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## How to improve your mental health while working from home

The first lockdown in March 2020 made working from home a part of millions of people's lives overnight. Nearly two years later and many businesses have adapted a hybrid approach where home-working is the norm. However, this new way of working can take a toll on your mental health, especially when lone working is a stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of a hectic office environment. Let's look at how you can improve your mental health while working from home.

### In what ways has working from home affected mental health?

Employers and their employees were forced to adapt to unfamiliar ways of working in a very short space of time last year. There is now an ongoing debate as to whether [working from home](#) or the office is more beneficial for [employees' well-being](#).

The [Royal Society for Public Health \(RSPH\)](#) found that home-working is having an impact on people's mental health, with 67% saying they felt less connected to their colleagues and 56% saying they found it harder to switch off.

Their research also discovered women were more likely to experience worse mental health than men, as were those living with housemates as opposed to alone or with a partner.

In summary, the most common health and well-being impacts of home-working were feeling less connected with colleagues, taking less exercise, developing musculoskeletal problems (as 1 in 4 people work from a bedroom or sofa), and having [disturbed sleep](#).

Jason O'Callaghan is a psychologist and clinical hypnotherapist, and he says the shift to home-working has also caused an increase in [anxiety](#) levels:

"The new [COVID-19](#) world has seen more people working from home for the first time. This has led to social isolation and increased anxiety in those who are more socially dependent than others. This is especially the case for people living alone or those moving from working in a big city to their home in a small town."

## In what ways might working from home have improved mental health?

Despite the challenges working from home can bring, the RSPH found that the vast majority of people didn't want to go back to [working in an office full-time](#). Nearly three quarters of people (74%) said that they wanted to split their time between the home and office.

O'Callaghan says those who are more introverted seem to prefer [working from home](#), as he highlights some of the mental and practical benefits of home-working:

- Reduced stress.
- Less travel.
- More childcare flexibility.
- More time to exercise.
- Healthier diet when cooking at home.
- Longer sleep.
- Less office politics, leading to reduced anxiety.
- Stronger relationships with family members.
- Flexible hours.
- Increased productivity.

Home-working also allows for a personalised working environment. This means (providing they have the space and equipment) employees can create an environment that is stress-free, quiet, is relaxed and allows them to work to the best of their ability. This is particularly important for employees with [chronic health conditions](#) or disabilities, as home-working allows for flexible hours and feeling more comfortable.

## Ways to stay mentally healthy working from home

O'Callaghan says the key to self-care while working from home is to observe five key points:

1. Sleep.
2. Diet.
3. Exercise.
4. Work/life balance.
5. Communication with friends/family.

"You should look at your life like a pie chart, and ensure each slice represents each of these things evenly. When these aspects of your life are balanced, you can achieve optimum performance at work, and also enjoy a stress-free personal life."

Other ways to practise self-care to protect your mental health while working from home include:

### Set boundaries

"One of the most powerful ways in which you can manage and improve your mental health while working from home is to set effective boundaries," says Ryan Hodgson, a health and lifestyle coach.

He says these can be physical, professional and emotional boundaries, all of which help you draw the line between your home and work life, and allow for balance.

### Physical boundaries

- Designating a space in your house to work from.
- Closing your laptop when you've finished for the day.
- Turning off notifications.
- Setting your phone to silent.

### **Professional boundaries**

- Defining your 'office hours' and not interacting with clients or colleagues beyond them.
- Learning how to say 'no' to favours that go beyond your role.
- Adapting the ways you want to communicate with people (email, chat, or phone).
- Making it clear where the scope of your role and your responsibilities end.
- Keeping work and personal phones separate.

### **Mental and emotional boundaries**

- Drawing a line between your professional brand and your personal, private self.
- Setting limits on what you're willing to share in a work context and what needs to remain private.
- Understanding who are your closest and most trusted friends.

