



7 areas of mental wellbeing to nurture while working in self-isolation



Stay at home.








As the coronavirus develops, the single most important thing we can all do is to **stay at home** in order to **protect our healthcare systems** and **save lives**. But working from home, especially under quarantine or self-isolation for extended periods, poses challenges to our mental wellbeing.

Over the coming weeks, we may experience loneliness through disconnection, stress amid the uncertainty, or difficulties navigating new family dynamics as everybody goes about their daily lives under the same roof.

As the world adjusts to this new normal, we caught up with Matthew Knight, Chief Freelance Officer at **Leapers**, a mental health support community for freelancers and the self-employed, to explore the challenges faced by remote workers.

This short guide outlines the steps you can take to make the transition as easy as possible. Focusing on seven key areas of wellbeing, these measures will help you to proactively manage your mental health while working from home.

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1. Connection

Support through loneliness

Humans are social beings; we're hardwired to need community.
Feelings of loneliness are normal.

What to look out for

Most people who are currently working from home are used to busy office environments. This means abruptly transitioning from being surrounded by people to being around very few.

While many workers are familiar with occasional work from home days, prolonged periods of weeks or even months is another kettle of fish. Some people may find this isolation overwhelming, which can have wider consequences. Extended periods of loneliness put our bodies into a state of stress, and can impact our immune systems' abilities to cope.

“The power to change lives doesn't just come from what we say, it comes from how ‘present’ we can be with others, how willing we are to listen to their story, to put ourselves in their shoes and to try and truly understand what they are experiencing.”



Dr Hazel Harrison,
Clinical Psychologist

What to do

It's a misconception that loneliness arises when no one else is around – it's more likely a lack of meaningful connection. So now is the time to reach out and support your colleagues. Regular meaningful communication, empathy and lashings of gallows humour are what we should aim for. Here are a few ideas for getting connected:

Schedule in socials

Book in reminders to connect with people.
Work related, or not.

Don't just write

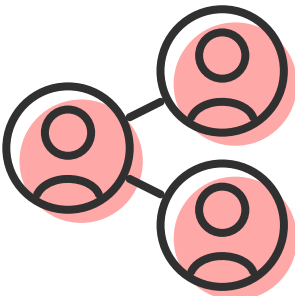
Use your full communicative arsenal –
voice calling, video, fitness app, or gaming.

Check in with others

Different from a transactional 'catch-up',
checking in should focus on how you're feeling.
Make sure you're sharing and listening.

Share your experiences

We're all in this together. By opening up about the
challenges you're facing and how you're dealing
with them, you could help others manage their own.
A problem shared is a problem halved.



2. Calmness

Managing stress and worry

An infectious outbreak is, by anyone's measure, a stressful scenario. But dealing with this uncertainty in isolation, all while managing our daily duties at work, can lead to additional levels of stress, worry and anxiety.

What to look out for

When faced with a variety of pressures, we can be overcome by generalised feelings of concern, and a loss of control amid the newness.

You might be worried about things like getting ill and how it might affect you, or perhaps it's the health and wellbeing of elderly relatives that's causing stress. Financial concerns and managing family relationships are other common and valid worries at the time. Any of these can make us feel pent up and tense, making it difficult to switch off or to focus on the task at hand.

When dealing with uncertain situations, it's more important than ever to remain calm.



What to do

DON'T PANIC. Feelings of stress are entirely normal in these unusual circumstances – and they bear no reflection on your ability to do your job.

Take out your headphones and turn off the television.

It's important to stay informed, but a continuous stream of news that's spun to tap into nervous energy isn't always helpful.

Keep up-to-date with government and public health advice, both nationally and locally. Bookmark sources such as:

WHO (World Health Organization): [who.int](https://www.who.int)

Local governments: [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) (UK), [health.gov.au](https://www.health.gov.au) (AU), [usa.gov/health](https://www.usa.gov/health) (US)

There's no right or wrong. Go out for a run, read a book or do the ironing. Find what works best for you.

“By knowing ourselves and recognising the ways that stresses can impact us, or the coping traps we fall into, we can build our resilience and continue to live our lives the way we want to, even when we face hardships.”



Dr Heather Bolton,
Head of Psychology, Unmind

3. Happiness

Minding mood in isolation

At best, self-isolation is morbidly fascinating;
At worst, it's depressing.

What to look out for

Drastic changes in structure can tip the balance in our mood. If you're unused to working from home for long periods of time, it can be a shock to the system.

This can be compounded by compulsory isolation, jeopardised businesses, strained relationships and uncertainty about the future. It's easy to feel frustrated, bored, or worse – low in mood.

The building blocks of positive mental health that we often take for granted are compromised when we're forced to spend time away from our usual lives. Even if we're naturally introverted and enjoy time alone, prolonged periods of isolation can take toll on our mood, so we need to take proactive steps to avoid developing sustained low mood or depression.



