STRATEGIES for MINDFUL LIVING

Managing Work Stress & Increasing Productivity

Workplace stress is a commonly reported issue among career-aged adults. When the demands of the job are combined with stressors at home, as well as external issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing, some individuals may notice a decrease in their productivity.

There can also be additional stressors when navigating working from home and working to maintain work/life balance. According to the American Institute of Stress (AIS) and the Attitudes in the American Workplace report, 80 percent of workers report some type of stress on the job and indicated that they would like additional help in managing this stress. When working with clients who report difficulty managing stress, I have a number of recommendations that I offer clients in order to alleviate stressors and to increase productivity — and the good news is that they can be utilized when working from home as well.

1. PRIORITIZE YOUR TO-DO LIST

When we have a seemingly difficult number of tasks to complete, it can be helpful to create a prioritized list of the things to be done. Put the long list away, and focus on a small number (say, three or five tasks), making sure to mark them off once they are completed. Once those three to five things are finished, you can move on to the next priorities — but it's much easier to focus on a small number of manageable tasks than it is to stare at an evergrowing list, which can make us feel anxious and increase risk of procrastination.

Focus Matrix, an app you can use along with prioritization, has you organize tasks based on how time sensitive and important they are, which can help prioritize your list.

2. BREAKS & TIME MANAGEMENT

It's difficult to complete long stretches of work with no break to relieve tension or adjust focus.
It's important to take breaks to allow time to decompress, even when working from home, as increased stress and tension can actually cause us to become anxious and less productive. If you find that you have difficulty starting back after breaks, look into the Pomodoro Technique, which breaks work into 25-minute chunks and allots a 5 minute break between, which is helpful for more tedious tasks that you can walk away from. On breaks, stand up, stretch and get a change of scenery — as tempting as it is to automatically check email or social media, breaks from technology are just as important as breaks from work.

3. NIX THE MULTITASKING

Especially when working in an office or from home, it can be tempting to multitask and work on multiple things at once — this can backfire, however, as multitasking can increase mistakes and decrease overall ability to focus on the prioritized tasks. If you need to check your email, schedule breaks where you can do so and turn the notification volume down on your phone and laptop so that you can better focus on one task at a time.

4. MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

If turning the notification sounds off is not enough to prevent distraction, or you have a tendency to watch an entire season of "The Office" while you're working, it may be best to set your work area up in a place where the TV isn't readily available, and leave your phone in another room unless you absolutely need it (such as in "on call" situations). The issue often arises that one to two minutes of distraction can lead to a loss of time on your end … especially when the important tasks you are working on aren't stimulating, or when Michael Scott's jokes are particularly funny. This is also related to keeping work and life balanced, as scrolling Twitter doesn't feel as stressful when you don't have 87 tasks looming on your list that you're actively procrastinating on.

5. NEUTRALIZE NEGATIVE TALK

A factor that isn't always identified when looking at productivity and stress is self-talk — the things that we think about and say to ourselves. Some individuals find that when they are struggling with productivity, their self-talk becomes increasingly negative, which lowers their overall mood and ability to complete tasks. It's an easy trap to fall into, and can turn into a habit if we don't actively address negative self-talk as it arises. However, turning negative thoughts into positive ones is a cognitive muscle that has to be built and trained, and a good place to start is to try and make the thoughts more neutral — "I'm not doing enough" turns into "I'm doing what I can with the tools at my disposal," which can help us keep perspective when it feels like we are struggling or having to navigate working from home.