### **Remain sociable**

"Working from home can become very lonely, very quickly, so if your role doesn't involve much communication with others throughout the day, schedule in time to have conversations. This needn't be with a colleague; it can also be with a friend or family member to ensure you aren't completely isolated. This gives you a chance to check in on one another and reduces the likelihood of you feeling anxious next time you have to leave the house for a social gathering," says Hodgson.

### **Take breaks**

It's very easy for the lines to become blurred when you work from home and you might have to work from your dining table - the same place where you'll be eating your evening meal a few hours later. It can also be tempting to shorten your lunch break or work late into the night to get things done. However, breaks are just as important - if not more so - while working from home.

You should schedule in screen breaks to reduce your risk of eye damage and [repetitive strain injury](#), and use this time to get some fresh air. If you struggle to force yourself to take breaks, it's a good idea to schedule them in on your calendar so you'll receive a notification when it's time to grab a coffee or head for a walk around the block.

### **Keep communications open**

It's easy to cut yourself off unintentionally while working alone at home, so it's important to remain connected to your colleagues. Set up group chats to communicate throughout the day where you can either discuss work-related topics or simply boost each other's morale, and schedule video calls for weekly catch-ups.

You should also maintain an open line of communication with your manager so they know how you are getting on - not just in a professional capacity, but mentally and emotionally too. When your employer is aware of any struggles you're facing, they can help.

### **Replicate your working day**

The lack of routine when [working from home](#) can be a major contributing factor to depression and low levels of motivation. You should therefore try to replicate an office day at home so you still have structure. For example, if you would usually have to commute to the office, go out for a 10-minute walk before you start work to clear your head and switch on your working mindset. As tempting as it can be to work in pyjamas when the only thing colleagues can see are your shoulders on a Zoom call, you should also try to get dressed into work clothes.

Hodgson says this has just as much of a mental benefit as a physical one, as it helps you feel like you're mentally getting in and out of work mode at the start and end of the day, maintaining the work/life balance.

# What can employers do to ensure their staff have good mental health while working from home?

O'Callaghan stresses the importance of company wellness, and how employers have a duty of care to their staff, as the RSPH found that only a third of the workers it surveyed had been offered support with their mental health (34%) from their employer.

"This doesn't just mean offering perks such as massages, spa days and company events, but also regular check-ins on a daily basis with staff. It's important to schedule in one-to-one meetings so employees have a safe space to open up about anything they are struggling with, and to ask for advice. There should also be frequent opportunities in place for colleagues to mix face-to-face to reduce loneliness, as well as access to counselling and other mental health resources." says O'Callaghan.

Windy Tshepiso Maledu is a behavioural scientist who focuses on mental health, and she highlights the necessity for every employee to feel visible in their work environment.

"One of the biggest challenges in a virtual workplace is offering everyone the opportunity to feel seen and heard. It can also be difficult to maintain team morale and allow each person's unique characteristics and personality traits to shine through. To keep people engaged in their jobs, it is vital that employers encourage open communication and empower people to make their own decisions about how they do their work.

"Forcing people to return to the office, or micromanaging outputs are not effective tools for retaining workers, and it will only lead to a dip in their mental well-being. Quality of leadership can make or break a business, so managers have a responsibility to listen to their employees, as well as create an open dialogue about how to move forward post-pandemic, always being willing to make adjustments as the situation evolves. There needs to be full transparency across all levels of the workplace so people feel able to express their concerns."

# Where can you find support for your mental health while working from home?

If you are struggling with your mental health at work, you should contact your GP who may refer you for therapy or prescribe [antidepressants](#) or anti-anxiety medication if necessary. Alternatively, you can [refer yourself for NHS counselling](#) through the IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) service if you live in England.

O'Callaghan also recommends free apps and services which, while they are not a replacement for professional support, can offer meditation and [mindfulness](#) or even [hypnotherapy](#). This can help [reduce your stress levels](#) and switch off at the end of a working day.

You should also keep in constant communication with your employer so they can make adjustments to your working day to benefit your mental health. This might include adjusting your hours, decreasing your workload, or offering workplace counselling.

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