WORK/LIFE BALANCE

Mindfulness and the challenges of working from home in times of crisis

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Abstract Many employees unexpectedly were required to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. With this abrupt change came the challenge of blurred lines between career and personal life. Lacking designated home office spaces, countless individuals had to create improvised work setups in living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms—wherever there was space. Moreover, the closure of schools forced many working parents to attempt productivity while concurrently supervising their children. As a result of these changes, numerous employees have experienced lower work productivity, lessened motivation, increased stress, and poorer mental health. One approach that may help employees going through the challenges associated with working from home is mindfulness. Mindfulness may be particularly beneficial as it can (1) help employees mentally disconnect from work when they need to; (2) improve individuals' attention to work tasks and thereby improve their performance; and (3) allow workers to better manage screen fatigue. In this installment of Work/Life Balance, we elaborate on how mindfulness may help employees deal with these work issues, explain how mindfulness can be cultivated, and provide a list of mindfulness techniques. We also provide a set of recommendations for managers and team leaders responsible for their employees' well-being and productivity.

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1. The stress of working from home in unusual times

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has changed the way we live and work. Early in the year, many employees were abruptly required to telecommute. Quite suddenly and unexpectedly, countless individuals faced the challenges of juggling work with childcare, personal relationships, household chores, and family demands in general. Unless their dwellings already boasted dedicated home offices, workers were forced to improvise on the fly: dining tables became desks; couches became office chairs; and bedrooms, kitchens, and family rooms became shared workspaces. Instead of working fewer hours, many employees found themselves putting in extra time. Working from home often makes it harder to concentrate due to ambient distractions such as

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ringing doorbells, noisy pets, and interrupting children. In the opinion of experts (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.; Giurge & Bohns, 2020; Gorlick, 2020; Querstret & Cropley, 2012; Van Buggenhout et al., 2020), an inability to unplug and disconnect mentally from one's job can lead to lower productivity, lessened motivation, increased stress, and decreased mental health.

The most significant struggles associated with working from home stem from the blurred lines between work and personal life. Respondents in a recent survey (Routley, 2020) stated that the biggest challenges of working from home include not being able to unplug after hours, difficulties collaborating and/or communicating with colleagues, and a lack of motivation. Employees with younger children trying to maintain work productivity in unsuitable spaces alongside their kids face additional obstacles (Gorlick, 2020). The closure of schools and the associated transition to online student learning has forced many working parents to become full-time caretakers of their children (Gorlick, 2020). Those working from home have also encountered an entirely new hurdle: *Zoom fatigue*, a phenomenon of emotional and physical drain caused by video conferencing (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020).

It is vital that managers explore ways in which to help workers deal effectively with the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although productivity is important, the primary goal during crises should be to maintain productivity while concurrently protecting employees' mental health and well-being (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.; Giurge & Bohns, 2020; Van Buggenhout et al., 2020). Employee burnout inevitably will be a longer-term risk of major crises such as the current pandemic, and this should be of utmost concern to employers (Giurge & Bohns, 2020). Furthermore, employee well-being is beneficial to both staff and employers alike as it leads to enhanced organizational performance via increased employee health, reduced absenteeism, and reduced turnover (Danna & Griffin, 1999).

Employees that face such heightened work-from-home challenges may benefit from the practice of mindfulness. Specifically, mindfulness may aid telecommuting workers in three main ways: it can (1) help them disconnect from work when they need to, (2) improve their attention to work tasks and thereby improve their performance, and (3) allow them to better manage Zoom fatigue or screen fatigue in general. Before diving into how mindfulness is useful for tackling these issues, however, we turn our attention to explaining what mindfulness is and how it can be cultivated.

2. Mindfulness

In recent years, mindfulness has inspired considerable interest among academics and organizational managers alike (Toniolo-Barrios et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2016). In the literature, *mindfulness* is generally described as being aware of and paying attention to what is occurring in the present moment (e.g., thoughts, body sensations, surroundings), without judgment (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Put another way, mindfulness allows one to observe what is happening in the present moment, both inside and around oneself, without attaching any interpretation to what is being noticed (Shapiro et al., 2006). In a mindful state, one simply observes what is happening in the here and now, without making any kind of evaluative verdict about it (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Shapiro et al., 2006). As a result, mindfulness leads to an increased capacity for objectivity in relation to one's internal and external experiences, because mindfulness allows one to disidentify from their thoughts and emotions, and simply observe them instead (Shapiro et al., 2006).

