



Working Remotely and Mental Health

Remote working has been shown to provide tangible employee benefits including flexible scheduling, increased employee morale, and reduced commuting stress. However, teleworking can present unique challenges to employees, most notably, feeling social and professional isolation.¹⁻² This resource provides practical tips for working remotely to both optimize performance and mental wellbeing.

What you can do to help stay productive and mentally healthy.

- **Stick to a Schedule:** One of the advantages of working at an office is the defined schedule that comes with it. Consistency provides a sense of stability, especially in times of uncertainty. Changes to the work schedule can disrupt productivity and cause feelings of stress. To increase productivity, set a schedule and consistently stick to it.
- **Set up your workspace:** Consistency in workspace can also help boost productivity. Make sure to set up your workspace in a quiet area with limited distractions. If you live in a loud area or have pets, it may help to invest in noise-canceling headphones.
- **Stay connected:** It can be difficult to maintain relationships with colleagues and feel engaged when working remotely. To help prevent these feelings, stay connected by using technology like facetime, skype, google hangout and other video-based options. Humans are social creatures that use vision as a primary sense, relying on both verbal and non-verbal cues to understand others and to be understood. This is particularly important for teams with high diversity since body language plays a key role in communication in many different ethnicities and cultures.
- **Make time to refresh:** Set aside times to step away from your desk and work area to take a walk, get some fresh air, meditate, or just take some deep breaths. MIT Lecturer Robert Pozen in his book *Extreme Productivity: Boost Your Results, Reduce Your Hours*, suggests taking a time-out every 75-90 minutes of work to refresh your cognitive energy for optimizing your ability to focus and learn.³⁻⁴

What managers can do to support employee mental health and wellbeing.

As more companies move to accommodate remote working, it becomes increasingly important for managers and staff to establish and maintain regular communication.

- **Maximize engagement:** There is a lot of uncertainty when managing employees from a distance. Set expectations early and develop set times for both meetings and regular one-on-one employee check-ins. In meetings, managers should serve as moderators and facilitate participation and encourage employee-to-employee interactions. Seek opinions and involve employees in decisions that affect them and their work. Inspire your team by taking a few minutes to recognize accomplishments and give praise for good work.
- **Invest in video conference tools to stay connected:** Video conferencing tools enable us to be more attentive to our team's needs. Since over 50% of communication is through non-verbal cues, virtual tools can help to minimize miscommunication and allow teams to connect "face-to-face."

- **Understand the impact of remote working on social isolation and loneliness:** Since working remotely can cause some people to feel isolated, managers should routinely check-in with employees. These one-on-one meetings should focus on offering encouragement, assessing feelings of team/project involvement and engagement, discussing concerns, and giving feedback. Managers should consider asking three key questions: 1) How are you? 2) How are you managing working remotely? 3) What can I do better as a manager to support you? These questions help facilitate rapport, reinforce the employee's personal value, and demonstrate your empathy and sincere concern for them as a person.
- **Don't be afraid to ask if you notice differences in behavior or work product:** Be mindful of any significant changes in an employee's personality or work product because it could be a sign that something more is wrong. If you are unsure, just ask, "I noticed that you haven't been yourself lately. Is everything okay?" Ask twice as most people fall back onto automated social norms ("Yes" or "I'm fine"). Asking the second time demonstrates sincere concern.
- **Know your benefits:** Contact your human resources department to find out what type of behavioral health support your organization offers (e.g. through employee assistance programs or other vendors) and how employees can contact them. Be sure to communicate these benefits and resources to your team every month to keep their health top of mind.

References

1. Center for Workplace Mental Health. Working Remotely During COVID-19. <http://workplacementalhealth.org/Employer-Resources/Working-Remotely-During-COVID-19>
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3. Pozen RC, et al. (2012). Extreme Productivity: Boost Your Results, Reduce Your Hours. Harper Business.
4. Pozen RC, et al. (2011). Managing Yourself: Extreme Productivity. Harvard Business Review.

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