

## COVID-19: How to reduce stress and maintain a work-life balance while working from home

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The Mental Health Foundation's 2018 [Stress: Are we coping?](#) report found that 74% of people in the UK have at some point felt overwhelmed and unable to cope with stress. How people react to stress is unpredictable and unique. It can negatively affect an individual's physical and psychological health as well as their efficiency and effectiveness. If not dealt with, stress can lead to ill health, burnout and in some cases, psychological and physiological issues.

The CIPD's annual [Good Work Index](#) report shows that as the COVID-19 crisis was about to hit the UK, the impact of work on mental wellbeing was already a cause for concern. The survey of more than 6,000 workers found that the number of people saying work has a positive impact on their mental health had fallen from 44% to 35%. Of those who'd experienced anxiety in the last year, 69% said their job was a contributing factor. Of those who'd experienced depression, 58% said the same was true.

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, it was easier to distinguish work-related stress from personal stress. Now that many employees are working from home, the boundaries are more blurred. Employers need to recognise the additional stress individuals are under. The CIPD's [Health and Well-being at Work](#) report shows that mental ill health is the major cause of long-term absence from work. Considering the risk of COVID-19, it is important that employers support individuals as much as possible to manage their stress levels.

### **The impact of rapid change**

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the significant change of pace, stress has increased for many people. The CIPD's [Good Work Index](#) snapshot survey, carried

out following the COVID-19 outbreak, confirms this. Forty-three per cent of workers with a mental health condition and 29% of those with anxiety said the pandemic has contributed to or worsened their condition.

Change in itself can cause stress as it introduces a variety of uncertainty. The level of uncertainty that individuals are facing due to COVID-19 has increased substantially.

COVID-19 has brought about very rapid change giving us little time to adjust. It was less than a week from announcement to realisation of the closure of schools and lockdown. This in itself causes a lot of stress and emotional turmoil.

### **Lack of control**

An important COVID-19 related stressor is the limited control we have over our environments and lives. In a few days, we lost control over:

- how we work
- how we shop
- how we exercise
- how we socialise
- how we keep in contact
- how we learn
- how our children learn.

For many the changes have been even more fundamental, having sadly lost loved ones, jobs and homes.

Many of us are trying to juggle working from home in environments that are not necessarily 'fit for purpose'. Due to the fast pace of change, many employees were asked to work from home without the necessary health and safety risk assessments or the right equipment.

Working from home has led many people to rely on new technologies, including communication tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. As the CIPD's report [People and machines: from hype to reality](#) highlights, these technologies can allow us to work much more effectively. However, when we rely on them and encounter glitches or unintended consequences they can become a real stressor.

During this particularly challenging time, many of us are trying to home school our children, shop for vulnerable family or friends, and at the same time, attempt to rediscover a feeling of 'control' over our lives. This may be an unachievable task and can cause high levels of stress. We should be careful not to set ourselves impossible targets, as this will build on stress levels and reinforce feelings of failure and guilt. Employers and people managers should be mindful of the expectations they place on employees, maintain regular communication to check how they are coping and provide health and wellbeing support wherever possible.

Research has indicated that the feeling of being out of control or overwhelmed significantly impacts our levels of stress. The opposite is also true: trying to gain some level of control can relieve stress. Knowing how to manage the factors that can cause stress is key to staying healthy during the COVID-19 outbreak.

## **Tips for managing stress when working from home**

### **1. Recognise your priorities**

Recognise that we are all individuals. What causes your neighbour or colleague stress may have no impact on you. How you react to a stressor depends on various elements which are unique to the individual, such as a person's ability to cope, situation-based pressures, availability of resources and their level of proficiency. The first step in avoiding stress is to recognise your reaction to stressors, for example, noise at home, internet connectivity problems, lack of exercise.

You must identify what is important to you during these unprecedented times and prioritise that. This will vary, depending on your unique circumstances and approach to life. It is fine if your list is different from that of your colleague, or your partner or friend. You can gain control by being clear with yourself on your top priorities

## **2. Figure out how to work around others in your household**

If you're working from home and have to juggle other responsibilities that don't normally interfere with your ability to work, such as caring responsibilities, looking after pets or sharing your workspace with housemates, attempt to organise your work where possible to fit around the elements you can control. If you have young children, they have their needs, and the compromise will have to come from you. If you have to write a report, for example, choose a time that works around them, such as first thing in the morning, before they get up, or in the evening when in bed. If you have to attend meetings, try, where possible, to give your child/children a task to focus on in a different room or space in the house.

## **3. Streamline your work responsibilities**

Many friends have shared their frustration that their workloads have increased significantly as a result of COVID-19. Suddenly, meetings are set up with people you never met with before. We are bombarded with COVID-19 related changes; emails, meetings, phone calls, WhatsApp messages. You need to prioritise which are essential meetings to attend and which are duplications. Do you need the same update from the CEO, the operations director and your line manager? Is this an efficient use of your time? If you attended the meeting, do you also need to read the three different email streams that follow? Do you need to respond to an email, or is it merely an update?

