

## **COVID-19 Stress from a changed workplace**

Many measures were introduced to make Ireland safer, most notably remote working and restricting movement nationally and internationally. Each works in tandem and affects us directly as well as indirectly. They all interact and have synergistic effects on our mental health.

As we are all different, these changes affect us differently at different times and in different ways.

Lots of other factors will help determine our reaction to these challenges:

- how resilient we are,
- how much support we have available to us,
- how good we are at accessing those supports,
- our social network and habits,
- our current mind-set,
- personality style and
- family and community circumstances.

Secondary effects of sudden change in our living and working conditions can include sleep disturbance, mood alteration, obsessive behaviours, emotional extremes and the development of new rituals and compulsions. When this occurs, professional expertise should be sought as these are some of the manifestations of an anxiety disorder, rather than regular worry and transient distress.

Worries may arise, but each time you catch yourself worrying, gently (without self-criticism) refocus your attention on what you want to be doing right now. We should identify and access supports, and where they are not there, design-in new supports and develop easy connections to them. We should learn where our pain points are, when they occur and how best to remedy them.

## **Stress from Remote Working – finding solutions for you.**

Consider how your time is spent from the start of your day, through to the end. Take each day separately– Monday, to Friday. Try to identify and replace some of the positive features of your previous working environment for your current environment. If you went for a lunchtime coffee before, try going out to get a takeaway coffee Mondays and Fridays, now.

It's the things we do while doing 'other things' that often keep us strong. These might be called things we do 'mindlessly'. While walking to the café we see the sky, watch what's going on outside and interact with retail staff. This all helps our mood, without our knowing it.

Try to pin point the positives. A good thing about remote working is that you have the control to decide to replace some old organisational habits and methods used, for better, more rewarding ones, to suit you.

Most people have more time due to not commuting. So you could, for instance, schedule in a 30 minute activity every morning and evening, to mark the border between breakfast and the start of the work day. Similarly, another activity could be designed to replace the commute home, when, without us knowing it, most of us engage in reflection, rehearsal and planning. These three mental activities are important for preserving our sense of control. We usually engage in them mindlessly so we are not aware of the useful time we spend on them.

Replacing this mental activity with a physical trip in your area helps us take stock to kick start our mental state to do them, and to mark out the boundaries from work and leisure time.

It's important when dealing with mental health to stop 'doing'. Sit back, take time, and assess yourself. The tendency in a time of mass messaging - stay home, wash hands, physical distance, isolate – can be to assume that we are all the same and that our feelings are not 'ours' but merely a tiny particle of the greater mass. The sense of our own individuality and unique identity can get lost. We each can do our own risk assessment and honestly pin point areas where we need more support and other areas, where we are thriving, in order to design our days and work week to promote the best environment for us, now.

## **Focus for Building resilience during Remote Working**

Three main areas will keep us resilient. These involve social interaction, cognitive flow and taking control. They are:

1. Making efforts regularly to stay connected, using a range of media and reciprocal communication skills: use more positive, caring language than in pre COVID-19 times

2. Doing things which require our full concentration and which we enjoy for our own sake, make the time for your own enjoyment, others will benefit
3. Leading our own work by planning and scheduling a good range of passive and active, stimulating and relaxing actions into each day: make new habits and stick to them.

Think about specific challenges you have been through in the past and answer the following questions:

- How did you get through it?
- What did you do?
- What did you say to yourself?
- Who was supportive or helpful at the time?
- What resources did you use? Places, things, skills, organisations...
- What useful advice did you get from others?
- What did you learn about how to cope with challenges?
- Which of these could be useful again now?

## **Insights from psychology to combat stress from remote Working**

- Don't underestimate the benefits of being around people – both in the workplace and otherwise. When it's not possible, mimic some of the social activities you previously enjoyed. Use the phone, the internet and even postcards to keep connected.
- Assume your behaviour is different due to this novel arrangement – be mindful of how you are behaving and how others are reacting – is it cooperative and supportive or demanding and intolerant. Set yourself behavioural goals each week and see how you achieve them by reflecting honestly with yourself at the weekends.
- Distinguish work week from weekends: arrange separate activities at the weekends, to those done during the work week. Avoid letting the days morph into replicas of the previous one.
- Are you controlling your environment as much as you can? Are you just being driven along from day to day, week to week, waiting for 'the end'? Or are you

driving your own agenda, setting goals, deadlines and standards in different aspects of your work and non-work life – goal setting and seeking feedback while attaining goals is crucial. Those who set realistic but demanding goals break the goal down and get intermittent feedback, are more likely to reach their goals and build competencies. Growing self-efficacy makes us happier.

- Do you practice and stick to a schedule? Monday morning and Friday afternoon are pivotal times: have a Monday morning, timed schedule. Ideally wear clothes that you only wear for work and be at the desk by a specified time. Similarly, Friday afternoon, change clothes when work day ends, put away the work equipment and cover it so that it is out of your sight.
- Every day, plan to do one thing you really enjoy – crossword, fixing something, a puzzle, a swim or a craft. Get fully engaged in doing this, for up to 30 minutes. After doing things we enjoy, we are more alert and cognitively competent at tasks we do.
- Arrange your work area so that it is attractive, quiet, light and warm. Change it every few weeks with small items – new photographs, flowers or a new perspective/view, if possible.
- Keep as informed as you need but avoid over exposure. Listen to advice and recommendations from your favoured source and then avoid other news rehashing what is already known. Over exposure tricks us into thinking that each iteration of the ‘story’ is in addition to the others; a flawed heuristic which accumulates anxiety, rather than us seeing them as merely being another version of the same original story.
- Have a positive non-work routine too. Keep up with daily routines as far as possible, and change them every 3 to 4 weeks. Add small, do-able novelty challenges. Avoid highly ambitious aims like learning to play the clarinet perfectly – set up goals you can reach in short time frames to allow you experience the results.

**Hygiene Factors – things we can do, practically, to set the scene for a healthier, less stressful remote working experience:**

- Get up and go to bed at similar times every day.
- Keep up with personal hygiene and dressing for the occasion – work clothes don't have to be those you previously wore, but they should be different to your leisure clothing.
- Eat healthy meals at regular times to preserve structure.
- Exercise regularly – short spurts often.
- Pre-allocate time for working, exercising and time for resting every week.