Although mindfulness can be practiced through a variety of mindfulness techniques (e.g., meditation), one does not need to engage in a specific technique in order to cultivate mindfulness. One can go about their daily activities while still being mindful, as long as they are aware of and paying attention to the present moment without prejudice. The key to being mindful while doing anything, at any moment, is to remember to be attentive to and aware of what is occurring in the here and now. Mindfulness has a naturally occurring characteristic given that almost everyone has some capacity to be aware of and attend to the present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Therefore, mindfulness is not only a short-term state but also a trait that varies from person to person, as individuals differ in their general propensity or willingness to be mindful (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2017). Although remembering to be mindful may seem a simple task, it is not always easy; that is why engaging in more formal mindfulness techniques can be useful. Indeed, the regular and consistent practice of mindfulness techniques facilitates the cultivation of mindfulness and thus serves to increase one's levels of mindfulness, both in the short and long terms (Hölzel et al., 2011).

One way to cultivate mindfulness is via the practice of mindfulness meditation, which is a type of awareness meditation. This meditation approach emphasizes the detached observation of events happening from one moment to the next (e.g., passing thoughts, sounds in the environment), without analyzing or assigning meaning to them (Hülsheger et al., 2013; Kabat-Zinn, 1982). In mindfulness meditation, no event (e.g., emotion, thought, sensation, noise) is considered a distraction because all events are simply noted as they arise (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). This observant instance allows individuals to experience all physical and mental events simply as they are, without reflecting upon them or judging them as good or bad (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Shapiro et al., 2006). It is worth noting that mindfulness meditation is different from other meditation approaches such as concentrative meditation (e.g., transcendental meditation), whereby one directs one's attention toward a specific object, such as a mantra or sound (Hülsheger et al., 2013; Kabat-Zinn, 1982). Although mindfulness requires steady attention to the present moment, it also requires an open and receptive awareness of all events happening in the present moment, both internally (i.e., intrapsychic) and externally (i.e., in the environment).

There is no specific amount of time one should meditate for; this can vary from person to person, as it depends on how comfortable one feels with the technique. Nonetheless, one option of a well-known mindfulness meditation is the 3-Minute Breathing Space approach, which is brief yet very effective. In addition to meditation, mindfulness can also be stimulated through a variety of other techniques, such as body scan, grounding exercise, paying attention to one's breathing, and mindful check-in. All these techniques are very practical and easily adopted in an employee's daily life. Table 1 provides more details and instructions on the different mindfulness techniques.

3. Mindfulness may help employees working from home during a crisis

Mindfulness may help employees working from home in three key ways:

1. By facilitating psychological detachment from work (i.e., disconnecting from work);

2. By improving attention to work tasks and thereby improving performance; and

3. By allowing employees to better manage and recover from Zoom or screen fatigue.

Next, we turn our attention to how mindfulness may help with these work issues.

3.1. Disconnecting from work

The blurring of job and personal life boundaries makes it more difficult for many employees to unplug and disconnect from work (Routley, 2020). As a result, individuals may find it difficult to stop thinking about work after hours. In the literature, the ability to switch off mentally from work-related issues during off-job time is known as psychological detachment (Firoozabadi et al., 2018). The more someone can detach from work psychologically when off the clock, the more recovered that person will feel, thereby leading to enhanced well-being (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Steed et al., 2019). Thus, employees benefit more from their off-job time if they can disconnect from their job.

One of the mechanisms that interferes with one's ability to psychologically detach from work is work-related rumination (Querstret et al., 2017). *Work-related rumination* is defined as thinking about work-related issues and events when not working (Querstret & Cropley, 2012). Work-related rumination is the antipode of psychological detachment since one cannot be psychologically detached from work while still thinking about work problems. Because it causes one to pay attention to the present moment in a more objective manner, mindfulness leads to decreased levels of rumination (Bishop et al., 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Gu et al., 2015; Shapiro et al., 2006). In a mindful state, one will not dwell on the past or worry about the future (Good et al., 2016).

