



## COVID-19: HOW TO STAY FOCUSED WHEN YOU'RE WORKING FROM HOME

### How to create work breaks that protect your wellbeing

1. **Move:** There are plenty of exercises you can do, even indoors. There are apps that will give you some useful suggestions. Some can even sense when you've been sitting still for an hour and launch a workout for you to follow.
2. **Eat and drink:** A small nutritious snack plus some water can make a big difference to your energy levels. Nuts, an apple or a few raw vegetables can all be great.
3. **Take a walk:** if you can get outside and breathe some fresh air, it will clear your mind. Vitamin D can make for a better mood which helps concentration too.
4. **Connect with colleagues:** A short Skype or Zoom call can be great. UGM research suggests that socialising virtually promotes rapport, trust and good relations. All these support effort.
5. **Tune out briefly:** Short bursts of relaxation, meditation or listening to music can provide useful mental and emotional refreshment, especially in a stressful period like this. Experiment to find a few things that work for you.

#### *Welcome to the new normal!*

Many thousands of people are now working from home during this corona virus pandemic, with adjustments to usual practices happening on the fly. In some parts of the US, the use of teleconferencing increased by over 200% last month. There are, of course, inequities in all this which need to be openly acknowledged. Employees in some sectors have retained their jobs *and* it's feasible for them to do much of their usual work remotely. But most of those in healthcare, for instance, can't do that. Their work requires direct human presence. As well, certain sectors, such as aviation, retail, travel and hospitality, have been essentially closed down. In these sectors, people may be temporarily laid off. But many are telling us that, despite this, they are endeavouring to engage in productive, career-related projects while self-isolating. Quite likely, you find yourself in one of these categories.

However, working from home isn't always a straightforward transition. For one thing, perhaps this decision was forced on you unexpectedly and in stressful circumstances. You may not have had time to acquire the particular skills known to support remote work. After all, we humans are social creatures. You might find yourself having to redesign what you typically do and how you do it. We see this even in technologically savvy businesses. Marissa Mayer (Yahoo's CEO until 2017 and now CEO of AI company Lumi Labs) famously discouraged employees from working from home. She commented, "People are more collaborative and innovative when they're together face to face." But operating virtually is simply, for now, the new reality for many and businesses need to learn how to make this work.

One issue clients describe is that sometimes it's hard to stay focussed and be productive. Part of the challenge can be a newfound lack of structure. Your usual targets, priorities and accountabilities may be postponed as your organisation figures out the implications of COVID-19. There can be a sense of drifting and marking time. Your day can feel a bit shapeless. If you relate to this, our briefing will give you some useful, evidence-based insights that will help you to be productive, as you sit at the kitchen table with your laptop in front of you!

#### *Start by identifying your priorities for the day*

Here, it's been shown to help if you simply write down everything that's in your head, including the less important and even the trivial. Even small 'to do' items consume mental space. Setting down everything in the external system of your choice enables you to sort and prioritise, making sure less important things don't suck your energy and feed procrastination. Here is a useful habit. "After I finish

breakfast, I'll sit down at my desk and ask myself, 'What am I committed to achieving today? What are my key priorities?'"

#### *The psychology of deadlines*

Now that you have two or three priority tasks, the next step is to set a deadline for yourself. Most of our clients find one hour works well. Your aim is to dive in and work hard for that length of time. Nira Liberman and her team at Tel Aviv University have been studying the psychological impact of deadlines. They found that one benefit of a deadline is that you ramp up your energy and effort as you near the finish line. They called this 'goal gradients'. They found striking differences between the performance of two groups on a task, where Group A had no deadline and Group B had a definite one. Those in Group B galvanised their efforts, knowing the time allocated was finite. They reached a superior level of performance on the task and, interestingly, reported feeling far less fatigued than the drifters in Group A. Liberman concluded, "Deadlines and progress monitoring keep us in focus and advance our work."

#### *Your concentration is like a muscle*

But no-one is capable of being 100% productive all day. Even if you start your morning fully intending to make the most of every single minute, it simply isn't humanly possible. Concentration, researchers remind us, is like a muscle. It needs rest, if it's to function well. Otherwise, you risk overusing the muscle, such that it burns out. In this context, regular breaks turn out to be vital not optional, if you want to sustain concentration and stay productive. Being productive (not just being present) requires hard focus, then real rest.

#### *What do the findings tell us?*

The designers of the time-tracking app, DeskTime, collect 5.5 million logged records each day. This gives them plenty of data about what users themselves consider productive and what they do to support that. They took a sample of 36,000 users and analysed what they did in some detail. They were interested in looking closely at what exactly the top 10% did that might be different. What these highly productive people had in common was an ability to take effective breaks. They worked in bursts of around an hour, followed by a 10 to 15 minute break, before diving back into their next task.

#### *A sprint then a rest*

Highly productive people throw themselves into what they do. During a work period, they dedicate themselves 100% to making progress and getting things done. Then, during a rest period they remove themselves from tasks and rest entirely. The box at the side will give you some proven advice about what to do on a break in order to genuinely refresh.