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Vocational Strategies for Maintaining Mental Health While Working at Home

The shift to temporary work at home affected over 80 million U.S. workers and may become permanent for many.

Working from home has advantages — no commute, flexible hours, fewer coworker interruptions, and availability to family members. But common problems include loneliness, isolation, less supervision and feedback, expectations of being always available, longer hours, and feeling burned out. Child or elder care creates new interruptions, work disorganization, family conflicts, and worries about family safety. These stresses can cause anxiety, poor productivity, and job dissatisfaction, and they can exacerbate physical and mental health problems. As a result, 60% of those who are working and providing care simultaneously feel that doing so is not sustainable.¹

Employers can proactively address these issues, using several strategies.

1) Acknowledge that the transition to working at home, while managing personal and business responsibilities concurrently, is challenging. Let employees know that leadership supports them and understands that “business as usual” may look different. Supervisors should also regularly reinforce this message.²

2) Encourage separating work from home life as much as possible with a separate work area, specific schedules for work and personal time, and work activity

limited to normal work hours. Informing coworkers and family of the schedule helps to create consistency and stability and reduces conflicts. Managers should work with employees to establish and adhere to these schedules.

3) Routines help maintain a sense of control and normalcy for the employee and their family. Eating breakfast and getting dressed for work every day are often recommended. Keep everything organized, as working from home has more potential for disorganization. Taking regular breaks, getting outside, and staying physically active reduce stress and support mental wellness.

4) Offer strategies for working at home with children and other dependents. Many suggest setting expectations; teaching cues to be quiet; scheduling tasks (such as making calls during nap time or remote school time); finding safe, engaging activities for children; focusing on projects early before children wake up; and having a contingency plan for the unexpected. Informative resources, coworker support, and experienced mentors can provide invaluable empathy, assistance, and practical solutions.³

5) Loneliness and isolation compound other stressors. Discuss this with others and actively look for solutions to reduce stress and anxiety. Encourage regular meetups, virtual coffee breaks, check-ins

with coworkers and managers, and asking for help. Referrals to social services and support groups can help solve child-care, elder care, and other issues.⁴

6) People often feel guilty when taking time off. Employers can discuss flexible schedules and leave options with employees; encourage employees to have these discussions to minimize guilt feelings and support business needs.

7) Supervisors who notice signs of increased stress and anxiety can confidentially encourage employees to use the employee assistance program as well as local mental health and other services.

Working at home is a vocational challenge that can affect mental health if not executed properly. Strategies using adjustment, awareness, and support can go a long way toward ensuring that employees can stay productive and healthy, both physically and mentally, while working at home.

References

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