

8 tips to upgrade your work-from-home routine

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How's your back? Are you sick of being alone or trying to work in others' living space? Getting distracted by the lure of the fridge — or maybe forgetting to eat without the usual lunchtime cues at the office?

It's common for people to succumb to unsustainable habits when they start working from home. And that's all right ... for a little while. But if you want to retain your mental and physical health over the long term, it's time to stop working on the couch with a cat on your lap and start following these tips.



1. Carve out a space that is only for work.

Creating a physical workspace — even just the corner of a room — makes it easier to mentally shift into work mode when you enter the space and home mode when you leave it. Preferably, choose a spare or quiet room, so you won't be fending off the inevitable distractions that crop up when you try to work in an area with inadequate separation from activities like eating, watching TV, or helping your kids with school assignments.

If you don't have an extra room, is there an area you can screen off with a makeshift divider, like a bookcase or curtain? A piece of furniture you can relocate to make way for a small table or desk? A section of a porch that might suffice if you run an extension cord for your computer and space heater? Get creative and stake your claim.

2. Get serious about ergonomics.

What's worse for you than sitting at a desk for several hours a day? Craning your neck, breathing stale air, and slouching your way toward chronic back problems while you do it. Besides, you don't want to mess around with your health or require an emergency trip to the chiropractor during a pandemic.

Take a few moments to assess and adjust:

- **The temperature, air quality, and lighting in your workspace.** These basic environmental elements are easy to forget about, but critical to your comfort. Can you generate better air flow by cracking a window or using a fan? Do you need to adjust your thermostat or wear thicker socks? Can you switch to eye-friendly, low-wattage light bulbs and a desk lamp to avoid glare?
- **Your chair's support and height.** Your chair shouldn't feel like a marshmallow. It should support decent posture. If you don't have a fancy adjustable one, play around with a firm pillow for lumbar support. Chair height relative to your keyboard is also important. Make sure you can keep your forearms at a 90-degree angle to your body when you type and your feet flat on the floor.
- **Your screen distance and height.** Are you unconsciously craning forward? Increase the font size or zoom in. Also, your screen should be at eye level. That could be a problem if you use a laptop. Consider investing in a separate keyboard and laptop stand (see No. 3) so that you aren't looking down and straining your neck all day.

3. Address your most pressing tech needs.

While it may be overwhelming or cost-prohibitive to make every aspect of your setup perfect, it's worth investing in at least one piece of game-changing gear.

If your partner is on the phone all day and your home doesn't allow for adequate sound separation, noise-canceling headphones could save your productivity (and your relationship). If your Wi-Fi worked great back when you were just checking personal email at home, but is too spotty to handle video meetings, upgrade your plan. And if you're breaking every rule of ergonomics (and slowly breaking your body in the process), order the monitor, keyboard, or other hardware you need to maintain a healthy posture while you work.

4. Use behavioral cues to mentally toggle between work and nonwork activities.

In addition to creating a designated workspace, experts recommend:

- **Adding a mini "commute."** Walking around the block before you enter your workspace and after you finish up for the day can help you create separation between work and home activities. It also adds a few doses of movement to your day, which can jumpstart your brain and help release stress.

- **Dressing for work.** While working in pj's may be perfectly OK for some, others find that doing so primes them for relaxation instead of work (and sends the wrong message to colleagues in video meetings). Try changing into work clothes before you head to your workspace and back into leisurewear when you're done for the day. It might affect your mindset more than you expect.
- **Using different soundtracks for work and leisure times.** Try switching between a "work soundtrack" (music that energizes you but requires only passive listening, white noise like a fan circulating air, or a soundscape background of coffee shop activity) and a "leisure soundtrack" (podcasts or music that require active listening or have a calming effect).

5. Schedule breaks, stretching exercises, and time outdoors.

There are two common extremes that people fall prey to when they work from home: being too easily distracted *from* their work and too easily distracted *by* their work (i.e., unable to unplug).

