

Staying Psychologically Well: A Guide to Help Staff Whilst Home Working

The purpose of this guidance

This guide was produced to help staff adapt from office based, face to face client work to providing telephone based support from home.

Personalise this guidance

Think of this guidance as some general ideas about how you might keep yourself psychologically well whilst working at home. Some of the suggestions below may be relevant and applicable whilst some might feel less relevant or even impossible to apply. At the end of this document is a template of topics to guide a discussion with your supervisor/manager and colleagues. We hope this template helps you to develop a personalised plan which aims to boost your resilience and keep you psychologically well during this difficult time.

The challenges we might face

The sudden transition from working in a building with face to face contact with colleagues and clients to working alone in your home, is unlikely to be a smooth one. Many of us have experienced frustrating IT issues and might feel quite disconnected from others as we reconfigure our services. You might also feel frustrated that you cannot provide the level of support or help to your clients that you feel they need.

As we move to communicating with our clients through phone contact only, it is likely that this will present us with some challenges.

Whilst some clients might demonstrate resilience, it is likely that many of our clients' difficulties will be exacerbated by the current situation. People you speak with might be expressing distress, anxiety and fear regarding themselves or their loved ones becoming unwell or dying. Clients might feel depressed, lonely and isolated whilst being confined to their homes. For people who live with others, these relationships might be unhelpful or abusive leading to them being at risk.

This means that whilst at home (either on our own, with partners, friends or family) we are being asked to find a way to deal with what might be high levels of distress. This presents challenges to our own emotional and psychological well-being.

This guidance aims to help staff think about how to manage home working whilst looking after their psychological well-being.

Creating a physical “work space”

Whilst not everyone will have a study or a room they can use as an office, it is important that you pick a regular place in your home where you can work. If at all possible, try to pick somewhere where you would not normally sleep or relax (i.e. in your bedroom or on your sofa). Try to be as creative as you can, it might be you can move furniture around? If you need to work in an area which has another purpose (e.g. your kitchen) think about small ways you could differentiate a work space from a home space.

If there are others at home (especially children), it might be even harder to create space for yourself where you cannot be overheard. We appreciate that this is tricky and there might not be a perfect solution but speak with your supervisor about what might be possible.

Creating a psychological “work space”

As well as the practical aspects of creating a work space in your home, there are things you can do to try and psychologically separate work and home. Whilst we recognise that this is not an easy task, trying to do some or all of the following might help.

- Keep as much as usual to your normal routine i.e. when you get up, when you wash, when you eat, etc.
- Resist the urge to stay in pyjamas all day. Getting dressed will bring that element of routine.
- Think about transitional activities that you can do instead of your usual commute. This could be a short exercise video, meditation or mindfulness exercise, tidying up in your house or anything that works for you. The important thing is that it signifies to you, that you are now leaving “time off at home” and beginning work.
- Structure your day so it broadly conforms to work schedules i.e. start and stop at the usual time and schedule in coffee and lunch breaks.
- Start to create a structure in your working day e.g. meetings with colleagues and client calls at particular times. Think about when is helpful to call clients, for example, if you were in an office you probably would try to avoid calling them 30 minutes before the end of the day.
- At the end of the day do something that signifies that you are finished work. This may be a ritual around tidying away lap tops, phones, notebooks etc. You may also want to change your clothes.

Boundaries with the people you live with

If you live with others it might be hard to have somewhere to work which feels separate. It might be helpful to talk to the people you live with and create some ground rules. Speak with them about your hours of work and what would help you.

We understand that others in your home might also be trying to work. This could cause friction or require compromise. If you have children at home, the tasks of speaking with clients and having online meetings might be extremely challenging. Speak with your supervisor about what’s expected and what you can realistically manage.

If you have had a particularly difficult day or meeting it might be harder not to use your partner, family or house mate for a face to face debrief in the way you might usually do with colleagues. It is important that we are aware that this might be hard and use supervision and colleagues for this function rather than others within our household.

Feeling connected to your colleagues

We are social beings and for most of us work was a time when we connected with other people. Having face to face contact with clients and colleagues in the same room is temporarily not an option. To help our psychological well-being, it is helpful for us all to try and keep a sense of being connected to our teams. We can do this through formal structures like team meetings and group supervision but we also need to think creatively about how to create a sense of team and connection. Over the coming weeks, you could speak with colleagues and your supervisor about how to set up spaces for “virtual coffee and lunch breaks,” informal channels of quick team communication and online activities which might promote well-being.

