CREATING A HOME WORKSPACE

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In the current state of self-isolation and social distancing, "work" has changed substantially for most people. With only essential services remaining operational (and at a limited capacity themselves), most white-collar employees and professionals have been asked to conduct their work from home. For some people, this is just an intensified version of how they normally work, as many Canadians already have a home office or have regularly worked from home prior to Covid-19. However, this is uncharted territory for many other Canadian workers who have never worked from home. Employees of many organizations are required to do much more than simply communicating with other employees. Entirely from home, Canadians are now completing complex tasks such as managing organizational finances, providing education, meeting with clients, and writing articles like this one, just to name a few.

That being said, where are these people doing their work? In what type of environment? To do this level of work from home, most people will likely utilize one central place in their house or apartment. For some, it may be the desk in their home office; for others, it may be their dining room table. Many aspects of the physical environment can have a significant impact (either positive *or* negative) on your well-being and productivity. How can you leverage your space, technology, and work station to work more effectively and healthier? What are the resources that can help you do your job (e.g., technology)? Ultimately, what works for you will depend on your personal preferences, as well as the physical properties of your home. However, here are a few best recommendations for how to set up a workspace that also sets you up for success.

Top Tips for Setting Up your Home Workspace:

1. Have a designated workspace that is separate from the rest of your home

Research suggests that, if you have the space, you should separate where you work from where you live the rest of your life. This will depend somewhat on your personal preference and the space in your home. A healthy separation between work demands and home demands are beneficial for many people. But what is a "healthy separation" and what does it look like?

- Based on research, having a separate room like a home office or a spare room converted into a workspace would be ideal[1]. Having this physical boundary has been linked with

lower stress, lower partner stress, increased productivity, and may help prevent long-term burnout[1,2].

- If having a separate room is not possible, the next best option is to designate a specific space of a room to be your work station[3]. This may involve re-arranging the furniture in your home, or even putting up an artificial barrier of some sort, so that the differentiation between the two spaces increases the boundary between work activities and non-work activities[1].
- Ideally, your designated workspace should not involve sitting on your couch or bed, because it may impact your ability to relax and disengage during non-work times.
- Think about how to control, reduce, or avoid non-work distractions in the space you designate for work[4] (e.g., move the tv to a different space).
- These recommendations are extra critical for individuals whose work requires privacy (e.g., counsellor), and for individuals who have children or live with roommates or family.

2. Consider the ergonomic design of your workspace

Unless you already have a home office, it is unlikely that the furniture and equipment in your household matches that of your regular workplace.

- Think of the chairs in your home: If you do not already have an office-style chair, you may be using a dining room chair for potentially eight hours a day. Dining room chairs are not designed to be used for long periods of time. Chair features, such as adjustable height, wheels, armrests, backrests, and more comfortable material are linked to lower musculoskeletal conditions along with higher self-reported job satisfaction and productivity[5,6].
- The devices you use for work can also be optimized to protect your well-being. For example, using a keyboard and mouse instead of a laptop is preferable for upper-body strain and musculoskeletal conditions [5,6]. Optimizing the distance between your screen and your eyes is also something to consider, as having it too close or too far can lead to significant eye strain. These may not be issues that you have considered in your regular workplace, but in your home they are all under your control.
- You may want to consider having separate devices for work-life and home-life. If this is not possible, you should at least consider taking advantage of the settings on your devices such as turning notifications off for work-related apps when you're not working[7].
- Other factors to consider include the lighting and noise in your workspace. Too little lighting (e.g., no desk lamp) or too much lighting (e.g., excessively bright screen during night time) can lead to eye strain and deteriorating vision. Earplugs or headphones may help reduce distracting noises.

3. Bring the outdoors inside!

Having natural light and plants in your workspace can have many beneficial impacts on well-being and performance. That's right, plants! Although it seems quite simple and many of you may be

skeptical, there is considerable research showing that having exposure to plants in an office setting can have many beneficial impacts on well-being and performance.

- Having plants on your desk or in your office is linked with lower stress, improved satisfaction with working conditions, and being in a more positive emotional state overall[8,9]. Specifically, controlled studies have indicated that workers around plants tend to have significantly lower physiological stress (e.g., lower heart rate, lower blood pressure) as well. These reported benefits from plants do not just exist in the short-term either, as one study found increases in satisfaction, concentration, and a 15% boost in productivity in the long-term![9]

- There are a few potential explanations for this consistent finding, but the main one appears to be that plants reduce certain air pollutants at imperceptible, yet important, levels. Reducing such air qualities that are typically associated with "indoor air" alleviates what is sort of an "indoor sickness" marked by apathy, boredom, and energy-depletion. This is similar to alleviating the feeling of just needing to get outside and get some fresh air after being inside for too long.

- If you cannot acquire new plants for your home, even the ability to see green spaces from your place of work can benefit your well-being. In some organizations that have a "greenspace" such as a park or garden, being able to see that greenspace from one's office window has been linked with lower stress[10]. However, this is only for green spaces that are well-kept, so a window overlooking an empty lawn may not have the same impact.

- Simply setting up your workspace near a sunny window with natural light may improve your working wellbeing. Opening that window and getting fresh air may have the same impact on the "indoor sickness" mentioned above. However, that can also introduce distractions.

Overall, it is important to note that generally designing an office to be personally tasteful and inspiring may boost productivity, whether that comes in the form of plants or other room accents.

Take-Home Messages

Working from home is a new environment for many Canadians. For those individuals, there may be a lack of consideration for how they should structure their home workspace. Even for those more familiar with working from home, these recommendations of how to set up the physical environment may prove useful. In general, people working from home should maximize the physical separation between work-life and home-life, providing improvements to both work-related and personal well-being. Potential ways to do this include considering the ergonomic design of your workspace, from furniture to the devices being used. If the above conditions are met, having plants in your workspace may be another way to improve well-being and efficiency.

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