

November 2021

Staying mentally healthy when working from home

Guidance for workers who do office-type work in their home, or an equivalent location, rather than at their business premises.

What is this guidance about?

It is now more common for people to work from home part-or full-time. Working from home often supports positive wellbeing, but can expose you to different work health and safety risks, including when it comes to mental health.

This guide describes practical steps that you can tailor to your situation to stay mentally healthy when working from home. For the purpose of this guidance, a worker who is 'working from home' is someone who does office-type work in their home or an equivalent location rather than at a business premises.

Some of the guidance will also be relevant for workers who occasionally work on-the-go from various other locations (for example, from improvised settings such as a coffee shop or airport, or on a temporary basis from a co-working space or another city).

This guidance is not intended to advise you on your employment relations or employment contract. If you need further advice on this, independent advice is available from the [Employment New Zealand](#) website. It includes about your rights and obligations in relation to flexible working, sick leave, and other employment rights and responsibilities.

What are the mental health risks when working from home?

Working from home can create challenges that could impact your health and safety. Risks to your mental health can arise from:

- a poor work environment
- a lack of social connections
- poor work design.

Your business must first try to eliminate work health and safety risks so far as is reasonably practicable. If it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate the risk, it must be minimised so far as is reasonably practicable. This includes the risks to your mental health from working from home.¹

It is important that you and your business work together when identifying and assessing risks, and making decisions about how to eliminate or minimise the risks using appropriate control measures.

For more information on worker's rights and obligations, see our guidance: [Your health and safety rights and responsibilities](#)

¹ For information on what your business should do to manage risks to mental health from working from home see: worksafe.govt.nz

Exceptional circumstances (for example, during global pandemics or natural disasters) can often be complex and surrounded by a lot of uncertainty. If you have to work from home due to one of these circumstances, you may be more likely to experience challenges, which may include mental health challenges.

The practical steps described in this guidance are also relevant for working from home during exceptional circumstances. However, it is important to continue communicating with your manager and team during these types of situations as you may need additional support.

Remember – you are working from home, not living at work.

Set up a healthy work environment

The work environment is about the physical work area (including equipment, climate, space, and lighting), the people present, and the tasks being completed there.

		PRACTICAL STEPS YOU CAN TAKE
 <p>Find a work area at home that suits you and the tasks you do</p> <p>Think about how you work best. Consider whether you get your energy from being in a quiet focussed space, or from working around people/ background energy and noise.</p>		<p>Consider working on different kinds of tasks in different spaces.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For example, for creative tasks, working outside in natural light or in a shared space with music playing may be stimulating for you. Tasks where you need privacy to make calls or to perform intense mental work might be better suited to a quiet space. - Discuss your needs with other household members and agree how you will work with and around each other. - Natural lighting, glare, noise, and climate may change during the day. Different areas may be suitable depending on the time of day.
 <p>Use physical boundaries to help create a mental boundary between work and home life</p> <p>When working from home, it is beneficial for your mental health to keep clear physical and mental boundaries between your personal home life and your work life.</p> <p>By setting up a dedicated workspace, you can help to create a mental boundary. This will help your brain shift into 'home mode' so that you can enjoy your personal time without feeling like you are still at work.</p>		<p>Examples of how you can help to mentally separate work and home life include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - separating your main work area from the rest of your home. Use screens or plants to create a work area, or if one is available set up a desk in a separate room - using separate work equipment can help you to form mental separation (for example, work-only computer, pens and paper) - at the end of your workday, covering your work area with a sheet, packing up your equipment, or closing the door of the room you were working in - having a short walk around the block - this can be a good way to mentally transition between work and home - Wearing 'work clothing' during work to help mentally separate work time and home time.
 <p>Have the right equipment and work environment to work from home effectively</p> <p>Having the right tools and resources will help you to be effective when you work from home. Appropriate technology and a suitable physical work area are important for your mental health.</p>		<p>Discuss your equipment needs with your manager. If possible, request that you have the same, or similar, equipment, technology, and resources that you do at your business premises.</p> <p>Consider whether your equipment and work environment are suitable for the tasks that you do from home. Discuss with your manager what systems and processes you need to use, and whether they are accessible and effective to use from home. Consider whether different tasks would be more suitable to do at home than others.</p> <p>When working from home, the people who share your home may also be working or doing other activities in the home environment. This can add a wide range of distractions that make work more challenging.</p> <p>You could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - try to think outside the box, and brainstorm with the people in your home or your manager to problem solve ways to work around any issues - consider what other resources (for example library, shared office spaces, or support services) are available to you.