Speaking with clients who are distressed

Although we are all used to working with people who are experiencing distress, speaking with a distressed client on the phone from your own home might feel quite different. In our usual circumstances we have a range of options to suggest to someone in distress (e.g. practical strategies they could try, places they could go, people they could see or organisations they could meet with). Many of these options are temporarily unviable and this might leave us feeling unhelpful or even useless. We are social beings and part of the way we are programmed means that we pick up on other people's feelings. It is therefore normal to sometimes feel upset, anxious, frustrated or hopeless after speaking with someone in distress. It is really important that we try to be aware of the impact clients might have on us.

After speaking with a client in distress try some of the strategies below.

- One of the most effective strategies is to speak with your supervisor or a colleague. Talking through the call will help you process what has been said. Another person might be able to help you problem solve, provide guidance, reassurance or an alternative perspective.
- Take a break. Don't just try to keep working. Stop, remove yourself from your work space and do something different. Have something to eat or drink, listen to some music, watch tv, anything that might change your focus for a while.

Boundaries in a time of shared experience

During the normal course of our work we will find particular clients who we relate to more than others. At the moment, we are in a situation where it is likely that we might find clients are talking about issues which are also directly affecting us. Clients might express concerns or worries which we also share. In the coming weeks it might be that they are discussing feelings of loss or bereavement which are also impacting on us. Although we all have different styles and ways of relating to clients it is important to think about how you will manage situations where you identify with the issues a client is bringing. It would be helpful to think with your supervisor or with your team in group supervision, what is appropriate and inappropriate sharing of your own personal experiences.

Monitoring your own thoughts and feelings

We are humans in unprecedented times. There is a risk with home working and social isolation that your mood might dip and/or your anxiety levels might rise. This is a very normal reaction under very abnormal circumstances so a certain level of feeling fed up and anxious is to be expected.

Over the course of the next few weeks it is likely that there will be times when we all feel distress and wonder how we will manage to get through this.

Whilst some days we might feel ok, they might be others when we struggle. It is our expectation that staff's psychological well-being will fluctuate and that there might be times when it would not be sensible to speak with clients on the phone.

As part of your daily check in with your supervisor it would be useful to have an honest conversation about how you are feeling that day and consider whether you are psychologically well enough to speak with clients.

Managing your own feelings of stress, anxiety or distress

Feeling less resilient than usual is a normal reaction to the current circumstances. If you find you are struggling to cope then you are not alone. The presence of feelings of stress, anxiety, low mood or loneliness does not necessarily indicate psychological problems. There are many steps we can take to help ourselves feel more resilient. It is important to acknowledge that some of the strategies you might

usually use to reduce stress might no longer be available to you. Try to think about how you need to adapt or rethink ways of coping and keeping well. It might be helpful to think about how you will:

- Maintain connections and see social support from friends, family and your community
- Take regular physical exercise
- Get enough high-quality sleep
- Create space and time to do activities that you enjoy

There are many helpful resources relating to maintaining your psychological well-being during this difficult time. Recommended resources will soon be available on the City of Edinburgh Council's Shared Drive.

If you feel that you would benefit from further support it might be helpful to speak to your supervisor about accessing staff counselling. It might also be worth considering making a phone appointment with your GP.

This guide was developed by the Clinical Psychology Team, Community Justice Services, NHS Lothian and City of Edinburgh Council in March 2020.

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Template for Personalised Home Working Management Plan



Loved ones

Do you have caring responsibilities that need to be taken into account when planning work? How will you create boundaries between work and those you live with?



Physical space

How will you maintain a boundary between your “work” and “personal” zones?



Transitions

What activities will replace your commute? What will you do to mark starting and finishing work?



Schedule

What changes do you need to make in your schedule for home working? How will you structure your days?



Breaks

How will you remind/prompt yourself to take breaks?



Team connection

What can you and your team do to improve team connection and collaboration?



Switching off

What activities might help you switch off from work, particularly if you are managing high levels of client distress?



Monitoring your psychological health

How will you know if you are struggling? What might you and others notice? When might it be a good idea to take a break from client work?



Social Connections

What are your plans to stay connected to your friends, family and community?



Physical Activity

What physical activity will you do and when?



Sleep

What actions will you take to get enough quality sleep?



Time for yourself

How will you make sure you create some time when you can do something you might enjoy?



Holidays

When do you plan to take time away from work?



Managing distress

Who or what might help when you are feeling distressed?
