

When working from home is a must... and how to make it work

Interview with

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For many of us it's become a daily routine and, perhaps after a bit of a rough start, we've adapted and learned to make it work. But for some it still poses its own set of unique challenges and doesn't feel quite right: working from home during the pandemic.

What can I do to make work from home, well, work?

If you've a dedicated office space in your home and the right equipment for taking undisturbed calls, video conferences, recording videos for teaching purposes or engaging in online lectures, then you're on the right track. If you can also ensure minimal distractions – for example, the kids are entertained and busy, your mobile is put away and silent, you've prepared all the materials you'll need and you've got your cup of tea or coffee ready – then working from home can arguably be more efficient than an average day in the office or classroom. When you then hit your “flow” – that stretch of time when creativity and productivity just seem to pour from your fingers – you might very well end up losing yourself in your work, spending more time at the desk than you originally intended! (Not to mention the added pressure of proving to your boss or professor that you're not just sitting around all day...)

That's why it's crucial to keep work from home manageable, and the key to that is a well-structured daily routine. That means a detailed schedule for the day with clearly stated tasks and goals, set times for breaks and food, and a specific time for clocking out and shutting down the laptop. Try maintaining your usual pre-work morning ritual before a normal day in the office: shower, brush your teeth, eat breakfast, get some early exercise in, and then dress for a working day (but perhaps a bit more casually than you normally would!) Rituals and routines can ground us and give us a greater sense of control over situations with little or no structure. In the same vein, start your day by coordinating with flatmates and family so that everyone has a better picture of how to approach their day. But in the midst of all this planning and coordinating, don't forget to take a moment to praise and reward yourself and others for their efforts. For example, reward yourself when you can scratch a task off your to-do list or the kids after they spend a good chunk of time being good. Everyone likes some recognition!

I'm mentally blocked and working from home feels like a struggle. What can I do?

Though it may sound trite, it's true here regardless: "We are only human!" That means you absolutely cannot expect to always be well-rested, highly motivated, feeling fantastic or have nerves of steel.

When you feel sluggish and demotivated, turn your thoughts to more positive things: write down everything that brings you joy and keep this list in or near your home workspace. What advantages does working from home have for myself? What advantages for my family, spouse or partner, or my flatmates? Which parts of the current situation do I enjoy and would like to keep around for after the pandemic? Keep in mind that we won't be social distancing forever. Slowly, but surely a sense of pre-pandemic normalcy will return to our lives over the coming weeks and months. Think ahead to this future and contemplate how it will make you feel. Working from home gives you a lot more free time; time that might have been spent in traffic, for example. Why not seize this additional time for your own benefit? Why not use it to stop and smell the roses, to meditate and plan the future?

What can we do to look after our mental health?

We've all heard the old saying: "A healthy mind in a healthy body." It's true: good nutrition and regular exercise are essential always, not just when we're "flattening the curve" and distancing at home. We should always appreciate our bodies and our mental health, and strive to do things to boost both. Whether that's jogging outside or Youtube yoga in the living room – if it makes you feel healthier and brings you joy, then it's right for you. Many of us are sorely missing art and culture at the moment. While it's not possible to attend these kinds of events in person for the time being, many artists are bringing culture to you by streaming concerts, recording podcasts or broadcasting classic films. Even better: many of these streams are for children and young adults, both of whom are sorely missing their friends and playmates at the moment. These offers are out there, so let's use them!

Coronavirus seems to dominate everything at the moment, so it's nice to have something else to focus on for a time. In the same vein, try to avoid the absolute flood of coronavirus information out there by limiting your daily dose. Stick to reliable, vetted sources for news and avoid the unfounded fear and anxiety that comes with wild speculation. However, if you find your thoughts and actions increasingly clouded by fear, loneliness, sadness, nervousness, irritability, insomnia or anxiety, don't be hesitant to seek out the help of others. Person-to-person contact is a basic human need and of such critical importance to our well-being, particularly in these trying times of distancing. Seek out friends, family, colleagues or even new contacts through social media, video conferencing, telephone calls or in person (with 1.5-2 m of distance between you, of course!) Why not enjoy breakfast together with your project group via video chat before you get down to work? How about a game of chess or Scrabble by video chat or phone call? Unusual times call for unusual ideas!

Here's something else to consider: who might really enjoy a call or a message from you right now? Take a few moments to do something good for someone else. Helping others helps yourself, too.

What if this information doesn't apply to me or my situation? What if my emotional and social circumstances are so overwhelming that I can't deal with them alone?

In these cases, Germany provides many professional mental health services offering quick, unbureaucratic and often free support. For example: the coronavirus hotline of the Association of German Psychologists, which you can reach at 0800-7772244. You can also reach a general crisis support hotline (the "Telefonseelsorge") 24/7 at 0800-111 0 111 or 0800-111 0 222. If you are struggling with depression, call this information hotline: 0800-3344533. While German is naturally

the standard language for these hotlines, English is often possible depending on the person you're speaking to.

Students at HSRW can also contact our new contact for Psychological Support Services for Students, Pia Weigelt-Lindemann. She joined us in May 2020 and is standing to assist students. For more information, please visit:

<https://www.hochschule-rhein-waal.de/en/university/services-students/psychological-counselling-service>