

Managing Stress and Emotions When Working Remotely

Eight practical tips for a new-for-many mode of work.

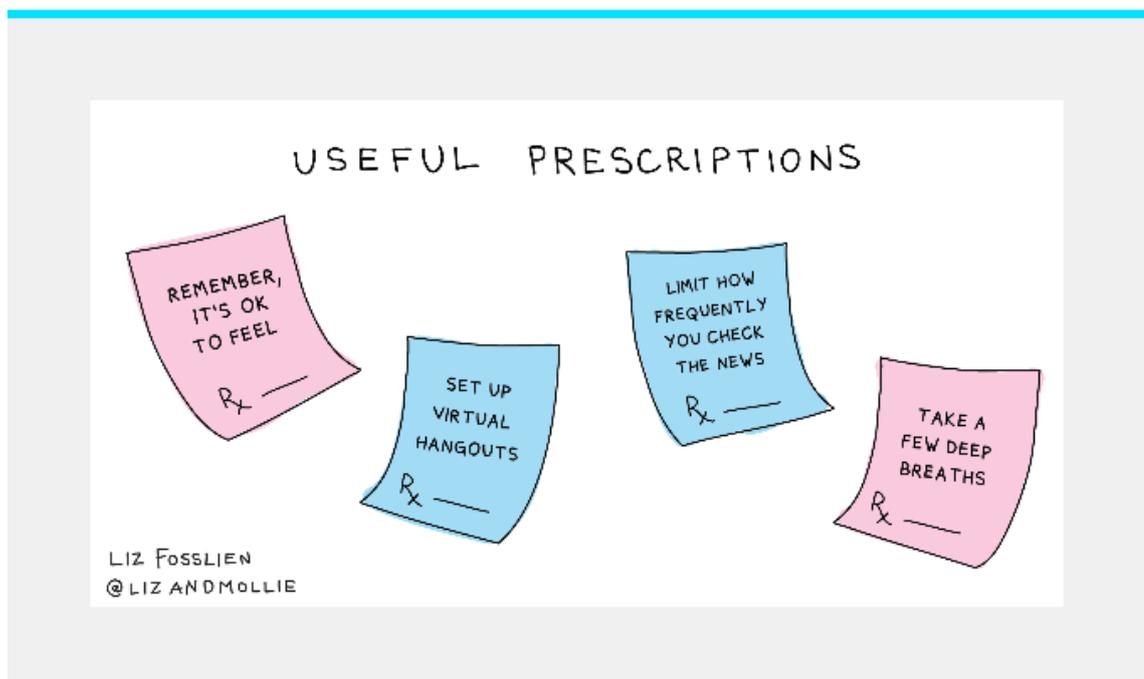
Liz Fosslien and Mollie West Duffy March 31, 2020 **READING TIME 4 MIN** [HTTPS://SLOANREVIEW.MIT.EDU/ARTICLE/MANAGING-STRESS-AND-EMOTIONS-WHEN-WORKING-REMOTELY/](https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/managing-stress-and-emotions-when-working-remotely/)



As COVID-19 continues to spread around the globe, more and more of us are starting to make changes to the way we work. Google, Microsoft, Trader Joe's, Gap, and United Airlines are among a growing number of U.S. companies that have already acted to address their workers' most immediate employment concerns stemming from the pandemic, including recommending or requiring employees to work from home, offering more paid sick leave, or maintaining wages in spite of reduced hours.

We've spent the past four years studying the science of emotions and their intersection with our lives at work. In our research, we've spoken to thousands of remote workers around the world, and from these conversations — and our own personal remote work experiences — we can attest that feeling isolated is common when working from home. Living with uncertainty in the face of a pandemic makes the current situation even more stressful. Here, we've pulled together our top tips for both tackling the challenges of remote work and managing stress and difficult emotions.

