakes you make in your work as your attention gets dragged away to something else.

Don't have kids? Then self-isolate from that other great dependant: your phone. A study at the University of Southern Maine found that when testing complex tasks, the mere presence of the experimenter's phone (not the participants') was enough to distract people and lead to lower scores in the test.

Stepping away from tasks occasionally is a good idea, though. "Get away from the computer but keep a pad and pen with you," says Carter.

Research at Indiana University found that longhand writing improves creativity and problem solving, while journaling is said to be an effective way to stretch your attention span.

1. Sit near a window

The field of environmental psychology, which explores our relationship with our immediate surroundings, has lots to teach us about being stuck indoors and creating an office in the home.

"The first thing to think about is where to sit," says Lily Bernheimer, director of Space Works Consulting. She refers to a concept known as 'refuge and prospect', which says that humans are more comfortable sat with our backs to the wall and a view of the door or window. "We believe that we evolved to prefer these settings because these factors could have contributed to our survival by being the safest places we could be."

A view of nature through the window can reduce your blood pressure © Getty Images

A view of trees or even a picture of scenery on your wall can help. "If you can find a room with a view of any kind of nature then this has the ability to reduce blood pressure and the circulation of stress hormones, and it increases the capacity for directed attention, which is the ability to focus."

1. Arrange a meeting (or three)

A commonly told joke at the start of the pandemic said that one thing the coronavirus would teach us is whether all those meetings could have been emails after all. Excess meetings may have been a bugbear of the pre-COVID-19 workplace but right now, they're essential. And not just for much-needed human contact, Cooper says.

"The individual manager's role is suddenly more important than ever before," he says. "Reassure, motivate and make your team feel secure. Don't just email people. You have to do it eyeball to eyeball."

Use technology like Skype, Slack and Zoom, especially when problems arise. Cooper says this will minimise misinterpretations and prevent time-wasting chains of emails that devour your day.

It might also make your team more effective. A study in the Journal of Organizational Behavior found that teams who met regularly for debriefs produced more innovative solutions to problems. Appoint somebody to lead the meeting, review recent work and brainstorm ways of improving.

1. Work out to work well

In 2019, the Journal of Human Sport and Exercise reported on a 12-week exercise programme conducted in a Greek prison. In line with all the existing evidence, it found that participating inmates felt a greater sense of self-esteem and quality of life than those who didn't take part.

Even low-intensity activity can boost your energy levels. Now that COVID-19 has us all confined to our homes, we should all be doing the same as those Greek prisoners. Because as well as the health benefits and the regular dose of serotonin, getting a sweat on can also improve your work.

Researchers at the University of Georgia found that even low-intensity exercise can boost your energy levels, making you better able to face your to-do list. Follow YouTube videos or apps and mix your workouts between cardio, bodyweight exercises and yoga.

1. Combat loneliness

“Remember we're social animals,” says Dr Angela Carter, associate fellow at the British Psychological Society. “Part of the reason we go to work is that we love being with other people.”

Nobody should take the threat of loneliness lightly during the pandemic because it can lead to poor mental and physical health in other areas.

Petting your pets and face-timing your family are no-brainers, but don't forget about your colleagues, too. “Using virtual spaces to meet up is really good,” says Professor Pamela Qualter, a specialist in loneliness research at the University of Manchester. “But there is a temptation to use those just for work meetings.”

1. Learn something new

Work is likely to slow down for many people during the pandemic but this in itself can create an opportunity. “Think about what else you can do during this period to develop another line to your work,” says Cooper. “Maybe an IT course, maybe a language, do something to keep yourself cognitively active. You might never get this kind of window to learn something again. Use it.”

As well as bolstering your long-term employability, lifelong learning is proven to improve happiness as well as cognitive traits like memory. And the literature is full of tips to help you learn more effectively.

One of the most important is to rest after acquiring new information. This seems to allow your memory to consolidate what you've just learned. And a 2019 study in the journal Current Biology found that even taking regular 10-second breaks while you're learning can improve your ability to pick up new

skills.

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