

How to Work From Home Alongside Your Partner Without Losing It

Try 'spousal distancing' to minimize coronavirus conflict when you're stuck at home with your whole family 24/7.

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THE NEW YORK TIMES

March 20, 2020

Remember how, mere days ago, the most annoying person in your office was Steve from accounting? It seems almost quaint now. Meet your new co-worker in this surreal new world: your spouse. With many companies having their employees work from home (#WFH) to help slow the spread of the new coronavirus, scores of people are trying to navigate being stuck working at home alongside a loved one.

On the plus side, your new co-worker will not ask how your weekend was, nor must you slap a proprietary Post-it on your favorite mug. But how do you communicate, maneuver and create personal space when your house is your new WeWork — and your kids' school? And what do you do when you realize your partner is much more like Dwight Schrute than you had ever noticed?

“Normally my husband works in an office downtown and leaves in the morning at 7:30 and comes home 12 hours later, so I have the entire tiny apartment to myself,” said Julie Klam, 53, an author based in New York City. “Now he and my kid and our dog and I are all jammed together in the one room that has air and light, and I’m listening to him on conference calls.”

Adjusting quickly to these new circumstances is key to setting your family up for success, said Guy Winch, a psychologist in New York City and the author of “Emotional First Aid.”

“Abnormal life has begun, so we must maintain as much normalcy as possible during these challenging times,” he said. “And it’s super-important to realize that this is a marathon and not a sprint, so we have to set up conditions and habits and rituals that will get us through that.”

When you work at home, there is no H.R. department — so start with a meeting, recommended Brooklyn-based clinical psychologist Schekeva Hall, Ph.D. “The first issue people need to address is to talk about how they feel, honestly, about the coronavirus, and how they’re managing their feelings around it,” she said. “There are different levels of responses to this pandemic and being aware of your own individual levels of anxiety or apathy — or even annoyance — is important to keep in mind, because it can really impact your new workplace dynamics.”

From there, Dr. Winch said, establish office rules, and get granular: What are our work hours? Where do we go in the house when one of us needs to take a call? Where will our individual workstations be? Who keeps an eye on the kids and when?

During work hours, put on work clothes, Dr. Winch said. It doesn't need to be a suit — just not pajamas. “We do associate working from home in pajamas as having a sick day, so we want to disassociate from sickness as much as possible,” he said. “Ritualized transitions,” such as changing into comfier clothing at the end of the day, he explained, signify that “it’s no longer a workplace, now it’s a home.”

At the end of each day for the first week, Dr. Winch said, “check in with each other, and say, ‘Just in terms of being work colleagues, what worked for us today? What would we like to change? Was it useful to take a lunch break at the same time? Was it OK that I came over and looked at what you were doing?’”

I’ve personally been training for this moment for years. My husband, Tom, and I are freelance writers. For a decade, we have worked, Monday through Friday, at opposite ends of the kitchen table. Over the years, we have developed a series of rules. I now refrain from impulsively sharing random thoughts such as, “We really need to replace that screen door” or showing Tom the latest Instagram post of unlikely animal friends, until we break for lunch, which is designated chit-chat time. Luckily, we have had years, not days, to craft an efficient system to work together.

Once you fine-tune your routine, keep it consistent, said Julie Morgenstern, a New York productivity consultant and author of “Time To Parent.” “Structure and routine during a time when everyone feels unmoored is critical to your mental and physical and relational grounding,” she said. “If you were working from 9 to 5 in the office, that becomes your edges.” Ideally, those newfound 2-3 hours normally spent getting ready for work and commuting, she added, should *not* go to your job, but to self-care and relationships.

She mentioned the strategy of Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, who was marooned with his men on the polar ice in 1915 for 16 months (this was before Netflix). “He did not lose a single man, and one of his primary tools was routine,” Morgenstern said. “They had a structure every day: They did exercise, they did work, they had game time, they had mealtime. And that structure kept everybody alive. I never forgot that — the power of routine.”

With kids in the mix, anchoring your new routine in what existed before is even more important, Morgenstern said. If possible, try to recreate their school schedule. “Embrace the hell out of structure and routines, which will keep them happy and stable and calm,” she said. If you have no childcare and two partners at home, Morgenstern added, trade off watching the kids.

Now that elementary schools have closed in New York City, and our daughter is also at home all day, Tom and I have found it helpful to organize kid maintenance around our levels of productivity. I am most productive in the morning, while Tom typically has a surge of output

in the afternoon — so he keeps an eye on our 10-year-old's makeshift home-schooling schedule in the morning, while I take afternoons, when I'm fried.

To avoid burnout, build in some daily alone time for each person if they need it, Dr. Winch said. Call it "spousal distancing."

"If an introvert is stuck in the house with five other people, they might find it really stressful," he said. "Going on solo walks is important for all kinds of reasons — to be out of the house, to keep up some exercise and ... have some time for your own thoughts."

Make a concerted effort to enjoy this family time by creating new rituals. We're trying out new recipes and cooking semi-elaborate meals together. "While you're socially distancing from the rest of the world, you're investing *more* in your home life experience," Dr. Hall said.

While tensions may be high, try to give your partner the same basic level of courtesy and tolerance you would give a coworker if your boss were on the premises. Hand him or her a collared shirt if they're doing a Zoom call. Don't leave dishes in the "break room" sink. Respect each other's boundaries and save conversations about re-upping your paper towel supply for after work hours.

"We're all trying to get through this together, and the importance of kindness and respect cannot be underestimated, even if you think your partner is acting like a piece of work," Dr. Hall said.