As an example, consider an employee who has been given a short deadline to write a report for her supervisor. She cannot stop thinking about the report and this causes stress and anxiety that affects her sleep. In this situation, the individual should remember to bring her attention back to the present moment, for instance by engaging in a body scan or grounding exercise. In addition to bringing her attention back to the present moment, mindfulness would also help her recognize the reality of the work situation without attaching anxiety-provoking judgements to it. Therefore, by being more mindful, she will be less likely to ruminate and be anxious about the whole thing.

Table 1. Mindfulness techniques: Details and instructions

Mindfulness technique	Instructions[a]	Purpose
Mindfulness meditation	This technique entails sitting in silence, anchoring one's attention to the present moment and noticing what is occurring in the *here and now*. No event (e.g., emotion, thought, sensation, noise) is considered a distraction, because all events are simply noted as they arise. One should not analyze or judge what is being noticed. Staying focused on the present moment may be challenging, and thus it is important not to criticize or blame oneself for getting distracted during the meditation; rather, one should simply realize that they got distracted and bring their attention back to the present.	To anchor one's attention to the present moment, in a non-judgemental way.
3-minute Breathing Space	This technique is a 3-minute meditation and it has three steps: • Step 1: Ask yourself: "What thoughts are going through my mind?", "What feelings are here?", "What body sensations are here right now?" • Step 2: Direct your attention to the physical sensation of the breath. Use the focus on your breath to anchor yourself in the present moment. • Step 3: In addition to the sensation of the breath, now expand your awareness to your body as a whole, to your posture and facial expression, and to any sensations that may emerge.	To become aware of one's inner experiences (e.g., thoughts, feelings, body sensations), and accept them as they are.
Body scan	After sitting comfortably, take a few slow long breaths and close your eyes. Use your imagination to envision a band of light circling the top of your head. As this exercise progresses, the band of light will slowly move down your body, and as it does, become aware of the different physical sensations you're feeling beneath the band of light. Move the band of light slowly from the top to the bottom of your body, noticing any sensations (e.g., pain, itches, tingling) on the different parts of your body.	To anchor one's attention to the present moment, and to become aware of one's bodily sensations.
Grounding exercise	In this technique, you should identify 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste. Repeat this process as many times as needed.	To identify objects and events that are happening now, in order to bring one's attention to the present moment.
Pay attention to the breath	Be aware of your breath and direct your attention to it. You can choose to either pay attention to the rising and falling of the stomach or to the subtle sensations in the nostrils (e.g., how cold or warm the air feels like in your nostrils).	To anchor one's attention to the present moment.

Table 1 (*continued*)

Mindfulness technique	Instructions[a]	Purpose
Mindful check-in	Ask yourself and answer the following questions: • What is happening right now inside me? • What am I feeling in my body right now? • What is happening right now in my environment?	To anchor one's attention to the present moment, to become aware of one's inner experiences, and to practice non-judgement.

[a] Except for the 3-minute breathing space, which already has a set time for practice, the techniques can be practiced for as long as needed or wanted.

3.2. Attention and task performance

Because the home environment can introduce numerous distractions (e.g., easy access to social media, household chores, ambient noise), employees may find it hard to concentrate on the job at hand. This could result in suboptimal performance and decreased productivity. To the extent that attentional focus drifts away from the work task, performance will be hindered (Beal et al., 2005). Home distractions therefore act as off-task attentional demands; for optimal performance, it is key that employees not let their focus wander. Because mindfulness entails paying attention to what is occurring in the present moment, it has been shown to lead to enhanced self-regulation of attention (Bishop et al., 2004; Good et al., 2016). According to Good et al. (2016), mindfulness leads to:

- Better anchoring of attention to the present moment (i.e., attentional stability);

- Better allocation of attention amid competing demands for attention (i.e., attentional control); and

- More economical use of cognitive resources (i.e., attentional efficiency).