## **4. Manage your work platforms**

This is perhaps one of the most common contributors to stress and anxiety, and one which is completely within your control. Now that many of us are working from home, there are multiple ways we are communicating with work colleagues. The days of

email and face-to-face meetings are a distant memory. Many of us are juggling multiple chat functions – Yammer, WhatsApp work groups, Microsoft Teams – in addition to email, meetings and actually doing our jobs. It's no wonder many of us feel overwhelmed. Don't let yourself be ruled by constant updates on WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, and the endless schedules of Zoom meetings etc., as this leads to FOMO and anxiety. Instead, choose what you need to be involved with and limit what you engage with accordingly.

## **5. Build exercise into your routine**

It isn't news that exercise boosts not only our immune systems, but also our mental health, which can reduce stress. With fitness centres closed, you don't have to stop exercise. Simply adapt how you do this. Go for socially distanced runs or bike rides with your housemates, or dust off your old tennis rackets and play a game in a local park. If you have children, exercise together. This can be as easy as kicking a ball around or going for a walk within government guidelines. This way all the family's needs are met when it comes to exercise. Exercise can also be a great opportunity to get a break from the home environment. If you are not able to easily access outdoor space to enjoy exercise, there are many TV programmes or games that encourage exercise in a fun way.

## **6. Eat healthily**

With lockdown restrictions in place, meal preparation and any tidying up that follows can feel overwhelming and never-ending. The compromise when rushed or busy is often to opt for convenience meals, which tend to have higher fat and salt content. Staying healthy is critical during a pandemic and healthy eating can have both physical and mental health benefits. Share food preparation duties with other members of your household where possible. If you have children, it is an opportunity to keep them busy while learning an important life skill. Using these interventions will share the workload, keep children learning and be rewarding when a nice meal is prepared.

## **7. Shop smart**

Doing the grocery shopping has in itself become stressful. Masks, gloves, social distancing, one-way systems, hand gel... it is a miracle just to remember the credit card. To limit the infection risk, we all try to minimise our exposure outside of the home. Online shopping directly from a supermarket, although a great solution for saving time and limiting infection risk, has become very difficult to secure. Consider other options such as food boxes with fresh ingredients and recipes pre-ordered and delivered to your doorstep. This allows for an element of control and security. There are equally many other providers that deliver fresh produce, including meat, fresh fruit and vegetables, afternoon tea, cakes and even locally-brewed alcohol. All of these services can save you time and limit risk. If you have no choice and have to brave the supermarket, use it as a time for yourself. A break from home and work can have a positive impact if you use it as some downtime from the norm.

## **8. Make time for relaxation**

During this period of sizable change, it's vital to build in time for self-care. You can combine relaxation with exercise, such as going for a bike ride or a walk at the end of the working day. A change of scenery is good for and will aid with a better night's sleep.

If you have children, although it may be tempting to relax their routine, you could agree to an extended bedtime that has minimal impact, such as 30 minutes, that still allows you time to relax. This could be a win-win solution for all the family. The children will feel special due to an extended bedtime, which you could perhaps trade off for tidying their room or a bit of school work. After bedtime, you get some time to do whatever you constitute as relaxation.

## **9. Manage your household**

Managing the household has become more challenging for us all. Whether we live in flat shares, have children, pets or look after elderly relatives, navigating cleaning responsibilities will no doubt come with a whole host of challenges. It's important to remember that in an office environment, you would never work non-stop. You have breaks, which may consist of corridor conversations or going for coffee with a

colleague. Use breaks at home to do one thing, such as putting on washing and make sure the cleaning responsibilities are shared equally among your household. If you're used to returning home to a clean house at the end of the working day, this will have inevitably changed. Be kind to yourself. This is a unique situation, and in time, things will return to normal. There is no reason to be regimented and stressed about how clean your house is. If you have children, engage in fun activities throughout the day that help to break up the monotony of chores, study and work. Refrain from having the news on all day long, and save any adult conversations relating to the news and COVID-19 until after bedtime. Children of any age are extremely perceptive and will pick up on their parents' anxiety, fear and tension.

## **10. Ease anxiety around home schooling**

Home schooling is causing a lot of stress for parents. The anxiety can be overwhelming when you are working from home as well.

We don't have to follow old-fashioned routines of writing out timetables to keep children learning. Children are inquisitive and learn constantly. Engage in some fun learning activities. Playing board games such as Monopoly or Scrabble all allow for learning. Watch documentaries. You can create many experiments with household products, grow seeds in the garden, and learn about cause and effect in far more enjoyable ways than following a worksheet. Kids learn fast, and they will catch up.

### **Let go of the guilt**

Guilt is one of the most destructive emotions and negatively impacts our wellbeing and mental health. Be realistic in what you want to achieve. We don't know what the future holds, so don't waste your energy worrying about elements beyond your control. Give yourself a break and focus on what you can control within your environment.