



Productive Seclusion: How to Make the Most of Working From Home

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Amidst the lockdowns in response to COVID-19, many of you have been working from home, perhaps for the very first time. For those who have never had this experience, it may feel overwhelming. Suddenly, time and focus are a thing of the past. But as someone who has been working remotely for the past two years, I can assure you that not all hope is lost. I have picked up a handful of habits that have allowed me to not only focus, but to actually be my most productive at home. Here are **seven** easy tips to incorporate into your day to enable you to be productive too.

Goal-setting

The most important step to making sure you stay productive, whether you are working from home or back to your normal schedule, is to think about **what you want to accomplish**. What exactly are you trying to achieve or complete today, tomorrow, this week, or this month? If this question seems overwhelming, focus on your most pressing goals. The Prophet ﷺ reminded us to “Take up good deeds only as much as you are able, for the best deeds are those done regularly even if they are few.” Following this prophetic advice can be life-changing. Identifying our goals and then creating a realistic way of following through with them gradually allows us to make our efforts more manageable. Not to mention, as countless [“scientific” books](#) have now proven, having small (achievable) and consistent goals allows you to experience reward from accomplishing even a little a day and hence motivates you day by day to maintain and increase good habits. Say, for example, your goal is to memorize the Qur’an. So you set a manageable goal of reading for 20 minutes a day. The first day goes by and you feel good. You sense the reward of having achieved even something as little as reading (and not necessarily memorizing yet) the Qur’an. But that sense of accomplishment motivates you to do it again and again, until you find yourself memorizing every day for an hour. And ultimately, this is how you create habits.

To identify your goals, start with your work or children’s school responsibilities since they are more likely to have set expectations and hard deadlines. What projects are you working on and what deadlines do you have to meet? Write these

down along with the ideal completion date for each. Then move on to your personal goals, which can include spiritual, emotional, and family goals. Don't limit yourself to things you need to get done in your day-to-day life. Sure, write down all of the chores you have to get around to like laundry and scrubbing the bathroom. But also think about all of the other projects you've wanted to do around the house or in your life. Always a dream gardener but never enough time? Keep telling yourself you're going to read more Islamic books? Planning to incorporate a few minutes of [mindfulness techniques](#) a day to keep track of your thoughts and emotions? Well, now's the time. Write down—yes, I mean literally *write*—all of these goals, and organize them by level of priority: high, medium, or low. Once you know *what* you want to do, you can move on to *how* you're going to do it.

<i>Task:</i>	<i>Deadline:</i>	<i>Priority:</i>
<i>Work: Submit proposal</i>	<i>Wednesday, April 1st</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Personal: Memorize 2 lines of Qur'an</i>	<i>Daily</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Personal: Grocery shop</i>	<i>Before this Monday</i>	<i>Medium</i>

Block-scheduling

Scheduling your time is the answer to “how” you achieve your goals. And when I say scheduling, I mean having every hour (or blocks of hours) of your day planned. Don't worry, it's not as intimidating as it sounds. Choose one day of the week (ideally, Sunday night) and do a “brain dump.” Basically, sit and write down all of the tasks and goals you have for the upcoming week (you can also do this on a monthly basis). Then, once you've identified what you need to do and you have prioritized each task, write down which day or days of the week you will work on each task. To give you a simple example, I had two tasks this week: 1) to write this article and 2) work on my dissertation. The first task is a “one and done,” meaning that it's a short-term project that can be completed in one or a few sittings. I planned to have it done in one day, so I dedicated Monday afternoon to write this article. The other task was to work on my dissertation, a long-term project to say the least. In light of all of my other responsibilities and personal goals, I have

committed to working on my dissertation daily for two hours. So, as I started to plan my schedule for the week, I blocked off 8am-10am every morning for working on my dissertation. Once you've figured out what *you* generally need to do each day of the week, take a few minutes every night before you go to sleep to plan exactly how that's going to look the next day. Here's a sample schedule:

6:30-7:30am	Wake up, <i>Fajr</i> , drink coffee, get ready for the day
7:30-8am	Qur'an
8am-10am	Work on dissertation; daily target: 500 words
10am-12pm	Write first draft of article
12pm-1pm	Lunch, <i>Dhuhr</i>
1pm-3pm	Revise article draft
3pm-3:30pm	Break, <i>Asr</i>
3:30-5pm	Submit article draft and review comments
5pm-6:30pm	Go for a run, shower
6:30-7:30pm	<i>Maghrib</i> , Dinner
7:30-9:30pm	Laundry, cleaning, other chores
9:30-10:30pm	<i>Isha</i> , Reading
10:30pm	Sleep

As you can tell, block-scheduling requires you to essentially plan out every hour of the day. But that does not mean you are working every minute of the day. In fact, it's crucial to schedule in break times, family bonding, and even meals. The point in doing all of this is that it allows you to 1) not waste your day thinking about what you're going to do next, and 2) hold yourself accountable. So when you have every hour of the day planned, the moment you find yourself aimlessly scrolling through Facebook for half an hour, you'll realize exactly how much time you lost working on a certain task.

With your children at home, "focus" or "work" times may feel like a luxury of the past. Parents with older children, however, have some respite. Plan an activity or allot "free time" for your kids during certain hours of the day, and specifically inform them that within those allotted hours (e.g., 10am-12pm) you are not to be

disturbed. To make this more realistic in the long run, consider offering your kids incentives if they manage to not disturb you during this time period. This way, both you and your children can benefit from having a set schedule to retain normalcy and, might I add, the occasional (healthy) break from your kids.

