Health & Medicine

3 Essential Strategies for Dealing with the Work-from-Home Blues

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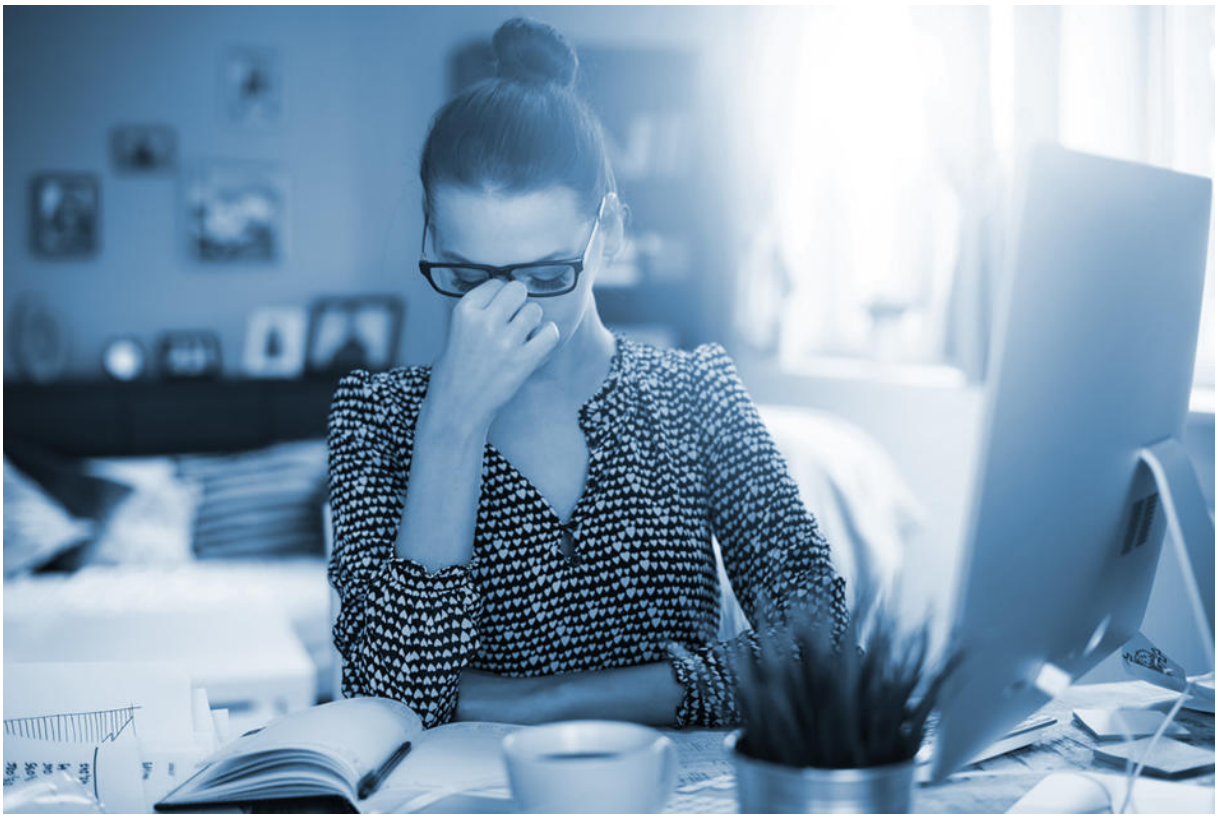

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With millions of people now working remotely, many of those fortunate enough to still have jobs are confronting new challenges. Some are struggling to keep up with the latest technologies and work procedures, while others are finding it harder to strike a healthy work–life balance. Research from Columbia faculty and alumni experts offers insights into dealing with these pandemic-related problems.

Keep wearing the power suit

Research has shown that people who dress formally in the office are likelier to be perceived by colleagues as confident, capable, and reliable. But if you're telecommuting, is there any point in putting on your work clothes each morning?

A series of studies conducted by psychologists at Columbia Business School suggest that there may still be advantages to wearing business attire even on days when we have limited contact with coworkers. That's because the clothes we wear, in addition to influencing how others perceive us, change how we see ourselves, making us feel more powerful and competent. And this altered mindset can boost our performance in areas like attention, creativity, and abstract thinking.