What to do

Unless you're in self-isolation or full quarantine, avoid spending an entire day cooped up indoors. If your government allows it, get outside. Enjoy the fresh air, daylight, and try to take some exercise. These are crucial components in boosting mood.

For those stuck indoors, it's equally important to get some time away from your screens. Plan a diary that factors in yoga sessions, stretching, breathing exercises, regular sleep routines, and healthy food intake.

Here are some techniques to help boost your mood:

- Try not to be self-critical and accept you can't be perfect.
- If everything seems negative, try to look for exceptions.
- Watch out for biases in your thinking.
- Treat thoughts as thoughts and try to gain some distance from them.
- Practice mindfulness and just be in the moment.

“Learn to accept the inner stream of thoughts, feelings that come up from moment to moment. Acceptance is probably the most important mindfulness skill.”



Steve Choden,
Former Buddhist monk;
Secular mindfulness teacher;
Honorary fellow at Aberdeen
University

4. Coping

Setting boundaries between life and work

While working from home, the physical boundaries between life and work are literally blurred. This is reflected in our minds too.

What to look out for

Obligatory home working will disrupt our daily routines of getting up, commuting, doing work and then returning home.

Meanwhile we may struggle with the new balancing act of managing family life with the fluctuating demands of work. Without mindful intervention, it can be easy to lose the boundaries between work and home life.

“Work can enhance our self-esteem and give us identity and purpose. But overworking can make us irritable, restless and give us trouble sleeping or concentrating. To learn how to switch off from work, you need to take control and work at it.”



Professor Mark Cropley,
Professor of Health Psychology,
Co-director MSc Health Psychology

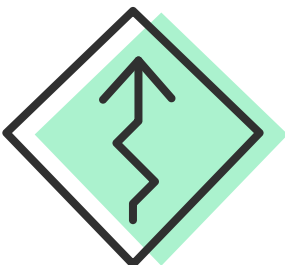
What to do

Avoid working in your bedroom. If you must, then do it in a designated working area. It's difficult to establish boundaries when we're spending all of our time in the same space.

Structure is essential. Two-way dialogue with direct reports and setting clear expectations is really important. Agreeing what work needs to be delivered – rather than just the expectation of being present – will make us less inclined to remain glued to our screens, ensuring our instant communication availability status is green.

Design your day in advance, ideally remaining pretty close to how it was before COVID-19 – get up at a set time, have breakfast, use your would-be commute time to read, listen to music, play Candy Crush (whatever works for you), and then commence your day.

You shouldn't feel the need to be online constantly – no one spends the entire eight hours at their desks in the office. Breaks will make you more productive in the long run. Similarly, shutting down at the end of the day is important – close your lid, avoid looking at emails, and batten down the hatches for another evening of self-isolation.



5. Health

Getting active and eating healthily

It stands to reason that the longer we're sat down indoors, the less physical activity we'll get.

What to look out for

Physical and mental health are intertwined. Stress and anxiety can be worsened by the fact self-isolation restricts our typical opportunities for movement – such as commutes, tea rounds and meetings. And just like the rest of our bodies, our brains depend on good blood flow and glucose metabolism to work properly. Therefore exercise is even more critical in these sedentary times.

What to do

If you aren't in quarantine, try not to spend all day cooped up indoors. Take a walk in the fresh air or go for a run around the park. To get your blood pumping indoors, there are plenty of guided exercise videos and classes freely available online for everything from mindfulness meditations to yoga classes.

For those who track their biometrics with wearable technology, try not to obsess over the drop in step counts. Plan your diary with plenty of exercise breaks and remember that quarantining will pass and normal routines will be resumed soon enough.



There's no magic food guaranteed to protect you against coronavirus, but there are nutrients that will keep your immune system functioning effectively. These are the five types of nutrients and which foods to find them in:

1. **Vitamin C** – citric fruits, red and green peppers, broccoli
2. **Vitamin E** – almonds, sunflower seeds, hazelnuts
3. **Zinc** – baked beans, cashews, chickpeas
4. **Carotenoids** – carrots, kale, apricots
5. **Omega-3 Fatty Acids** – oily fish, flax seeds, walnuts

As a rule of thumb, to ensure you're getting the right level of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants, try filling half of your plate with vegetables and fruits.

“Food is the foundation for the structure and function of the trillions of cells in our body. From our skin and hair to our muscles, bones, digestive and immune systems, and brain function. So it makes sense that a good nutritional intake is vital for our physical and mental wellbeing.”



Sue Luscombe,
Registered Dietitian, NHS;
Managing Director, Hampden Health

6. Sleep

Maintaining a routine

A physically active day will leave our bodies restful and ready for sleep. As home working is typically more sedentary, the consequences could be felt at night.

What to look out for

While working from home, it's possible that we begin to disassociate our environment with sleep – this is particularly pertinent to those working from their bedrooms.

