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How to find your flow working from home, even if you're surrounded by a spouse, kids and worries.

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Take-Aways

- Working from home has never been more necessary – or more stressful.
- Your work environment should not make work harder than it has to be.
- Adopt habits and practices that foster an optimal frame of mind.
- Make working as easy and painless as possible.

Recommendation

If you're working from home during the coronavirus pandemic, you may already be coping with anxiety and stress. Beyond the everyday challenges and distractions of family life or inadequate office space and equipment, you may have difficulty concentrating or being productive. Sunny Fitzgerald, writing for *The Washington Post*, offers simple, doable suggestions from neuroscientists and flow experts to help you make the most of your external and internal environment.

Summary

Working from home has never been more necessary – or more stressful.

Even under the best circumstances, working from home has its challenges; add the pressures of a worldwide pandemic and working from home can feel impossible. Remote workers face not only the familiar obstacles – inconvenience, disruption and lack of external structure – but also heightened worries about their own and their families' physical and financial well-being, and new stresses like home-schooling.

“We are most effective when we are calm, nonreactive and open to experiences.” (Steven Kotler, executive director of Flow Research Collective)

Achieving a state of “flow” – an immersive frame of mind in which concentration and productivity come naturally and prove easy to sustain – has become more elusive under current circumstances. Now, neuroscientists, researchers and brain trainers offer suggestions derived from brain science for coping with your work-from-home landscape. Adopting any of these methods can help. The more you can embrace, the more likely you are to enjoy enhanced flow.

Your work environment should not make work harder than it has to be.

Plan ahead with members of your household to schedule time when you can work without interruptions. Let your loved ones know that during this time period they must solve their own problems and run their own errands. Clear your desk, even if it's the kitchen table. Remove everything that isn't relevant to the immediate task at hand. By reducing visual distractions, you reduce your brain's cognitive load. This enhances your focus.

“One bad message, voicemail or email can hijack your whole day.” (Jim Kwik of Kwik Learning)

Never look at your phone for the first 30 minutes of your day. Doing so disrupts your morning calm state of mind. Further, an unpleasant message can start your day off on the wrong foot and distract you from your work. When you sit down to work, shut down your social media apps, turn off your phone and open only the programs that specifically apply to the project at hand.

Adopt habits and practices that foster an optimal frame of mind.

Avoid multitasking. Keep family activities and work separate in time and in place. Look after your body and mind. Stay hydrated to improve and maintain your focus. Try initiating a daily five-minute gratitude practice, which studies show improves your sense of calmness. Add 15 minutes of meditation and half an hour of physical exercise daily to improve your health, and to boost your ability to pay attention and sustain concentration. Establish small rewards for yourself – something pleasurable to anticipate when you complete your work. Eventually you will associate that pleasure with the work itself. Try to establish 90 to 120 minute stretches of unbroken concentration on one task. Start with short amounts of time and build up.

“In the beginning you won’t know how many items to put on the list.... What you want to do is figure out how many things you can do in a day and still be great at all of them.” (Steven Kotler)

Take time every night to make a list of specific tasks for the next day, with the most vital at the top. This keeps your brain from having to keep track of everything and helps you to start your day with anticipation of the most important or difficult task. Getting a big win early in the day is its own reward and will improve your outlook and raise your work energy.

Make working as easy and painless as possible.

Decide when you’ll either be working or not working. Find the happy medium at which your work feels challenging, but not overwhelming. That lets you savor competence, which helps you enter the flow state.

“Adaptation is extremely important, because if we have a rigid structure but the world changes, we won’t be able to flexibly readdress our work.” (Bianca Jones Marlin, neurologist, Columbia University)

Experiment to determine your individual work rhythm: Taking regular five-minute breaks gives you an opportunity to pause, refresh, move and rehydrate. Some experts suggest 20 to 30 minute intervals of work; others claim that flow appears with longer blocks of time, from 90 minutes to two hours.

While structured time is valuable, don’t be too rigid about your schedule. Allow for flex in your day. Remind yourself that you cannot and should not try to do everything simultaneously. Think and plan in small steps. In such stressful times, consistency is more valuable than quantity in building productive habits. If you find that staying in your work chair all day means you spend half the day surfing the web, get out of the house and walk around the block. Sit back down when you feel ready to focus.

About the Author

Sunny Fitzgerald's blog (thisissunny.com) covers travel, culture, health and wellness.



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