Adam Galinsky, the Vikram S. Pandit Professor of Business at Columbia Business School and a pioneer of research on this topic, suspects that our choice of clothing takes on added significance when we're working from home. He points out that on Zoom calls we see an image of ourselves, and "this brings the symbolic value of our clothing closer to our consciousness."

Galinsky and two doctoral students recently began new studies looking at the practice of getting partially dressed up for video calls — pairing a formal shirt or blouse, say, with gym shorts or sweatpants. Galinsky hypothesizes that the psychological impact of such an ensemble — what's been called the "work-from-home mullet" — will differ depending on the individual.

"If it makes you feel like you possess a bit of secret knowledge that you're craftily hiding from your colleagues, this could be an exciting and empowering thing," he says. "But if it causes you to feel inauthentic, this could create a sense of insecurity and possibly harm your performance."

Know where to draw the line

With domestic duties like childcare, cleaning, and meal preparation consuming several hours of the day, telecommuters — especially those with kids at home — are finding it increasingly difficult to keep the two parts of their life in check. The stress is beginning to show: one recent survey by job-search website Monster.com found that two-thirds of remote workers in the US have struggled with burnout this year.

So what's the secret to remaining healthy and fulfilled while working from home? Experts say that it starts with establishing a firm daily schedule and having the discipline to stick to it. Erika Zauner '11BUS, the founder and CEO of HealthKick, a New York–based company that promotes health and wellness in the workplace, says that one of the simplest and most effective strategies for delineating between work and personal time is by setting physical boundaries — even if this means simply never working from your bedroom.

"Having a physical change from where we work to where we relax is important to mentally disconnect after the workday," says Zauner. And if you start to feel uninspired in your makeshift office, relocate to a new one. "Swap the kitchen table for the coffee table, or take your laptop outdoors if you can. Even small changes to our routine can revitalize our energy."

But no matter how busy you get, Zauner says, never neglect physical exercise, your normal sleep schedule, healthy eating, and socializing — all activities that are essential to our well-being. Schedule a video chat with a friend or coworker and catch up over coffee or lunch. "Even fifteen minutes of social connection can help us feel energized and refreshed," says Zauner.

Be cool on Zoom

Videoconferencing platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams are helping millions of people work more efficiently and safely, but there is evidence to suggest that at least one group of workers isn't benefiting fully from the technology: women.

The problem, experts say, is that the lack of structure on more casual video calls can exacerbate longstanding gender-based power dynamics, with men feeling emboldened to interrupt or ignore their female colleagues. Women, as a consequence, may feel added pressure to speak succinctly (or not at all) and to come across as deferential and likeable.

Alexandra Carter '03LAW, a clinical professor at Columbia Law School and a negotiation trainer for the United Nations, has spoken out about this trend and offered women advice on how to get sufficient screen time and combat virtual mansplaining.

Among her tips: consult with the meeting chair beforehand and get explicit confirmation on how much time you'll have to speak and when; log on to the call a few minutes early and establish your presence during the pre-meeting chat; and if you do get interrupted, calmly stand your ground and reclaim the floor. ("For example: 'Bob, I have something to contribute here, and you'll have a better sense of my ideas once I'm finished. I'd love to hear your thoughts at that point.'")

Carter also recommends that women discreetly join forces and draw attention to one another's contributions during video calls. She says that women who worked in the White House during the first Obama administration were known to be masters at this, perfecting a strategy that could also be adopted for video calls. "The women frequently felt unheard in meetings," she says. "Either they weren't called on, or a man might offer the same idea that a woman had earlier proposed and get credit for it. So they used an approach that they called 'amplification,' whereby after a woman finished speaking, another would raise her hand and say, 'I'd like to bring this back to that excellent idea we just heard.' So they spoke each other's names and gave one another credit. President Obama noticed, and he started calling on women and junior aides more often. During his second term, women gained more parity with men in the White House."

The same approach, Carter says, can be used to champion the voices of minorities and members of other underrepresented groups.

"In virtual meetings, taking time to recognize people can be one of the first things that goes by the wayside, because we're all trying to use time efficiently," she says. "But when we take those few extra moments, we make people feel more connected to the organization and produce better results."



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