Regardless of which you're prone to, scheduled downtimes can provide the structure you need to enforce sustainable habits. And if you're concerned about breaks affecting your productivity, you've got it wrong: Countless studies have shown that stepping away from work a handful of times a day — especially to move, stretch, and enjoy some green space — is energizing. It boosts output and helps counteract unhealthy long bouts of sitting.

So, open your calendar. Figure out what makes sense for you. Maybe your role is conducive to stretching for five minutes every hour, going for a brisk morning and afternoon walk, and/or stepping out on a patio or apartment balcony a handful of times to drink a cup of coffee in the sun. Then, follow through.

6. Don't let reactive modes of communication take over your day (unless it's your job to react).

When you're co-located with your colleagues, workplace sights and sounds can help you unconsciously prioritize some tasks and filter out others. For example, maybe you overhear a teammate talking about the importance of a particular project or pick up on someone's stress just by glancing at them and automatically calibrate your workflow to address their needs.

With fewer modes of communication available to you at home, it's tough to distinguish the signals from the noise. Also, you may feel added pressure to prove to your colleagues that you're available and working. The result? You find yourself spending multiple hours or even entire days ping-ponging between chat channels, your inbox, project management tools, and video conferences — while failing to complete important work.

Unless you're in a role such as a customer support rep that requires you to respond to inquiries all day — stop. There's a better way:

- **Systematize how you share progress** (e.g., through a daily update in a project management tool). This will cut down on ad hoc check-ins and requests for status reports.
- **Communicate how you'd like to communicate** (which tech tools work best for you and when). Experts call this matching the message to the channel. It saves you and your colleagues from fielding a barrage of confusing, scattershot communications

For example, perhaps a project management tool is perfect for project updates, email is best for sending out meeting agendas and project proposals, and chat tools are good for urgent requests and doses of social interaction (see No. 8). Ideally, your whole team will come to a consensus on these decisions. To propose doing so, you might ask:

“How would you feel about coming up with some communication norms to help us work more smoothly during this time? For example, I was thinking we could use tool X for ____, tool Y for ____, and tool Z for ____. What are your thoughts?”

7. Set clear boundaries with family members and your team.

Your partner keeps popping into your workspace to update you on the news. A child whose school is closed wants you to play endless games of Pictionary. The dog has to pee. The cat wants to follow the sunspot ... onto your mouse pad.

Meanwhile, your work colleagues are pinging you after 6 p.m. since you'd ordinarily be commuting on the train at that time or emailing you over the weekend because “we're all stuck at home anyhow.”

Rather than letting these interruptions and infringements pile up until you buckle or snap, make a plan with clear guidelines. Then share it — along with an explanation of why it will help you be more productive — and be prepared to gently steer people back on course until they adjust.

Plan elements could include:

- Using a do not disturb sign or a visual cue like wearing headphones to let roommates or family know when to leave you be.

- When possible, crafting a schedule with kids so they know when they'll have access to you and when they'll need to entertain themselves. Work-from-home experts agree, however, that during times of great disruption, it is unreasonable to expect the same level of productivity from parents — it's simply impossible to parent and work simultaneously. So, if you're a parent, cut yourself a break. And if you manage a parent, show flexibility and compassion.
- Walking and feeding pets at the same time every day.
- Agreeing upon work hours with colleagues, updating your online status whenever you step away, and taking back time that's yours (including time that would usually be spent commuting).

8. Be intentional about connecting socially with colleagues.

One of the biggest complaints people have about working from home is the drop-off in social contact. It can get lonely, especially if you're accustomed to random conversations in the hallway and informal coffee meetups or lunches with peers.

Seasoned work-from-homers have learned to be highly proactive about staying connected to colleagues by scheduling virtual coffee chats and peer 1-on-1s. They might devote one of their daily breaks to a #random or #justforfun chat channel, posting funny memes, asking social questions, or sharing photos of pets.

Don't wait for these interactions to happen. Build them into your routine. Your mood will improve, and despite the physical distance between you and your colleagues, you'll grow closer and collaborate more effectively.

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