

How to Handle the Stress of Working From Homeⁱ

While working from home can provide an amazing sense of freedom and flexibility as well as a no-cost commute, there are pitfalls and hidden stressors to be aware of. By focusing on what you can do to mitigate this stress, you can enjoy the added benefits of a work-from-home situation without the added stress. This is a great step toward achieving an ideal work-life balance.

Research on Stress and Working From Home

In fact, in this study of 15 countries, including the US, UK, Japan, India, Brazil, Argentina, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden, it was discovered that 41 percent of "highly mobile" employees (those who more often worked from home) considered themselves highly stressed as well, compared to only 25 percent of those who worked only on-site.

This news may come as a shock to many people who may consider a work-from-home lifestyle to be one that's less stressful and marked with more personal freedom.

Part of this stress experienced by those highly mobile workers may be due to the fact that those who work from home face a host of challenges that are unique to this particular setup.

- However, a significant part of this stress is due to higher use of mobile devices, which is perhaps unsurprising in light of other research that connects higher levels of stress to the habit of constantly checking one's phone. Interestingly, there are several factors associated with working from home that both increase and decrease stress.

It is true that most people love the flexibility that comes with working from home: getting up and going to sleep at times that are dictated more by one's personal body clock and tastes can be wonderfully liberating. It can also get out of hand and feel stressful, however, to be free from the structure that once felt confining.

Likewise with the freedom from dealing with obnoxious co-workers. While most people may enjoy having the freedom to choose who they interact with each day (and love to avoid listening to office gossip, complaints, and politics), they may be surprised by the isolation they feel when their interactions aren't automatic and they need to put in an effort to see anyone at all.

Many of these factors may balance each other out stress-wise, but the recent UN study suggests that the increased reliance on mobile devices may push the work-from-home crowd over the edge into higher-stress territory.

- A higher reliance on smartphones and laptops is associated with higher stress levels in addition to greater social isolation and even insomnia, both of which are conversely linked with greater stress.

These experiences may come as a surprise to someone who is new to working at home, but they are commonly experienced. They are also common sources of stress. Here's more on these and other widespread sources of stress for those who live where they work, have zero commute time, and may not realize that they are not alone in the surprising sources of stress they face.

What Is Stressful About Working From Home?

Most people are surprised by the stress they feel once the novelty of working from home wears off and the stress of its challenges becomes more apparent. While these stressors may not be the same as long commute times, toxic co-worker interactions, or the feeling of never being alone, they still take a toll. Here are some of the common sources of stress that many work-at-homers face.

Mobile devices.

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Lack of Structure

Feeling a lack of boundaries on when you need to start working (and stop!), when you need to get up and go to sleep, when to log off of social media, and more can feel like true liberation. This feeling, however, can gradually morph into a feeling of being out of control for many who don't expect it.

Flexible work hours can become too-long work hours as you struggle to fight distractions and get all of your work done, or they can be too-short work hours as others feel entitled to our time because they don't recognize that they are interrupting "work hours" for us.

Later bedtimes can slip into less healthy sleep schedules. And social media can drain hours of productivity when we know there's little risk of others coming into our workspace and demanding to know why we're still on Facebook or Twitter.

For many people, that structure that once felt stifling can feel like scaffolding on which we can structure our lives; It can be difficult to create this same structure if we don't realize it needs to be self-imposed. It can also be more challenging to function as efficiently without it.

Too Many Distractions

As mentioned, many people forget that those who work at home still need to *work*—including, sometimes, those who are actually supposed to be doing the working! This means that people can call at all hours of the day and may not understand that, "I'm sorry, I need to work right now," is as valid as, "Sorry, I'll call you when I'm off work," when they know that you set your own hours.

The problem is that there can be interruptions all day, and work hours need to be *hours* and not a succession of interrupted clusters of a few minutes at a time as few of us work as efficiently this way.

This can also mean that overnight guests may not understand that people who work from home may need to get up and work in the morning rather than taking a leisurely brunch, or they may need a solitary space to focus or they can't work as efficiently when they do start focusing on their work responsibilities. Solicitors, family members (especially children), well-meaning friends and neighbors may all provide distractions throughout the day, but that doesn't end the list of potential distractions.

Email, television, and the siren song of social media can all throw us off as it may seem simple to indulge in a few minutes but it's very possible to be distracted for hours by these things. Social media can provide a seemingly endless supply of fodder to focus on. Once we look up, it may be surprising but entirely possible to see that hours have passed with little to no productivity, putting more stress on the rest of the day.

Difficulty Setting Boundaries

Setting boundaries--creating a structure in your relationship and schedule and ensuring that you don't blur the lines between productivity and leisure time, between socializing time and working time--becomes vital when you work from home. This, however, can be more challenging than many people expect.

- Setting boundaries with others, as mentioned, can be difficult when people expect that you should have time to talk when they do. Setting boundaries with yourself can be even more difficult when you are feeling a lack of motivation.

When you work from home so you can take care of your children during the day or in the afternoons, it can be even more challenging as you may feel pulled between competing loyalties and overwhelmed by the responsibilities of your various roles. Again, it can be challenging to set boundaries in these situations, and those boundaries may be constantly challenged.

Social Isolation

Those who work at home may find that the solitude can be a double-edged sword. It is, of course, easier to focus when you're in your own home with no co-workers coming by your desk to chat at random times. But while this solitude can feel blissful at times, when we have no mandate for social interaction during the workday—when we don't automatically run across people outside of those we live with—we can become lonely before we realize it.

