HOW TO STAY SANE WHILST WORKING FROM HOME DURING COVID19

> I have been working from home for 14 years, with the last 8 years being full time at home. The first 6 were part time at home and part time in the office, which gave me a good opportunity to compare the two environments. This document is a collection of tips and suggestions that I have collected. Some from personal experience, and others from other people who work from home.

It is important to note that permanent "working from home" is not the same thing as "Working from home during a pandemic". There are added differences, such as home schooling, and reduced out of hours opportunities, so not all tips from people who normally work from home will be applicable to your situation. For example, there is less incentive to invest time and money in your work environment if it is temporary and you expect to return to the office before too long. You might not go and buy an expensive chair and desk, but there might be smaller things you can do to improve your environment.

There is no "one size fits all" solution. Different strategies will work for different people, but hopefully there will be something here to inspire you to find a solution that works for you.

SELF-AWARENESS AND CONTEXT

Everyone is unique. What kind of person are you? Are you an introvert? An extrovert? Do you like being in a busy hub, or being alone?

Are you stressed? Are you tired? Are you distracted? Are you frustrated? Are you grumpy? Are you lonely? are you overworked? Are you bored? Whatever it is be aware of it and acknowledge it.

What are your normal work duties? Are they different at home compared to in the office? There are often additional changes other than just your location. Are these changes a factor in your happiness/unhappiness?

NATE'S WORKING FROM HOME TIPS

WORK ENVIRONMENT

If you have other people and distractions in the house, if possible, find a room with a door that can be closed, at least during meetings. Not everyone has that luxury though. Some people have set up temporary offices in their garage just for meetings where they need to get away from the noise in the house, though it is likely too cold to spend the entire time there.

Let in natural light where possible. It helps your body clock, and alertness. Also consider using a program like f.lux to automatically adjust your screen brightness based on the time of day.

Get comfortable. Use a good chair, mouse, and keyboard, and try to limit the amount of work you do from the couch. If you are uncomfortable it will be difficult to be productive, or worse you could get a strain or a bad back. Even a small niggle adds to stress, and you might have to fit in trips to the physio.

FOOD

Don't forget to eat. Without others around you stopping for lunch, it can be easy not to notice the time. Try making an appointment in your calendar for lunch so you get a popup at the time.

Don't eat too much. It can be easy to graze through-out the day. Make sure you stop for decent healthy meals.

Consider cooking something at lunchtime. It's time away from your computer screen., and if there are other people in the house it can be a good time for a chat.

COMMUNICATION

Tone is hard in text. I try to always be polite in my emails, texts, and instant messages. And I always assume the best in what other people write. Even if it might come across blunt or hash that doesn't mean that's how they meant it. If you think you've been misunderstood don't

be afraid to ask for a call if you think your message will be easier to convey with speech. It's nice to turn on video too if you have the bandwidth to help reduce the sense of isolation, and it allows you to pick up on some non-verbal communication.

For some people video conferencing is subconsciously treated as "not real". Partly this is to do with all the sound coming from one direction, and you're looking at a two-dimensional image on a screen. Your brain tells you it's just a picture, or a movie. It can also be, for people who have not used video conferencing much before, that they are just not used to it. This can lead to "virtual" meetings being much more tiring for these people than physical meetings. This improves with time and exposure, but it might be helpful to make sure you're in the frame of mind that these are real people, you're not watching a movie.

Everyone should try to mute themselves in group calls when they're not talking if there is background noise. Even if it's not bad enough to causing difficulties understanding people unwanted background noise can irritate people and make meetings more tiring.

Try to regularly check for emails and respond to texts and messages as promptly as possible, even if it's to say "give me 5 minutes". People can't walk up to your desk so this is their only way of getting your attention, and they can't tell if you're in the middle of something.

If you find yourself being too distracted by emails to get a solid block of work done, for me I have an inbox filter to move emails that are only cc'd to me to a separate folder, which works well. Then I only check the cc folder when I'm not in the middle of something.

Check you have access on your phone to email and any other communication platforms. If your home internet goes down you need to way to stay in contact.

WORKING IN A TEAM

A daily 5-10 minute catchup "meeting" is a good way to keep everyone connected and in the loop. *(My experience is working in teams of 5-15 people. This won't be practical if you're in a larger team, or not relevant if you're not in a team).* It involves 30 seconds for each person on what's been completed and what they plan to work on next.

This is to make sure you are all aware of what each other are doing, to stay updated with progress, and know if any issues have popped up that you should be aware of.

It is NOT about justifying your time. If you haven't made any progress since yesterday's meeting it should be fine to say that without judgement. It's okay to say you have "Nothing to report".

Ideally you are working toward a common goal, and knowing what your teammates are doing helps with this.

While people are arriving at the meeting this can be "water cooler" chat time but try to discourage lateness. Better to start without people than have the length drag out waiting for people.

Be helpful. If someone has an issue I can help them with, I take the time to do a call and screen share to help solve it. It does take some time out of my day, but it usually pays off in the long run, and solving a problem is good for the self-esteem. Helping others can give you a sense of value, and a feeling of being appreciated. Likewise, expressing your appreciation for others can help them, and helps share the load. I am aware that not all workplaces have a culture of generosity and acknowledging appreciation. Maybe if you start it might catch on?

