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PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE AGAINST COVID-19

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Telecommuting from home: What psychologists advise.

By Dr Majeed Khader (Director), HTBSC/MHA

What does it mean to telecommute? What does it mean to telecommute do it effectively? Here's what psychologists advise.

Psychological studies¹ offer insights on how to work from home, both for first-time telecommuters and experienced remote workers juggling new demands.

Here are tips to help managers and employees.

Keep your focus and don't be distracted

- **Choose a workspace which is separated from household noises and activity** . Ideally, a room with a door you can close, or a workplace. If you can, use headphones to concentrate. You need to 'mentally distance' yourself from those disturbances, so you can concentrate with work tasks.
- **Quiet Hours.** Psychologist Timothy Golden, from of the Lally School of Management at New York recommends talking with family members to establish 'common quiet hours' and break periods, as well as what situations warrant an interruption of work time. Tell those around you including your children, or elderly relatives what you are doing – so that they understand and don't interrupt you.
- **Remember your purpose.** Spend a few minutes at the start of each day thinking about why the work you're doing matters. E.g. teachers may remind themselves that I'm now teaching my classes online, and this means students can learn as their own pace and review material or "I am doing this on line, so that I can keep you safe and prevent infections when we put large numbers of people in one room". Office employees should also remind themselves of their purpose when they do their work.
- **Be creative.** You can try working when distractions are minimal — such as early mornings or late evenings — to do your most important work, and coordinating with a spouse or partner on childcare or household duties when possible.

Set goals and boundaries

- Psychological studies show that Teleworkers work more. In 2013, studies of teleworkers in the USA reported that they logged an extra four hours per week, on

¹ <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/03/newly-remote-workers>

average, compared with their office counterparts. So don't think that less work is done when people telecommute²! This can get very tiring, so you will need a plan to avoid burnout.

- **Set daily goals** you wish to accomplish or project milestones to reach, working with your supervisor or manager to establish objectives.
- **Have your prioritised** important areas of work (discussing it with your supervisors?)?
- **Set a start and stop time.** When you're working from an office, there's a natural start and stop time, Prof Ravi Gajendran at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign explains that it should be the same, when you telework from home.
- **Schedules!** Aim to stick to the same schedule each day and if possible. Stop checking messages and emails when your workday ends (if you can).

Make a communication plan

- **Communicate performance expectations.** Both employees and managers should be proactive in communicating about performance expectations. If you're having trouble doing this new style of work— for instance, due to home disruptions, poor internet connection or phone signals — let your supervisors and colleagues know. They will be more understanding.
- **Plan for communications update.** Psychologists recommend creating a plan for the frequency and mode of communication between colleagues. For example, once a day? Or once in the morning and afternoon? Or a regular update pattern? Or when a project is completed or at various stages of the project?
- **Know which medium to use: video or phone call?** You don't always need that skype or zoom meeting. If you're sharing information, reports or analyses, email may be the best way to correspond. But if you're working to make sense of complex shared information, schedule a joint phone call or video conference. Using synchronous media will likely be faster and less prone to misinterpretation, according to Prof Ravi Gajendran.

Create and continue social connections while teleworking

- Telecommuters tend to experience social and professional isolation compared with employees who work in an office. Those feelings of loneliness will likely be worse now with social distancing. So find ways to stay connected!
- **Work connections.** Here you could ask about progress on projects or work
- **Social connections.** Connection isn't about work alone. It's about caring for the people you work with. Create opportunities for informal conversation, so employees can continue to build healthy and supportive co-worker relationships. You could for example, ask about the family, or the kids, or share pictures of the lunch you are having or funny GIFs!
- **Create shared platforms of support.** Support isn't just about what is really there, it is also about how people perceive the support they get. You could create a designated online space (a group for example) for coronavirus-related chatter, office updates, personal stories, where to get good online deliveries and so on. Create 'pantry areas' online!

² Gallup poll 2013. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/170669/remote-workers-log-hours-slightly-engaged.aspx>

If you are a supervisor or Boss, remember this:

- **Encourage and appreciate.** Psychologists find³ that In order to be most productive, telecommuters need to have a strong sense of self-efficacy, or belief about his/her ability to complete tasks. So provide encouragement in an attempt to foster self-efficacy, especially during the initial adjustment period for new tele-commuters.
 - Thank them for the work done!
 - Send a text message to show appreciation!
- **Help employees understand the boundaries of telecommuting.** Telecommuting employees often go above and beyond. Prof Ravi Gnjendran and colleagues at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, found that these employees would respond to emails outside of work hours—to demonstrate their organizational commitment because they were telecommuting⁴. But experts say that without firmer boundaries, employees can experience exhaustion and burnout and that such overwork should be discouraged by managers and organizations. So remind them that unless there are urgent matters, they need not do so.



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³ <http://www.siop.org/Portals/84/docs/White%20Papers/ScientificAffairs/telecommuting.pdf>

⁴ Gajendran, R.S., Harrison, D.A. and Delaney-Klinger, K. (2015), Are Telecommuters Remotely Good Citizens? Unpacking Telecommuting's Effects on Performance Via I-Deals and Job Resources. PERSONNEL PSYCHOLOGY, 68: 353-393. doi:[10.1111/peps.12082](https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12082)