Social media can feel like a lifeline to others, but this type of interaction can sometimes feel isolating as well, as these interactions can feel less personal than face-to-face encounters and conversations. While we may not need to paint a face on a volleyball and talking to it, the feelings of isolation can sneak up and we can feel more alone than we expect. And given the research on loneliness, this doesn't always feel good. Social isolation was a factor mentioned in the UN study that was related to increased stress of home-based workers.

Lack of Focus

While many people who work from home are self-employed, it can be paradoxically difficult to remain true to your personal goals when you have so many distractions and energy drains. Maintaining a focus on the future is vital if you have goals for changes you want to make, but staying motivated when you are juggling many roles can be a challenge in itself.

If you find your resolve weakening, you can start to lose hope that you will achieve the goals you've set for yourself.

Stress Associated With Mobile Devices

While all of these sources of stress are significant, the UN study found that working from home in and of itself may not be inherently more stressful than working on-site, but the added stress from frequent use of mobile devices appeared to be a significant source of added stress. Part of the reason is that those who use mobile devices late at night, as those who work from home may be more prone to do, can harm their sleep schedule.

Indeed, this study found that it was linked with frequent waking at night: 42 percent of those who work from home report frequent night waking while only 29 percent of office workers reported the same. This is notable because poor sleep can create significant stress throughout the day for several reasons. Social media use can also lead to stress because of increased social comparison.

One other factor that seemed to be a deciding one was job intensity; Those who worked from home tended to have more intense, demanding jobs. This may be part of why those who work on-site may be less stressed—perhaps their jobs are less intense. Regardless, this constellation of stressors takes its toll.

Tips for Managing the Stress of Working at Home

Fortunately, there are many tools at your disposal, and you are not alone in experiencing stress from working at home. While people who work together can gather and discuss the challenges of working in their office environment, those who work from home may need to be more proactive in finding a venue to give and receive support, and to discuss the challenges they face. It can be more challenging to realize that you're not alone in what you're dealing with.

Now that you know how common some of these stressors are, you may feel less isolated in what you face. You may also feel more energized in tackling these challenges head-on and minimizing some of the stress that comes with them. Here are some proven strategies for minimizing the stress of working from home.

Set a Schedule

While it's wonderfully freeing to set your own schedule, it's vital that you do set a schedule rather than working when you find the time. If you wait until you feel like working, the distractions will come from all sides and swallow up your time, so setting a schedule and sticking to it is a vital component of working from home for most people. There are several useful tricks for doing so, however, from calendars and apps to detailed to-do lists.

Here are some things to keep in mind when determining when you'll work:

- **Work when you work best.** Many people find that working in the morning when they feel rested can provide a more productive experience than beginning work halfway through the day after cleaning house and doing other non-work-related activities. This isn't true in all cases, so feel free to experiment if this advice doesn't seem to ring true for you.
- **Prioritize the challenging tasks first.** Rather than letting unpleasant or difficult tasks hang over your head and create stress when you think about them, pushing yourself to get the

most difficult jobs done first can help you to clear your plate of those less exciting tasks, and you'll feel a sense of accomplishment and increased energy and satisfaction throughout the day.

- **Make use of technology.** There are apps that can help you to track your social media usage (to help yourself use it less), remind yourself to work when you become distracted for too long, create to-do lists, and more. Learn what's available and use these tools to your advantage.

Create a Cohort and Stay Connected

When you feel isolated, it can be difficult to have as much energy to be productive. Plus, it can be very unpleasant and difficult to sustain for the life of your career. If you work from home and feel a bit too alone, it's important that you take responsibility for your own social life.

You can create your own supportive network of colleagues, fellow work-at-home buddies, or like-minded individuals relatively simply through social media groups, planned meet-ups, or even text-chat groups. You can also find already-established groups through social media or online.

The point is to identify people who share your needs or perspectives, gather them into a group, and benefit from that group! This group can feel like a lifeline when you need someone who understands or want to feel like part of a supportive community. The rest is up to you.

Reward Yourself

To keep your motivation up, it's vital to create your own personal rewards. Actually, taking a step back, it's a great idea to break tasks down into smaller, workable steps. However, the point is that it's up to you to make your work experience pleasant, for you to keep yourself feeling appreciated (even if you yourself are the only one who appreciates you), and make forward momentum a regular part of your life.

You can do this by breaking down your tasks into smaller goals and then rewarding yourself for taking each step. This keeps people motivated and excited to let go of comfort and move toward the life they really want, even if it takes a sustained effort to get there. (Hint: Rewards don't need to be food-based to be rewarding!)

Get Comfortable Saying No

You'll be faced with many requests, most of which you need to refuse if you want to have enough time to get everything done. It can be surprisingly difficult to say no to people you don't really owe your time to, simply because most of us can find reasons why a "yes" is a perfectly reasonable answer.

We may think of their needs and see ourselves as a great answer for them, and not realize that saying yes to them means saying no to ourselves. We may have our egos involved. Whatever the

challenge, realize that saying no to the time drains you didn't plan for often means saying yes to the life you truly want, one step at a time.

Protect Your Sleep, and Don't Use Mobile Devices Late at Night

You may already know that this is a no-no but do it anyway, or you may not be aware yet, but using screens late at night can alter your sleep patterns and make it difficult to get to sleep. It can also make you more wakeful during the night.

Because healthy sleep is vital for your productivity, do what you need to do to protect your sleep. (This includes setting a bedtime for yourself and sticking to it.) This can be quite challenging, but well worth the effort.

ⁱ Scott E. (March 17, 2020). How To Handle the Stress of Working From Home. Accessed from Verywell Mind, Coronavirus News Online, <https://www.verywellmind.com/the-stress-of-working-from-home-4141174>