



Working remotely during the COVID19 lockdown - Top 10 Tips for neurodivergent colleagues

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“Normal is an illusion. What is normal for the spider is chaos for the fly.”

Cartoonist Charles Addams

One of the aspects often associated with neurodiversity is that neurodivergent brains literally think differently. Many also have a different approach to working and getting things done than what is assumed ‘standard’ in the workplace. For example, bright light and noise in open plan offices can cause distraction or even anxiety. Rush hour commute can lead to sensory overload.

To combat these challenges, many colleagues on the autism spectrum, with ADHD or dyslexia have had arrangements in place to work from home for one or two days a week. I have often been at my most productive when coming into the office at weekends. As much as I value my colleagues, I sometimes find it easier to get work done in a quiet, rather isolated environment.

The same applies to life in general. Our brains work at impressive speed, but are often less able to focus and filter input from our surroundings than neurotypical brains. Whilst it can be absolutely hilarious when you notice everything which is going on around you, it is also quite exhausting. To relax from such overstimulation, many neurodivergent brains require a good amount of ‘alone time’. This does not mean that we are unsociable or not interested in social interaction. Withdrawing from the world for a few hours (or days) is simply part of self care and is needed to reduce the pace we are operating at and help us relax.

This means that most neurodivergent brains, including my own, will have chosen to regularly and voluntarily self-isolate. Therefore, when we are now asked to work remotely it is typically not the isolation which causes difficulties. What poses the bigger challenge is the loss of daily structure and therefore the reduced ability to separate work life from ‘home life’ and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

We are notoriously bad at looking after ourselves and articulating our needs, partially a result of our neurological wiring and partially in an attempt to cover up our differences. But we can -and have to- learn. The following tips may help:

Staying organised

1. Creating structure

Establishing structure to your day and setting boundaries is important.

Neurodivergent colleagues often find it hard to stop doing a task and to switch from one activity to the next. Many have the often admired ability to hyperfocus and can get things done at amazing speed. However, when working from home this may result in never-ending workdays and weekend sessions.

As a first step, try and stick to your normal work hours while working from home, and ensure you take regular breaks. Don't forget to feed yourself! Setting an alarm may help.

2. Manage your to-do list even more diligently

Establishing a daily schedule as your first task of the day will help stay on top of things, and finish your workday on time.

There are many apps available to help stay organised, these articles list some of them:

<https://www.thebalancesmb.com/best-planner-apps-4174743>

<https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/5854-5-android-apps-to-plan-your-workday.html>

3. Be honest about your phone phobia

Working remotely means that you may receive more phone calls from colleagues than usual. And therein lies the trouble... Many neurodivergent brains share a passionate dislike of the phone, especially when it's ringing. Being disturbed by a persistent ringtone when you are working away at amazing speed, and quickly having to switch to a totally different topic is not particularly pleasant experience.

Remember that it is ok to put your phone on silent for a few hours, or to ask your colleagues to drop you and email before calling to arrange a convenient time.

4. Ask for help

Neurodivergent brains have a strong sense of responsibility and are extremely hard working. However, they tend to pick up too much work and often struggle to delegate. In an office environment, your colleagues usually notice when you are feeling overwhelmed and many will offer their help. Remember that it will be harder for them to spot that you are struggling when everyone is working remotely.

Of course you hate doing so, but you will have to train yourself up to articulate when you have too much to do and ask for help. It is perfectly fine to do so.

5. Obtain regular feedback

A lot of neurodivergent brains struggle with low self esteem and tend to question themselves and their abilities. Of course we rationally understand that there is no need to do so - but we do it anyway (just in case...)!

Regular feedback can help hold these worries at bay. Whilst working remotely, catching up with your manager at least once or twice a week will help ensure that your projects are on track and provide a confidence boost.

Wellbeing

6. Don't fall into the coffee trap

Many neurodivergent brains are overstimulated and find it hard to slow down and relax. Caffeine is a stimulant and can amplify this problem.

Therefore, as tempting as it might be to pay regular visits to the state-of-the-art coffee maker in your kitchen, try and limit your coffee intake and switch to healthier choices such as water or herbal tea.

And as much as I hate to say it, the same applies to another brain stimulant: chocolate...

7. Avoid foods with high glycaemic index

The glycaemic index indicates how slowly or how quickly different types of foods cause blood sugar levels to rise. Foods high on the glycaemic index (GI) release glucose rapidly, while foods low on the scale lead to a slower and steadier release of glucose. High GI foods include white bread, white rice, potatoes, sugar and sugary foods and drinks.

What does this have to do with the brain? Glucose is the brain's most important source of energy. A rapid rise in glucose levels is often perceived as a quick energy kick. On the flipside, food types which cause blood sugar to spike also cause them to fall again at equally fast pace. As a result, the brain is suddenly low on glucose and can experience withdrawal symptoms. These will lead to stress and result in an increased release of adrenaline, which may worsen anxiety.

Lists of foods with high and low GI can be found online, for example:

<https://www.healthyplace.com/anxiety-panic/list-of-best-foods-for-anxiety-relief>

8. Exercise

Regular exercise has proven benefits for our mental health. It also helps break up our workday and allows to refresh and refocus our minds.

Many tips for home workouts can be found online, for example:

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/mar/15/from-yoga-to-crossfit-the-10-best-online-home-workouts>

9. Keep calm and listen to our brain-friendly playlist

It can be difficult to withdraw and focus when working from home, in particular when spouse or flatmates are also working remotely, kids are playing in the same room, etc.

To keep calm and carry on, plug your headphones in and listen to our brain-friendly playlist on Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1uw8t9HNtBWAqTJVbsi3xm?si=nCCMzWjASVeTsKOfn4JrnQ>

10. Catch up with friends

Friends. What would we be without them??? Top of the list of activities at the moment: Long-distance hugs, quiz nights via zoom, cocktail mixing sessions via WhatsApp. Or just the good old phone call to a good friend to share a laugh. Anything which helps us stay sane in these strange times is permitted!

What are your top tips? Let us know, we'd love to hear from you on info@diversityproject.com

Please stay safe and well and, most of all, stay relaxed.

