



## Work from Home Burnout

14 September 2020

For many years, a few decades in fact, employees have been wanting the opportunity to work from home. Some of my clients have in the past spent three hours a day commuting to work. Which around Johannesburg is not that unusual. That adds up to fifteen hours a week, which is almost two whole working days just travelling to and from work. I have seen proposals submitted and reasons given for and against the idea. And then the Covid-19 pandemic hit us and working from home became something necessary. Now millions of people around the world are working from home and have been doing so for some months. And, it turns out, working from home has come with some challenges. In the last six months, a new phrase has entered the writings in journals and magazines – “Work from Home Burnout”. Forbes, Harvard Business Review, Fortune Magazine, and WebMD, amongst a whole host of other publications, have all weighed in with their comments and advice.

### **Not working in the office carries some downsides.**

- Your manager can no longer see you work and how much you work, and so workload can be distributed incorrectly.
- Your manager/company may feel that since you work from home you should be doing more work each day as you no longer have to spend time commuting.
- Your manager/company may be worried you are slacking off at home and pile on the work and deadlines.
- Working and living in the same building means the lines between work and non-work become blurry. Afternoons blend in with evenings. Weekdays turn into weekends.
- Colleagues often make it difficult to maintain boundaries by sending emails or making calls after the usual working hours, which research has shown people feel compelled to read.
- Data from studies in the USA, Canada, and Europe show people are working approximately 2-3 hours more per day while working from home. It seems like South Africans are experiencing the same thing too from what people tell me.



### **Signs of Work from Home Burnout:**

1. Exhaustion and lack of energy. Mood changes such as irritability, sadness, and anger. Symptoms of depression such as hopelessness, loss of interest in things you used to enjoy, and fatigue.
2. Feeling ineffective and unproductive, procrastination, increased feelings of negativity about your job, feeling numb or apathetic about your work and too tired to care about anything work-related, not completing work on time, poor quality of work, losing track of tasks, taking longer to accomplish tasks, making more mistakes.
3. Experiencing physical symptoms such as chest pain, headaches, increased illnesses, heart palpitations, dizziness or fainting, or gastrointestinal problems or pain.
4. Being too tired to exercise. Ignoring calls from family and friends because you have been in too many Zoom meetings all day. Drinking more alcohol than normal in order to cope.
5. Unable to sleep at night because of waking up and starting work at 7 am and continuing until 11 pm, and never being able to switch off from work. Getting poor sleep, experiencing insomnia, or having trouble falling asleep.

### **Some things you can do to prevent “Work from Home Burnout”:**

- Put on your work clothes every morning as if you were going to work. When it is time to work put on work clothes. When it is your personal time wear what you usually do when you are not working.
- Consider replacing your morning commute with a walk around the park, or even around your garden.
- Have a designated area in your home for work.
- Set consistent work hours. You cannot always stick to them, but try and keep to them most of the time. Employees who feel “on” all the time are at high risk of burnout, especially when working from home.
- Focus on the most important work – top priority issues. Don’t just work to keep busy.
- Have breaks and get outside when you can.

- Sleep adequately and take time off work a few hours before you go to bed. Have at least one hour before you go to bed when you stop work and just relax. You need time to unwind before you go to sleep.
- Stay hydrated and eat healthily and make time for exercise.
- Set aside time for self-care. Schedule “me-time” every day. Even just two periods of 15 minutes relaxation time each day will help.
- Make sure you take vacations and holidays and days off. Even if it’s a staycation, don’t work.
- Set aside time to do the things you normally enjoy, such as pursuing a hobby, especially over weekends. You need some time off from work during the weekends.
- Talk to your boss – check in with your boss so they know what you are doing. Speak up if you have too much to do. Write down and show your boss how much you do. Consider and discuss options with your boss to better distribute the workload or agree what to focus on as priorities.

We are moving towards the end of a very difficult year. Not only may you have had to learn to work from home, and then had the work piled on you, but it has been an emotionally difficult year with the virus, the lockdown, the changes to social and personal habits, and the general concerns and worry about the pandemic and how life is changing. We are all tired. So, cut yourself some slack, and even if you don’t think you have reached burnout yet, still make sure you have some down time for yourself.