

Now We're Talking Tip Sheet

Working from Home During COVID-19

COVID-19 has impacted our everyday living in many ways. Our routines have been dismantled and we are being asked to adjust to a new way of living, while we navigate our way through this pandemic.

For those of us working from home, we may also have to deal with the uncertainty of not knowing a "return to office" date which doesn't allow us to feel in control of a timeline. Each one of us will have a different response to the changes that are brought on by the virus, depending on our own unique circumstances. What might be bothersome to one person, might not bother another person, and vice versa.

With the adjustment of working at the office to now working remotely, we've put together some tips to ease the challenge and help you adjust.

Structure and Space

- 1. Space:** Finding your own space in your home is a major feature of adjusting to working from home. Be aware of the importance of setting up an ergonomically correct workspace; you will need a desk and a chair that supports you. Be open to thinking "outside the box" in terms of where and how to set up your workspace.
 - If you have a separate room or office to work from in your home, then great.
 - If you live on your own, find the most comfortable place or corner to set up your laptop and technology.
 - If your family is at home with you and/or if your partner is also working from home, discuss how you might divide up the space between you and the children. When space is limited, look for space which provides a dual purpose; it might mean sharing the kitchen table or using a bedroom.
- 2. Time:** Working from home may also be different in terms of expectations around time than when you worked in the office. For example, at the office, you may have worked 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. But management may be more flexible now that you are working from home (for example, it may be easier for an employee to work when children are asleep at night). Clarify what "normal working hours" looks like with your manager, and then adapt the following points accordingly:
 - Staying more routine oriented is a way to combat being scattered. If earlier-established routines work for you currently (for example, having breakfast before your workday), then those would be easier to implement. However, because routines may now need to be adjusted, establish new

routines and try to stick to them (for example, integrating a fitness routine in the morning, and working later, or keeping later but consistent bedtime hours).

- **Bookend your day:** It is a good idea to create a signal or ritual to start and end your day now that you're not going to be travelling to and from your office. For example, a second cup of coffee could be your signal to start the day and closing your laptop and walking around the block could be the signal for ending your workday.
- 3. Breaks:** It is important to give our minds and bodies some time away from the screen and phone. The advantage of working from home is that you can take a break to carry out a household chore or spend time outside to work in the garden. Also, lunch with family is a benefit which wasn't possible while working at the office and will offer some time to have conversation and to check in with each other what feelings/thoughts are coming up for people.

Communication and Connection

Typically, in an office setting, we were used to walking down the hall to our colleague's office where we could chat for five minutes. However, technology has evolved enough to offer us a variety of options to stay connected (such as Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams and text – or even a phone call!). Because we are not in the same physical space, it is equally, if not even more so, important to have regular contact with colleagues and managers.

1. Communicating Expectations:

- **Managers:** Ensure that you are having regular meetings with your staff to keep morale and spirits up (this can't be overemphasized!). Communicate expectations and requirements clearly so that there is no room for confusion and surprises (which can lead to resentment). Ask your team how you can support them and discuss challenges in a thoughtful and solution-focused manner. Flexibility and patience are important while employees (and you!) navigate adapting to a new reality, such as: managing clients in a different way, changing performance outcomes, and adjusting emotionally and psychologically.
- **Employees:** Communicating expectations is important. Ask your manager what is expected of you if you are unsure. Don't assume the same policies and procedures apply to your work at home arrangement. Understand as well that the organization is most likely going through drastic change in a short period of time and there could many taxing situations behind the scenes which are creating enormous pressure for the leadership/management team.

2. Isolation and Loneliness:

- It is important to recognize that it is normal to sometimes feel isolated and lonely when working from home; therefore, do your best to stay in more regular contact with not only work colleagues but friends and family. Remember to pull in some humour to counteract heaviness in your day.

Continue to monitor your mental health; isolation or loneliness can promote depression. We have on-line resources available with regards to anxiety and depression.

Here is the link to our website: <https://www.fseap.ca/>

- Arrange for a fun virtual lunch and acknowledge your friends and colleagues' birthdays (and hopefully they will remember yours!). While we are all living separate lives, it is crucial that people are reminded that they matter! Remember to ask others how they are doing; it doesn't take a lot of time but can change a person's day for the better. Don't hibernate and shut yourself off (it can happen before you know it); continue to share your lives with each other and support one another.

Focus and Distraction

Some will find it harder or easier to work from home. This is a unique situation and there are many variables which will play a part in a person's mental health. For example: managing your feelings about Covid-19, meeting the needs of your family, dealing with isolation especially if you are the only person in your home, or having the time to reflect (which can have its advantages and disadvantages). It is also likely that you are not working at the capacity that you were once working. Be kind to yourself if doubt starts to creep in that you are not meeting your own or others' expectations.

Managing Children While Working at Home

With day-care closures and elementary to post-secondary schools closing, we felt that managing children and youth while working at home needed to be addressed. The more people there are in the home, the greater the need to juggle individual priorities, which at times can be in conflict. Take what makes sense for you from the following list and discard other items.

1. Start your day with no screen time. Go outside for a walk. Wear out children by offering them opportunities to exercise, so that they have an outlet for possible boredom with having to stay inside so much. Create a daily schedule and chart out how hours are spent. Ask older children to help with the younger ones. One idea is that you might spend ½ hour or an hour to "home school" so to speak – something that is focused on learning and educational – but be creative as to how you approach this time and try to keep it playful and light. Be available for children if they look to be lost or need their questions answered, as they too could possibly be confused around the adjustment.
2. Offer younger children choices for activities that they can do during the day ie. playing with Lego, watching a show, colouring, or quiet time.

3. Prepare snacks and lunches the night before or first thing in the morning, so that you aren't scrambling last minute with hungry children, and you know when to replenish groceries.
4. If aunts/uncles or grandparents are available, schedule video chats with them. They can read, do puzzles and chat with them during the day.
5. If more than one caregiver is in the home, try to assess who is better at doing what, and share the workload, which will not only benefit the children, but also not put too much pressure on one person. Spend some time going over the schedule with the children the night before so there are no surprises.
6. Manage interruptions. Have a signal – raising a hand or finger – to let children know you cannot be interrupted if you are on a call or meeting. Another suggestion is to create a sheet with five tear-off tabs – each tab represents a question that children can ask you. When all five tabs are torn off the page, questions will have to wait until after work, during lunch or on a break. (Depending on the age of the children, this may or may not be doable.)
7. Be patient. Expecting interruptions will help ease the frustration or tension when you are interrupted. Having a plan to deal with these situations will also help. Colleagues and clients also must adapt and understand that you too are having to deal with multiple responsibilities; be transparent with people around this.
8. Even though there is often a struggle between parents and teens around screen time, be grateful that in this current day, that teens have technology to lure them inside and away from face-to-face interactions. Continue to communicate and use active listening with teens as to the importance of minimizing contact with others, as some may not have the developmental maturity to understand the consequences.
9. If you are experiencing high levels of stress or worry, don't hesitate to reach out to your EAP. We are all in this together – there's no reason to go through it alone or without support.

Call FSEAP 1-800-667-0993

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