One of the most intimidating aspects of block-scheduling is feeling like your day is set in stone. So, if something pops up, like a sick child or a random work assignment, all is lost. Scheduling, however, is primarily meant to keep you on track to achieving your goals and holding yourself accountable, so if other needs arise, that's OK. When something urgent or unexpected emerges, take a step back, reassess your daily tasks, and rearrange your schedule to meet your priorities. Rest assured, this is entirely normal and all part of the process.

If you are having trouble with creating a daily schedule, the best way to start is by blocking off times for *salah*. For those of you who may struggle with praying five times a day or praying on time, this trick is a particularly important first step. When you plan your day around your prayers, then you know exactly where and what you will be doing when the time of *salah* comes in, and you will be mentally prepared ahead of time to take a *salah* break. For those of you who are looking to increase certain actions, like praying *sunnah* prayers or allotting time for *dhikr*, this works great as well. Because, in order to create a habit (e.g., making *dhikr*), you need to repeat an action enough until it becomes routine.

Routine

One of the best perks of block-scheduling is that it creates a sense of routine in your life. This is extremely important to keep yourself motivated and productive. When you don't have a routine, you lose track of your time and spend most of your energy on simply getting through the day. After identifying your goals and scheduling your day, the best way to create a routine is by doing the same thing at the same time every day. So for example, you create the routine of jumpstarting your day every morning by making your bed. You're up, you've washed your face,

and you've made your bed, so you've signaled to your brain that you are ready to begin working. Even better than making your bed, however, is creating the habit of starting your day every morning by reading Qur'an. That way, once you've created this habit, even on mornings you feel groggy, your brain immediately reminds you to fall back into routine.

Create the vibe

Another great way to create a routine is by mimicking the habits you have when *not* working from home. This means washing up when getting out of bed, getting dressed, and being fully ready to tackle your day. Yes, this also means brushing your hair and getting out of your pajamas even on the days you work from home.

Once you're refreshed and dressed, you'll want to transition to your "workstation." Find a space in your home—which may be a make-shift table for many—to dedicate as your work station. This is ideally an office space, or perhaps an allotted seat at the kitchen table, to signal that when you're there, it's all work and no play. That way, you tell your brain that when you're at your workstation, it's time to focus and be productive. When you want to take a break or do something unrelated to your scheduled tasks, make it a point to leave that space to maintain its work vibe.

Food prep

One key to productivity is eliminating the time your mind wanders to complete your next task. Block-scheduling and routine help keep you on track and keep your day moving forward. One of the most common daily tasks that people get stuck on is food. What am I going to eat for lunch today? What am I craving? Should I cook something or eat out? Concern for what we're going to do for what is usually only an hour of our day at most (hopefully) sometimes takes hours to figure out. Instead of wasting energy debating what you're going to eat, plan ahead. Ideally, it's best to figure out what you and your family will be eating for the entire week ahead of

time and shop accordingly. That way, you get the benefit of not aimlessly walking around in a grocery store and buying unnecessary things (like tapioca bubbles as I did this week), while also knowing beforehand what you'll have to eat every day. This is also a great opportunity to involve your kids. Ask them what they are all craving and together create a menu of the week's meals and hang it up in the kitchen. Many people find it easiest to cook for the entire week on Sunday, but if you're like me and prefer fresh meals, I recommend preparing for your meal as you tune into your daily dose of news, lectures, or even those endless conference calls you'll now have the pleasure of joining.

Physical activity

Even though it's near the end of my list, physical activity is by no means any less significant to maintaining productivity. Many of you have heard or read about the numerous short-term and long-term benefits of exercise. But when you're working from home and are experiencing higher stress or anxiety levels, physical activity can be a real game-changer. It's an opportunity to clear your mind, release endorphins (aka feel-good neurotransmitters), and reset your day. One of the greatest blessings of enduring COVID-19 at this time of the year is the fact that most of us will be experiencing warmer weather. Go out for a speed walk, run, bike ride, or engage in other outdoor activities. There are also plenty of online videos to tune into for in-home strength training. As an avid gym-goer, I would be lying if I said motivating myself to work out at home is just as easy. It's not. So text a friend or family member and FaceTime one another over some squats and lunges. Once you start to sweat, I promise you won't regret it.

Airplane mode

Last but not least, give yourself a break. And by that, I mean a break from screen time that you'll already be overdosing on. Put your phone on airplane mode, [deactivate social media](#), hide your devices—do whatever it takes for you to disconnect and give your eyes and mind a break. This is of course not only

important because of the anxiety scrolling through social media induces or the unnecessary stress reading every article about the virus can cause, but because when we constantly check our phones, we do not allow our minds to focus. In order to reach peak productivity, we need to have zero distractions, which means no background music and no email-checking twitches. Things may feel lonelier these days, and this may be the last thing you're looking to do, but by allowing your mind to reach a state of "[deep work](#)," you can get more things done in shorter periods of time, giving you more time to bond with your loved ones and getting around to those bigger goals you've been dreaming of accomplishing.

Conclusion

In spite of the abrupt changes to your schedules and routines, know that you can still be productive in the coming days and weeks. Sometimes, it just requires a little [motivation](#). For me, one of the most inspiring reminders is the hadith of the Prophet ﷺ, "Take benefit of five before five: your youth before your old age, your health before your sickness, your wealth before your poverty, your free time before you are preoccupied, and your life before your death." Now more than ever this advice rings true to all of us. Time is passing. Our health feels precarious. For some of us, our sources of income are being threatened. Know that one day we will be asked how we spent our time, health, and wealth. InshAllah, as a result of your efforts to adapt amidst uncertainty and to be more productive in working towards achieving your goals, you will be able to look back and confidently say that you tried your best and made the most of your time.