Furthermore, mindfulness enhances sustained attention, which enables one to maintain attention to the present moment over long periods of time. It also leads to improved attention-switching skills, which enables one to swiftly bring their attention back to the present moment after identifying that the mind has wandered (Bishop et al., 2004). As such, mindfulness may facilitate optimal performance via increased on-task attention.

Distractions at home may also hinder performance because of the affective states they generate. Consider an employee who accesses their social media while working and, by chance, ends up seeing an upsetting Facebook post by a friend. Because of the heightened arousal created by this negative emotional state, task accomplishment may also be hindered (Beal et al., 2005). Given that empirical research has shown mindfulness leads to a more even-keeled emotional life (Brown & Ryan, 2003), as well as to reduced time to reach peak emotional arousal and return to baseline (i.e., shortened life-cycle of emotion; Good et al., 2016), mindfulness could also play a role in improving task performance by reducing emotional arousal.

Consider an employee who recognizes that he is distracted on the job and zoning out. In such a situation, the worker could anchor his attention on breathing exercises and then transfer his sharpened focus back to the task at hand.

3.3. Zoom or screen fatigue

Because most work meetings were moved online due to the pandemic, many workers suffered from Zoom fatigue—a phenomenon of drain caused by video conferencing (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020)—and/or screen fatigue in general. To better manage Zoom and screen fatigue, it is vital that one take action to prevent lassitude from occurring or, at a minimum, recover from the weariness after feeling initial symptoms. In that light, it is critical that employees modify their behavior preemptively with the goal of avoiding too much screen exposure. If this cannot be avoided, they must be able to recognize bodily cues and feelings of fatigue, and henceforth change their behavior in order to recover.

The process of guiding or changing one's behavior in order to achieve self-oriented goals and improved results is known as *self-regulation* (Karoly, 1993). Self-regulation plays a key role in improving one's well-being (Firoozabadi et al., 2018; Good et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2006; Tangney et al., 2004). To better elucidate the concept of self-regulation, consider the following example. An individual who sleeps only a few hours each night for several months will probably experience high fatigue. If the individual knows how to regulate himself/herself, he/she will be more likely to change behaviors to achieve better results. In this case, the individual will likely start sleeping longer hours to recover from their fatigue. This same example could easily be applied to Zoom or screen fatigue in the sense that an employee could strive to take regular breaks, communicate via other media (e.g., telephone, email; Fosslien & Duffy, 2020), or even use pen and paper to write notes when feeling fatigued due to screen exposure.

A certain degree of attention is necessary for effective self-regulation to occur; individuals must be in touch with their inner states and behaviors in order to pursue self-endorsed goals (Brown et al., 2007). Changing one's automatic behavior of sitting for hours in front of a computer is not a trivial task. For that to happen, one needs to be highly aware of their bodily sensations and cues that are indicative of strain. Mindfulness facilitates personal awareness of physical being and emotions, and this makes individuals better equipped to regulate themselves (Brown et al., 2007; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1982). As such, mindfulness may help employees regulate their behavior to better manage screen exposure. Consider these three approaches:

1. Engage in a mindful check-in every hour;

2. Engage in a 3-Minute Breathing Space meditation a few times during the workday; and

3. Engage in a longer meditation during a lunch break.

If the individual notices signs of fatigue during these exercises, they should strive to take a longer break from screen exposure.

Table 2 provides a summary of suggestions of mindfulness techniques that can be used in each situation. The list of options for each situation is neither mandatory nor exhaustive, but only suggestive.

4. How can managers and team leaders help?

Ensuring that their workers sustain productivity while maintaining enhanced well-being is a key responsibility of employers (Van Buggenhout et al., 2020). We offer the following advice to managers and team leaders regarding how to help employees during times of crisis:

1. Clearly communicate to your employees which tasks are top priority and demand first attention. This will allow workers to use their energy more efficiently by focusing their attention on important work, rather than busy work.

2. Educate your employees on how mindfulness can help. Share the mindfulness techniques explained in this article. You can also find additional mindfulness resources, exercises, and tools online.

3. Encourage your employees to discuss with you the challenges they are facing during the crisis. Make yourself available to listen, without judgement.