POSITIVE THINKING

Earlier we mentioned being aware of what problem you have, but it is just as important to be aware of the positives. What do you like? What is working well?

You can also be conscious of your point of view. Can you turn a perceived weakness into a perceived strength?

Maybe home schooling is distracting, but are get gaining a deeper relationship with them?

You don't have the routine of commuting, what do you gain with that saved time? Are you not dealing with bad drivers? Can you use the time to do something else you enjoy?

Take some time out from focussing on your own problems to build up other people. Thank someone. Share your appreciation with someone. Help them out if you can. As well as putting you in a more positive frame of mind, it often comes back around later when you need it. And it provides more opportunities for communication and socialisation.

MANAGING YOUR TIME

There can be a tendency to overwork. There's no "end of the workday" when you physically leave.

There can also be a perception of less trust of remote workers from management. You can feel like you need to accomplish more to prove to your boss you've been working.

Consider the little things that you'd normally do at the office as part of your workday. Take a toilet break, stretch your legs, make a coffee, wash your coffee cup, wash the other dishes that people were too lazy to do themselves, take the odd personal call or answer an email.

Even if you don't need to log your work hours officially it can be helpful for your own information, particularly if you're prone to overworking. Even just a week can give you insight into your working habits.

Factor in time to be the office manager of your home office. You don't have someone to do the cleaning, make sure there's paper in the printer, provide snacks, etc...

SOCIALISING

Would you normally have lunch with your co-workers? Or gather in the kitchen while you make a hot drink? You can't do this anymore, so be on the lookout for other opportunities during the day for a chat. Where off topic chatter would be discouraged in in-person meetings, we can be a bit flexible when it comes to remote working.

ROUTINE

Consider routines that can help you switch on and switch off at the start and end of the day. Some people go for a run. Some people stick to their normal routine of showering and dressing as if they are going into the office. Find what works for you.

If you have a tight schedule, consider ways to streamline your day. For example, it might be helpful to pre-prepare your lunch, so you don't have to think about it when lunch time rolls around.

Switching off at the end of the working day could involve shutting down the laptop, signing out of messaging apps on mobile and changing emails on mobile to manual refresh only.

DISTRACTIONS

This can go both ways. Some people will enjoy not having the distractions of the office and become more productive. Others might have a more distracting home, especially if there are kids home schooling or such.

Being "professional" doesn't have to mean shutting out your home life, so long as people are conscious of other people's situations. Generally, people are very understanding and appreciate the authenticity. We are humans, not machines, and we should treat each other as such. We all have life going on around us. Virtual backgrounds might make sense if you have meetings with clients, but I don't use one for internal meetings.

It can be a balancing act as to whether it is better to deal with distractions straight away, or deal with the stress of trying to suppress them. To give a contrived example, If you're in the middle of something and a smoke detector starts beeping every 10 minutes (battery going flat), how much will it distract and annoy you while you finish what you're doing? Or do you just accept a loss of focus and step away to replace the battery? This applies to working in the office too by the way, but the distractions are different.

DISTRACTIONS (CHILDREN)

Disclaimer: I have no experience here. The following comments are gleaned from conversations with colleagues who have children.

Invest in some noise cancelling headphones.

If a young child is generally better in the morning and requires less attention, try to have meetings planned during that time as opposed to the afternoon. And nap time = my quick lunch break before smashing out some emails before they wake up.

Work calls/meetings are briefly discussed before the day with the spouse so that they know who's on the phone and when.

It's always important to take some time out of the day to go outside (in spite of Melbourne's winter wonderland) to play with the child. Even if it's within a make shift playground in the garage which consists of a step up ladder, yoga mat, random balls, cones, chalk and a skipping rope. This can sometimes be an opportunity to exercise as well while they're playing which is just as important for the mental health as it is for the physical.

CONCLUSION

As I said at the start, there is no "one size fits all" solution. You will need to find what works for you. Hopefully some of these tips are of benefit, spark an idea, or at least help you be more aware of your situation and options.

Finally, be kind to yourself. Reach out to friends if you need to. We might be stuck at home, but we're not alone.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- https://wpielearning.com.au/courses/covid-aware-and-self-care-workshop/
  WPI have produced 3 facilitator led workshops which are excellent. In total, the 3 take 50 minutes to watch. The first one is about being covid safe which we should all know, but the second one is about specifically working from home and the third one is about managing our mental health.

- https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au/
  Beyond Blue has a great website set up with lots of COVID related information. One page to note in particular is Managing my Daily Life.

- https://raisingchildren.net.au/
  The Australian Parenting Website (supported by the Department of Social Services). Includes the Coronavirus (COVID-19): family guide with tips to help you and your family cope.

- https://hanselminutes.simplecast.com/episodes/guide-to-remote-work-with-courtney-nash-ko8ag_EE
  A podcast interviewing Courtney Nash from Holloway, publishers of The Holloway Guide to Remote Work.