How to Stay Sane While Working From Home

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As humans, we are creatures of habit.

As William James once wrote, “All our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits – practical, emotional and intellectual.”

Oftentimes, these habits are a helpful evolutionary feature of living in the modern world. They enable us to autopilot through easy decisions and save our mental energy for more important things. Writing for the *New Yorker*, Jerome Groopman explains:

> *“When we get into a car and drive off, we don’t need to think about the separate actions of buckling a seat belt, turning on the ignition, putting the car in drive, checking the mirrors and the blind spot, and pressing the gas pedal. All these steps, chunked into a single unit in the memory, are triggered by the environmental cue of getting into your car.”*

Even when it comes to actions that require more forethought – say, deciding to hit the gym – routines can help us fend off decision fatigue. That’s why, prior to this crisis, I had a standing appointment with my trainer every morning.

For the next few months, people around the world are facing drastic changes to their personal and professional habits, one of the most significant of which is the sudden switch to

working remotely. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 29 percent of Americans could work from home before all of this. Now that number has skyrocketed, particularly in the tech industry.

Here are some expert-backed strategies for keeping your and your team's productivity high (and stress at bay) while working under new circumstances.

1. Stick to your usual schedule.

When working remotely, focus on the ways in which you're able to stick to your old routine – beginning with your schedule.

To the extent possible, keep your usual office hours. "Try to get up at the same time, and do all the things you would typically do to get ready for work," William Castellano, a professor in the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations, tells the *New York Times*.

If your day usually begins with a status meeting, organize the same on Zoom or Google Hangouts. If you squeeze in a workout before heading to the office, don't skip your sweat session (even if going to the gym might not be an option). Given all of the factors that have changed, maintaining some of your habits can make the transition less stressful.

And don't forget to take breaks throughout the day. Research has shown that giving your brain a rest can increase creativity, productivity and your ability to learn. So talk a walk, grind and brew your favorite coffee or even just daydream – anything that allows your goal-oriented pre-frontal cortex to relax for a while.

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2. Set ground rules with your partner (or anyone sharing your space).

As Johanna Gohmann writes cheekily for the *New Yorker*, "If you live in an apartment with a child, one person should work in the bedroom, while the other quietly begins divorce proceedings."

Jokes aside, it's important to set boundaries with anyone who will also be using your space, keeping in mind that we're all functioning outside of our comfort zones.

You don't have an in-house HR department, but that doesn't mean you can't call a meeting with your spouse, partner or roommate and go over some basic points. Guy Winch, a psychologist in New York City and the author of *Emotional First Aid*, recommends asking the following questions:

What are our work hours?

Where do we go in the house when one of us needs to take a call?

Where will our individual workstations be?

Who keeps an eye on the kids, and when?

With ground rules established, it will be easier for all parties to organize their day and work effectively.

3. Provide your teams with the infrastructure to succeed.

While resources may be limited, do your best to set up a neat, organized workspace where all of your hardware is readily accessible.

At JotForm, to help our employees carry on during the COVID-19 crisis, we're encouraging them to submit requests for office furniture and supplies to create comfortable workspaces at home. In the same form, they can give us their supply "wish list" and their delivery address. That way, we can streamline the processing of requests and get employees set up as quickly as possible.

We've also set our teams up with communication software, so they feel connected, too.

Discord, for example, is our main communication tool. It's an app that lets us stay in touch via voice, video and text. On a typical day at our headquarters, I maintain an open-door policy and let employees know they can drop in almost any time. Using Discord, I try to do the same by creating a separate channel where I'm always available for a virtual "drop-in."

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4. Accept that home will never replicate the office.

Even if #WFH offers some great perks — no morning commute, homemade lunches and the option to wear pajamas all day if you'd like — it doesn't come without drawbacks. Distractions abound, communication is more challenging and family obligations may compete for your attention.

Start by forgiving yourself for not being able to maintain the same clip you did at the office. With practice, you might find new ways to be efficient and work just as effectively from home.

But if it takes time to adjust to your routine and productivity isn't quite where it used to be, that's OK: We're

in this together. Research has shown that anxiety impacts our decision-making skills, so don’t forget to schedule some self-care, too.

Hope you are staying safe and healthy (and sane) during these wild times.

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