Build and maintain social connections

Social connections are about the working relationships and interactions you have with your colleagues. We often work with the same people, and form bonds and connections that contribute positively to productivity and mental health.

Working from home will change the way you interact with other people, which can lead to negative outcomes like feelings of loneliness and isolation. To stay mentally healthy, it is important to maintain strong social connections while you work at home.

PRACTICAL STEPS YOU CAN TAKE	
 <p>Connect with your team</p> <p>Social connections at work are about more than just tasks and formal meetings.</p> <p>The casual conversations you have with colleagues form a large part of the work experience, and contribute positively to mental health at work.</p> <p>It is important when you are working from home to take time to consciously connect with your team, and build and maintain relationships.</p>	<p>Maintain positive social connections with colleagues by arranging social video chats, face-to-face catchups, and other social events.</p> <p>For example, everyone in the team could agree to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- call or check-in each morning- use video calls to help build connections rather than email or phone calls- be at your business premises on the same day on a regular basis- try new ways to connect, for example through messaging services. <p>Agree with your team 'work from home team rules'. Are there common team hours of work if some team members are working flexibly? What social versus work-related communications will work best for everyone?</p> <p>Social connections from life activities outside of work are a great alternative to work connections.</p> <p>For example, arrange to have lunch with family or friends, or play a sport on a work-from-home day to support positive mental health.</p>
 <p>Actively manage your professional networks</p> <p>Part of working from the office is that you usually have quick and equal access to information about business performance and drivers and how you and your team contribute, as well as training and professional development opportunities available to you.</p> <p>If this information is usually delivered verbally, then working from home can make it harder for you to stay 'in the loop'. You may hear the information later than other people, or not at all.</p>	<p>It is important to be proactive to understand business and team direction, as well as managing your professional networks when you are working from home.</p> <p>Ways you can do this include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- actively engaging your manager in conversations about the team and business, as well as about training and professional development. Let them know you would like to be kept in the loop and agree on ways that this can happen.- maintaining your professional 'presence' by continuing to actively build relationships and stay in touch with people inside and outside of your business- having conversations with your manager around your key performance indicators, outcomes, and work goals- regularly checking in with your colleagues to make sure you have not missed any information when you have been working from home.
 <p>Be open with your manager and team about how you are feeling</p> <p>Even when we make a deliberate effort to maintain social connections when working from home, it can still sometimes feel like an isolating experience.</p> <p>Everyone has different social needs, and work in unique home environments.</p> <p>Because you are not at your business premises, others might not notice if you are not quite yourself.</p> <p>If you feel like your mental health is being negatively affected, it is important to talk to your manager or team about how you are feeling.</p>	<p>Regularly talk to your manager or your team about how you are feeling and any challenges you face from working from home.</p> <p>Discuss what changes could be made to the situation so you can feel more connected and to make sure your work from home arrangements are working.</p>

Design your work in a way that supports your mental health

Work design is about the tasks you do, and how and when you do those tasks.

Mental harm associated with work design may be caused by:

- high physical, mental and emotional workloads
- lack of variety or meaningless work
- high uncertainty in your work
- work overload or underload
- high time pressures and short deadlines
- difficult or inflexible work schedules.

Good work design involves thinking about your work and how mental harms might impact you. For example, consider how you work best, what motivates or demotivates you, when you have the most energy, what flexibility you have around where and when you work, and then design your work in a way that supports your wellbeing.

Take notice of what does or does not work for you, and where possible design your work to suit your work and your home life.

Some practical steps you can take to support good work design are described below.