Missing out on quality sleep will impact our ability to cope with the pressures of the day, the unfamiliarity of the situation and possible heightened anxiety around the outbreak.

Tiredness is both a cause and an indicator of mental ill-health. Unlike many other mental health issues, sleep doesn't come with a stigma attached. So if someone says they're struggling with sleep during this unusual time, it might actually represent a deeper underlying issue. Checking in properly will help uncover issues before they become problems.

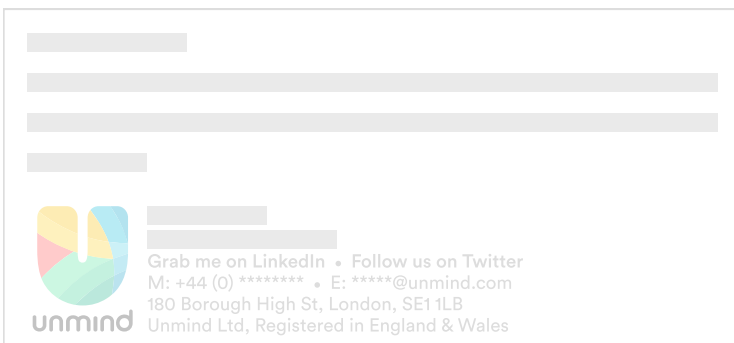
8 hours sleep – or wherever your sweet spot is – needs to be up there with factors like blood sugar, how much water we've drunk, what we've eaten, and whether we've exercised.



What to do

Try not to work in your bedroom. While this isn't an option for many people across the world, most can avoid working from the bed itself.

When the boundries between work and home are blurred, it's more important than ever to avoid drifting into checking emails and continuing duties late into the evening. Try using a note in your email signature to let people know you respect their own working hours. Here's one we made earlier...



*At Unmind, we work flexibly so whilst it suits me to email now,
I do not expect a response or action outside of your own working hours.*

“The research is showing that by affording yourself better sleep, better opportunities for sleep, and increased quality around the timing of sleep, you’ll perform better.”



Professor Jason Ellis
Professor of Sleep Science; Director of
Northumbria Sleep Research Laboratory

7. Fulfilment

Balancing productivity

In isolation, it's important to stay connected to your personal values, and to channel your energy in the right places.

What to look out for

For those unused to remote working, productivity levels can go both ways. You can fall into the always-on trap of over-producing to keep up professional appearances, or you can lose rhythm and give way to the many distractions that exist in our homes.

Both can pose their own challenges to mental health. Over-productivity can make us struggle to cope, while a lack of it could increase apathy as we lose track of the meaning and fulfillment our regular working routine provides.

"Try setting yourself small, manageable and achievable goals. Minimise all possible distractions – this includes multi-tasking. Test and experiment on what works for you."



Dr Kate Daley,
Clinical Psychologist,
Digital Mental Health Consultant

What to do

Don't be over-productive. Be sure to take regular breaks, chat to colleagues, family or friends about stuff that's unrelated to work. Let yourself slack off from time to time.

Agree daily structures and goals that allow for wiggle room with your line manager. Better to take your time and do a project properly than to rush it and pay the consequences with your mental health.

Stay connected to your personal values as much as possible. How can you adapt what you do to serve the same purpose within the limits you have?

Here are a few ideas to help you connect with the meaning in your job:

- Mindset is key: hold on to the bigger picture and remember it will end.
- Try to stick to a routine.
- Cultivate a sense of achievement and take meaning from small tasks.
- Nurture your relationships and keep connected with video.
- Accept that some relationships will need to be adapted and negotiated.
- Look out for others who might be vulnerable or lonely.



Remember, this will pass.

Many people don't have the option to work from home.

Millions of people across the world are feeling the impact of the coronavirus on the global economy, facing mass layoffs, staff cuts, reduced hours or insufficient sick pay.

Meanwhile independent workers and contractors will come up against project cancellations, postponed events and indefinitely delayed meetings.

Workers already in precarious situations are being hit the hardest. Wherever possible, find ways of supporting small and independent businesses during the outbreak.

And remember, no matter how uncertain or challenging things might feel right now, humans have a way of rebuilding and recovering. We will endure.

In summary: A quick guide to looking after your mind in isolation

Focusing on seven key areas of wellbeing, these measures will help you to proactively manage your mental health while working from home amid the coronavirus crisis.

1. **Happiness:** Taking measures against low mood amid isolation.
2. **Calmness:** Keeping stress, worry and anxiety about the virus under control.
3. **Coping:** Managing the demands of shifted work schedules and new home life dynamics.
4. **Sleep:** Getting enough quality sleep to deal with the uncertainty and demands ahead.
5. **Health:** Getting active and eating healthily to compensate for more sedentary days.
6. **Connection:** Reaching out and offering (as well as asking for) support through loneliness.
7. **Fulfilment:** Staying connected to personal values and channeling energy in the right places.

