When Workplace Anxiety Hits Home: Dealing with Work from Home Stress

At a glance

- Understand that experiencing anxiety or stress, either temporarily or for longer periods, is a common condition – and help is available if you or a loved one need it
- It's important to be able to recognize – and shortcut – the causes of stress to make work and home life as stress-free as possible
- Making small changes to behaviors and patterns of work at home can have an impact on your wellbeing and work

Working from home more stressful than we thought

Working from home temporarily can be a welcome break and even fun. Suddenly there are no long commutes in traffic, or unexpected interruptions from colleagues. But when working from home lasts more than a few days, or stretches out indefinitely, like in a pandemic, the line between work and home can become blurred, leading to confusion, anxiety, stress and even work from home burnout – a condition recently recognized by the World Health Organization.

Recognizing contributing factors when working from home

Work from home stress isn't just the stress of your job transferred to your dining room table. Experts agree that the way we work and the environment around us can significantly affect our mental state, health and work performance. Common contributing factors to work from home stress can include:

- **Lack of daily structure –** with no physical commute, or the routines of the normal workday around us, it's easy to work too many hours, skip lunch or let work bleed into other parts of the day or night. It's common for work from home employees to spend 1-3 hours a day more on their work, taking time away from personal or family activities and responsibilities.

- **Distractions –** the freedoms and conveniences of working from home soon become unwelcome distractions. The mail carrier, home deliveries, a neighbor stopping by and the temptations of having the fridge so close at hand, all interrupt workflow and focus to the point where you feel you make little progress with your work and have to work longer hours to make up for it.

- **Multi-tasking –** we think we can do it all (work, household chores, taking care of the kids) but if you are not crossing at least some things off your list on a regular, or even daily, basis, it could be a sign that you're taking on too much and may become overwhelmed.

- **Sleepless nights –** If you work at night or even too late in your day, thoughts of your to-do list and other work worries can follow you to bed, leading to poor sleep quality and problems with concentration the following day. Making a habit of this night after night will lead to chronic sleep deficit which can put you at greater risk for high blood pressure, weakened immunity and cognitive difficulties.

- **Alcohol use –** when you feel overworked or stressed – especially with situations like a pandemic – a glass or two of wine can be relaxing at the end of the day. But heavier alcohol use (more than one drink a day for women and two for men) can interrupt natural sleep patterns, leading to a lack of sleep over time and less ability to cope with whatever the next day brings.

Making small changes for big results

Don't worry. If you feel distracted, unproductive and anxious about your work from home situation you are not alone. Making even small changes to your environment and way you work can result in big differences for your work productivity and mental wellbeing. Try some of the following to see what works best for you.

- **Recreate your workday schedule –** it's tempting to work when you feel like it. After all, nobody is looking over your shoulder. But recreating a similar schedule and routine to the one you have at your workplace can keep your organized, on track and provide comfort in its consistency.

- **Build Physical Boundaries –** not everyone has the luxury of a home office or even a spare room to work in. Even if you're working at a table in the corner of a bedroom or basement, look for ways to separate and "zone" the space for work. Re-arrange furniture, move a bookcase and create a physical barrier between the place you work and the distractions of the rest of the home.

- **Set Personal Boundaries too –** let family members or others who share your home know that certain times are dedicated, as much as possible, to work, and other times you will be free to talk and catch up. Set your phone to silent and do not disturb, sending unwanted callers to voicemail and place a note on your house or apartment door letting mail carriers, delivery people and neighbors know not to disturb you during certain hours of the day.

- **Set and Safeguard for Yourself –** self-care is an essential tool in keeping ourselves mentally and physically healthy. Don't let work steal down time and relaxation. Schedule a run on the treadmill, a walk around the block with the dog on your calendar with a reminder to ping you into action. Try a relaxation or meditation app on your phone or set time aside in your week for the things that make you feel calm and relaxed: reading before bed, a hot bath or a vigorous basement workout to blow away the stresses of the day.

There are many simple steps that with a little discipline can create a heathy separation between your work and your home life. Try some of these for yourself. If you still feel anxious or stressed, consider talking with your doctor. Or you can also speak in confidence to a trained counselor by texting or calling the Disaster Distress Helpline of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration at 1-800-985-5990.