How you work

PRACTICAL STEPS YOU CAN TAKE	
Design for success – plan your tasks	<p>Plan your tasks so that you are working effectively. Take notice of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- the types of work that energise or drain you- whether you would rather work alone or with others- the types of tasks you have to complete and whether you are working alone or collaborating with others on them- location options available (for example, work at home, from the office, from a hub in your community or a combination of these). <p>Talk to your manager about your options and come up with a plan for how you will work best.</p>
Agree and manage expectations	<p>Discuss and agree deadlines with your manager and stakeholders. Consider how you can best fit their expectations into your work plan.</p> <p>Build connections and regularly communicate about your availability and when you will be working on their tasks. For example, set an automatic email signature to show which days and times you are available, and where you will be working from.</p> <p>Discuss with your manager what success when working from home looks like. It may look different than when you work at your business premises. Considerations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- sometimes working from home can be more focussed and intense than at your business premises, with fewer breaks and ad-hoc conversations. Are the same time-based approach or performance targets you had when you worked at your business premises still appropriate?- sometimes working from home can create a self-driven need to appear busy, or to go above and beyond as a 'thank you' for being allowed to work at home. Consider whether you are taking on too much work and what you would be doing if you were at your business premises- your workload and your support needs may not be as obvious to your manager as when you were at your business premises. Discuss your needs with your manager, including whether you need more work or less work.
Get active	<p>Working from home can provide different opportunities to get active. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- instead of your usual daily commute, spend this time doing some physical activity- consider which tasks do not need you to be at your desk. Could documents be read outdoors, or could phone call meetings be taken while you are walking?

When you work

	PRACTICAL STEPS YOU CAN TAKE
Set a routine	<p>Setting up a routine can help you to mentally engage with work, and then help you to mentally detach at the end of the day.</p> <p>Steady schedules can also help to keep the lines between work and personal time clear.</p> <p>Some steps to help you achieve this include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- break your day into manageable blocks, and stick to a similar routine as you would when working at your business premises- try to take rest breaks like you do when you are at your business premises- think about when you are most productive. For example, if you are more energised in the morning, these blocks of time could suit focussed, independent work. During any afternoon 'slump' times, collaborative tasks online with your team may energise you- turn off work notifications on your cell phone, or set an out-of-office message so it is clear you are no longer available for work purposes when you have finished for the day.
Explore opportunities to work more flexibly	<p>Depending on the agreement that you have with your manager, as well as the kind of work you do, working from home may provide an opportunity to be more flexible.</p> <p>Take notice of what you are giving your time to and when. You might be able to structure your day to suit your home and working life more easily than when you are at your business premises. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- having early start and early finish times could provide an opportunity to be more available for family, social or sporting commitments- taking a break between mid-afternoon and early evening, followed by a quiet focussed block of work later in the evening may help you to better manage childcare or other family needs. <p>Come to an agreement with your manager and your team around your flexibility that takes their needs as well as your own into account.</p> <p>Communicate your availability with your team and manager, and re-visit how it is working on a regular basis.</p>

What you work on

	PRACTICAL STEPS YOU CAN TAKE
Be deliberate when scheduling tasks	<p>If you have the option to work at your business premises as well as at home, be deliberate when you are deciding which tasks are most suitable to do at each location.</p> <p>Take notice of what motivates and energises you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- some people may be motivated by achieving results. They may find scheduling quick win tasks will keep energy levels high- others might speak to mentors or engage with colleagues to gain focus and energy- creative people may gain energy from collaborating with others. <p>Depending on your role and what energises you, different tasks might be better suited to be completed at home than others. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- you may choose to work on tasks that require higher concentration and a quieter environment at home, and save more collaborative tasks for days you are at your business premises- alternatively, you may find booking online meetings or collaboration time helps to energise and connect you with your team when at home. <p>Work with your manager and use your time management skills to help prioritise and plan your work in a way that supports positive mental health.</p>
Build in time to learn	<p>It is important to keep learning while you work from home and to build time for this into your work plan.</p> <p>Agree with your manager how this will be done, and work out what new skills you need to learn, articles you can read, and information or courses you can access.</p>

Additional support

If you are struggling with working from home, or with mental health in general, there is support available. This includes:

- free call or text 1737 any time to talk with a trained counsellor
- the Mental Health Foundation: www.mentalhealth.org.nz
- an employee assistance programme if your business has signed up with one.