



Working from Home

Stress, Anxiety and how to manage it.

As a nation, we are facing one of our greatest challenges and as individuals we have been thrown into uncharted waters without a life vest, or at least that may be how it feels. We are in the midst of having to navigate a new way of life and adapt on a scale that we have not experienced before. This, understandably, brings a new set of pressures, fear and anxiety as we are facing the unknown.

“the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown”

Of course, we all respond differently to fear and stress based on several things such as; our learned responses, our genetics, our social support, our life experience, our health, our mindset and perceptions. When we don't have all of the information our brains tend to fill in the gaps to try and determine the level of threat. This can, of course, increase unhelpful thoughts and make us feel more worried.

Not only are we having to manage these feelings of stress and anxiety, we are also having to adapt to a new way of working. However, as humans we have an amazing ability to adapt - to be resilient. The definition of resilience is:

“The capacity to remain flexible in our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours when faced by a life disruption or extended periods of pressure, so that we emerge from difficulty stronger, wiser and more able” (Pemberton, C 2015).

So, what can we do help ease the stress and how can we make the most of working from home to ensure we remain mentally, physically and emotionally well?

Below are some tips on how to maintain wellbeing and build resilience in these turbulent times.



► **BREATHE**

Allow yourself time to accept and process what it is going on. Accept that you will need to adjust and that it won't be perfect overnight. Find a moment of calm – keep yourself grounded. Give yourself permission to have some downtime and relax. Mindfulness, meditation and being outside are all great ways to do this. This will enable you to think more rationally, clearly and logically as well as reducing the feelings of anxiety.

► **CONTROL WHAT YOU CAN**

Our world has become unpredictable and uncertain impacting on our daily lives. This can cause people to feel out of control and helpless meaning they are less able to seek out opportunities or want to take action. Creating predictability and order when and where you can gives you a sense of control. Create some internal order by tackling simpler tasks first such as finding or creating a comfortable and tidy workspace. Organise folders and filing both paper and digital. Even making the bed in the morning, getting up and dressed as you usually would and writing a to do list can help bring a sense of order.

► **ENVIRONMENT**

Our environment has a significant impact on how we feel so where possible, designate a space in your home that is only for work and make this as comfortable as possible. If you already have an office space, keep it de-cluttered and free from distractions. This will help you to think more clearly and be less likely to procrastinate. One of the hardest things about working from home is the distractions such as the washing, the tidying, cooking etc. As much as possible, remove these from your eyeline so you can focus more on the task at hand. You may be having to create a makeshift workspace at the dining room table, in your bedroom or on your sofa. If this is the case, make sure you still go through the process of switching off the laptop and tidying 'work' away at the end of the day to keep the balance between working and home life.

▶ **MAKE A SCHEDULE**

Routine and structure are a great way to ease feelings of anxiety. Structure provides a sense of control amidst the chaos and allow you to feel more grounded and present in the moment. Make a schedule that allows for time to also self-care and know that everyone's schedule will be different depending on their individual circumstances i.e. including home schooling. You can set your schedule to suit you whether that is chunking into mornings and afternoons or by hours.

▶ **HAVE A DAILY ROUTINE**

As best you can, go to bed at the same time and get up a reasonable time. The temptation can be to stay up later and get up later as the structure of going to a workplace has been removed. Get up, showered and dressed for work as you usually would. Eat breakfast and prepare for your day. Maintaining a routine will help keep a sense of normalcy in an otherwise unknown situation.

▶ **SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES**

Whilst working from home you may need to adapt to new technology such as video calling but utilise the systems and processes you already have in place. For example, keep team meetings at the same time. Having systems, processes and a schedule in place will increase the feelings of structure and certainty allowing you to enable more rational and logical thinking. It is when under stress that we become more distracted and make poorer judged decisions.

▶ **CHANGE THE GOAL POSTS**

Some of the goals you previously set may not be relevant now and now might be the time to focus on smaller details rather than the bigger picture. This may involve being clear with teams what these goals are. Move the goalposts and set yourself smaller, achievable tasks with clear actionable steps. Feeling like you have accomplished even a small task will keep you feeling motivated and you moving forwards. Feeling you still have purpose in your work is a key contributor to positive emotional wellbeing.

▶ **REWARD YOURSELF AND GIVE PRAISE**

Working from home somewhat removes the feelings of comradery and teamwork and the gains may not be as acknowledged or celebrated. Now, more than ever, it is so important to recognise the wins and celebrate the gains, no matter how small. Find those moments of joy and opportunities to be grateful. Pat yourself on the back for a job well done and praise colleagues too. On a personal level, schedule things to look forward to reward yourself for achievements. Doing these things releases the feel-good neurotransmitter dopamine which boosts mood and motivation.

▶ **SUPPORT OTHERS**

Acknowledge that everyone is in this situation together and they will all be coping and feeling differently. Ensure regular check ins with your team. If you're feeling lonely then reach out and talk to others - pick up the phone and Facetime/call/email someone else. Working from home takes some getting used to and can feel quite lonely and isolating at times. Fortunately, we live in a world where it is possible to stay connected, even if not physically. Physical distancing does not have to mean being socially isolated. Connecting with others releases oxytocin which makes us feel good and helps us bond more. These are the biggest buffers against stress and build resilience.

▶ **TAKE REGULAR BREAKS**

The temptation can be to sit at your computer all day and not take breaks. Conversely, for those of you home schooling as well, you might get distracted with other things and again not take a proper break. Allocate yourself time in the day for coffee/tea/water breaks and also a lunch break. Get up from your workspace and go into a different environment, stretch your legs and move around. This allows your brain and mind to slow down and calibrate. Where you can, get outside and get some fresh air.

▶ **FUEL YOUR BODY**

Stay hydrated and eat well. Without the usual cues from a workplace, it can be easy to 'forget' to get up and get water or to go and eat lunch. Ensure you drink plenty of fluids and nourish your body with food. Food is both fuel and medicine and whilst it might be tempting to sit and just eat snacks or reach for the unhealthier options, try not to. Processed foods and foods high in sugar and saturated fats are also known as 'bad mood foods' as they decrease energy levels.

▶ **MOVE YOUR BODY**

As much as you can, keep your body moving. You may not be able to fit a full exercise class into your schedule but stay active. Gentle movements such as stretching and walking are enough or you could get up and dance to some music releasing feel good hormones. When you move your body, you are taking action which helps get out of your mind. Physical activity boosts mood and is proven to reduce feelings of depression and anxiety.

▶ **REFLECT**

In times of stress and uncertainty, tensions run higher and fuses become shorter. Whilst understandable, it is important to pay attention to those triggers and stress responses. Take time to notice how you feel and accept that you will have ups, downs, good days and bad days. As with any process, check it, measure it and adapt it if necessary. Focus on what you have got rather than what you haven't. What strategies do you already have in place and what could you do differently?