4. Have regular one-on-one meetings with your staff. Use these meetings to check in on them to discuss their challenges and review task progress with them.

5. If possible, avoid sending emails outside of regular work hours. Otherwise, your employees may feel compelled to respond right away, regardless of whether they are on the clock.

6. Let your staff know that getting professional help is an option. Provide organizational resources (e.g., counseling).

7. Start team meetings by encouraging team members to do a quick mindful check-in with themselves. Sharing their insights with others may be a good idea, but should be optional.

8. To avoid Zoom fatigue, make sure that speaking over the phone is also an option. Avoid scheduling back-to-back virtual meetings, which can sometimes run into each other.

Table 2. Suggestions of mindfulness techniques for each work situation

Challenging situation	Examples of mindfulness techniques[a]	Reason to engage in the technique
Not being able to stop thinking about work	• Body scan • Grounding exercise	By anchoring one's attention to the present moment, it will be easier to stop thinking about work issues that happened in the past or worry about work problems that could potentially happen in the future. In addition, these techniques allow one to see situations in a more objective manner, and consequently become less caught up in repetitive negative thoughts.
Feeling easily distracted while working	• Pay attention to the breath • Grounding exercise	By anchoring one's attention to the present moment, as well as identifying, without judgement, the events that are happening in one's surroundings, one will likely become less reactive to distractions and less emotionally involved with them.
Feeling Zoom or screen fatigue	• Mindful check-in • 3-minute Breathing Space • Mindfulness meditation	These techniques allow one to become aware of signs of fatigue, thereby improving one's ability to self-regulate. Engaging in longer mindfulness meditation periods is also a way to recover from fatigue.

[a] The list of options for each type of situation is not mandatory nor exhaustive, but only suggestive.

5. When Zoom is here to stay

In this article, we defined mindfulness and detailed how it can help employees deal with well-being and productivity challenges while working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, we suggested that practicing mindfulness is beneficial in overcoming three key hurdles: (1) difficulty in disconnecting from work; (2) difficulty in maintaining focus on work tasks and, thus, sustaining performance; and (3) Zoom and screen exposure fatigues. We provided instruction as to how mindfulness can be cultivated and proffered a list of mindfulness techniques. Finally, given that managers and team leaders are charged with ensuring their employees' well-being and productivity, we also detailed a set of recommendations for them.

Covid-19 is the single-most serious pandemic of the last 100 years. It arose at a unique time in human history, for even 20 years ago, most organizations would not have been able to cope with the abrupt shift to employees working from home. Two decades ago, in-home WiFi was not yet a reality, let alone the Zoom virtual meeting technology that is so ubiquitous today. While the pandemic and its consequences have been truly awful, it technically could have come at a far worse time in that organizations would not have been able to accommodate telecommuting. If the crisis ended today and everything returned to pre-pandemic status, the advice given herein would not be very useful. After all, if mindfulness for employees working from home were only about coping with the turmoil occasioned by the pandemic, then once the pandemic ends, it would not matter any more.

We contend that mindfulness for employees working from home matters for two main reasons. First, while we might hope that humanity does not encounter any further major health crises in the future, this is highly doubtful; there may well be similar events that force workers to telecommute. These individuals will face many of the same challenges and stressors that we have suggested herein can be aided by the practice of mindfulness. Second, many large firms—including Facebook, Twitter, Shopify, Slack, Box, and Square—have already announced that most of their employees will work from home well into 2021 and beyond. This decision was made not only for the sake of employee health, but also because these companies have experienced increases in productivity and lowered costs (McLean, 2020) from having workers off premises. Other companies—including Google, Microsoft, Morgan Stanley,

JPMorgan, Capital One, Zillow, Amazon, PayPal, and Salesforce—have extended their work-from-home options substantially for similar reasons (Kelly, 2020). While there are advantages to these firms and their staff regarding work-from-home arrangements, employees will still face inherent problems like isolation, screen fatigue, and inability to separate work from home life. Providing individuals and teams with mindfulness training and coaching will enable firms to not only realize potential benefits, but also maintain a healthier and more productive workforce.

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