1. Emotionally proofread your messages. As we move away from face-to-face interactions with coworkers, it's important to reread your messages for clarity and emotional tone before hitting send. Sending a direct message or email that says "Let's talk" when you actually mean "These are good suggestions; let's discuss how to work them into the draft" might bring up unnecessary anxiety for the recipient. If you're worried about how your tone will come across, pick up the phone or offer to jump on a video chat. Your colleague (who is probably also working from home) might be glad for the chance to talk.



2. Be mindful of time zones. To help people in all time zones feel included, strive to delay decision-making until you've heard from everyone who should be involved. This is an especially good time to hone your documentation skills so everyone stays in the loop, and to see if your team could cover some meeting content over email, Slack, or another messaging platform instead. After switching to remote work, Humu, where Liz works, set up a 15-minute companywide meeting every day at 11:45 a.m. PT (which allows for team members on the East Coast and in Europe to join as well), during which the team can fill one another in on important announcements. Everything discussed during the meeting is also sent out afterward in a companywide email

3. Schedule time for serendipitous collaboration. When we work remotely, we miss out on all the impromptu [moments with our colleagues that lead to good ideas](#): chatting before and after meetings, catching up in the kitchen or hallway, and stopping by each other's desks. When meeting via phone or videoconference, schedule time for informal conversation at the beginning and end of meetings.

4. Make room for minibreaks. Stepping away from your desk for even five minutes helps you relax — and stay focused. Danish students who were given a short break before taking a test got significantly higher scores than their peers who didn't get any time to relax. Mollie has been using the app Time Out (for Macs), which reminds her to take periodic breaks to stretch, walk around, or change position at her desk.

5. Set up an after-work ritual. It's easy to overwork when you don't leave a physical office at a specific time each day, so it's extra important to keep healthy boundaries. Your brain will benefit from a signal that tells it, "Work is over!" Some ideas: Meditate, listen to music, read a magazine, or lift weights. (Some studies show that weight training boosts your mood more than cardio.) Cal Newport, author of [Deep Work](#), ends each day by transcribing any loose notes into a master task list, shutting down his computer, and then saying the phrase, "Schedule shutdown, complete." "Here's my rule," he writes. "After I've uttered the magic phrase, if a work-related worry pops to mind, I always answer it with the following thought process: I said the termination phrase."

6. Put time on your calendar to exercise. Commit to getting some physical activity by blocking off time to work out on your calendar. Need some working-out-from-home ideas? Try a [seven-minute workout](#), or a [variety of desk stretches](#) that might (almost) replace going to the gym, or just put on your favorite song and dance it out. Even better, make it a virtual group activity: Jump on a video call with a friend, pick a YouTube fitness video, and get your sweat on together.

HOW TO DE-STRESS AT HOME



GET EXTREMELY INTO BAKING



JUMP ON A VIDEO CALL WITH FRIENDS



DO A YOUTUBE WORKOUT



CLEAN AND ORGANIZE

LIZ FOSSLIE

@LIZ ANDMOLLIE

7. Check in on each other. This can be done by setting up virtual lunches, teatimes, or what social media management platform company Buffer terms [pair calls](#). For pair calls, Buffer employees opt in to be randomly paired with someone else at the company once a week. Calls have no set agenda; coworkers get to know each other in pairs by talking about their families, hobbies, and favorite shows. If your organization uses Slack, one easy way to set this up is through [Donut](#), a Slack bot that pairs people automatically.

8. Be thoughtful when you do head out. Not all of us have the ability to do our jobs from home. For the sake of those who still have to be physically present on the job (think doctors, cashiers, and pharmacists), be sure to wash your hands regularly and carefully when you go out, practice social distancing, and thank those who can't stay home.

In these uncertain times, many companies are striving for business continuity and supporting employees as best they can in a variety of ways. Flexible, virtual work arrangements help employees continue to do their jobs, but these unprecedented circumstances require adjustments that for many come with significant challenges. It's important now more than ever to support one another as we navigate the days ahead.