

## MODULE 7: HOME OFFICE STRESS MANAGEMENT

### Module Introduction

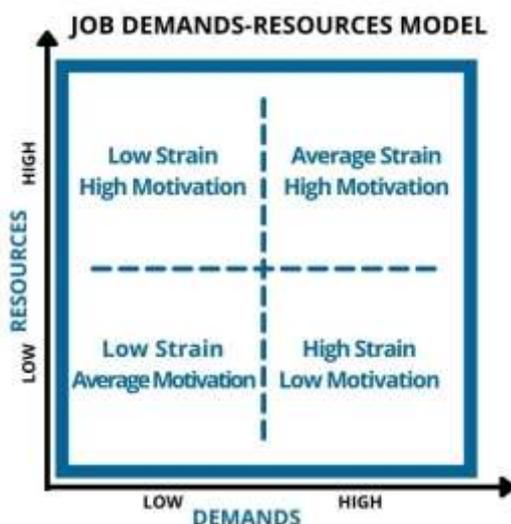
Home office, when it was overwhelmingly introduced at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, sounded great at first (no travels, saves time, more time with the family, etc...). But in the long run it became obvious that it needs good self-management and ability to draw lines.

It turned out that for many people, especially in the last two years, working from home causes stress. 38% of the participants in our STRESS-LESS project survey reported at least for one factor severe stress, related to home-office. The most pronounced home-office stress factors are:

- not being able to separate home working and free time
- and having no time to relax.

This is the reason why the STRESS-LESS team has devoted a separate module on managing stress due to working from home.

In order to set up a solid base for understanding how we can manage home office stress, we would like to introduce you to The Job Demands-Resources Model<sup>1</sup> (Bakker & Demerouti 2007, 2014; Demerouti et al. 2001). The model shows how stress can be caused in work environment. It differentiates between job demands and job resources, which can be: physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job. While job demands are the required efforts or skills, the resources help achieve the goals. According to the model, occupational stress is a response to imbalance between demands on the individual and the resources they have, to deal with those demands.



<sup>1</sup> Bakker, A.B. and Demerouti, E. (2007), "The Job Demands-Resources model: state of the art", Journal of Managerial Psychology, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 309-328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940710733115>

Home office work affects this model by increasing the existing job demands: unclear working hours, interruptions, role ambiguity, poor communication. But also, it leads to reducing our resources, for example by staying at home all the time we need to clean, shop, cook more; not to speak about the situation when we don't have enough space for all family members working from home or when we have to fit in children in home-schooling. Also, there is no physical separation between work and leisure time, which very often leads to our inability to effectively rest and recharge our batteries. The isolation, too, has its tax on our psychological wellbeing and leads to reducing our resources.

This new situation requires a whole new approach to planning, managing and organizing our work from home, so that we can protect and recharge our resources and manage the new demands consciously and mindfully. Next, we shall share some strategies and tips how to better manage your resources and the demands on them, which create home-office stress. With this module we aim at provoking you and helping you develop new habits, which are more suitable to the home-office style of life. Before that it could be helpful if you go back to Module 1: Digital Self-awareness and go through some of the activities from it (like Self-reflection cycle and Letter to myself). **This time do it with your focus on home-office stress.**

You can listen to the material [here](#).

## Activity 1

Work smarter not harder

What we like about working from home is being flexible. But in order to make this new way of life successful, it requires some changes in our habits. Maybe the most important one is that we have to plan our days in a new way and set a distinct schedule for when to work and when to pause. That is why we want to first prompt you to go back to the basics and rethink your time management.

Effective time management starts with prioritizing your tasks. You can check the Single-task Strategy Module for a useful prioritization tool. Please use the Eisenhower principle (prioritising according to urgent/important) to all the activities in your life: sleep, work, sport, eat, time with the family.



## Activity 2

Now is the time to plan your day with your personal and family tasks in the same in one common schedule. Take these 4 steps, following our example:

1. Draw/make a table for a typical day with 24 hours and block enough time for sleep (ex. 8 hours). You may also use the enclosed worksheet.
2. If your working day is 8 hours block this time in your calendar for work. If your work time is not flexible, block it as per your contract. If it is flexible think first about at what time of the day you necessarily need to be working, for example, in order to be able to take part in your meetings and answer the phone calls. You may need to definitely be working in the periods 10-12 and 14-17 - so you block them now and know that you need to include 3 more hours for work in your schedule.
3. Now fit in the personal must haves, for example: 1 hour for sport; minimum 2 hours for helping kids with school; 1 hour for your morning routine; 1 hour lunch break – to prepare lunch for the family and spend some time with them; 2 hours for family time, relax and dinner in the evening from 19 to 21.

4. So, you have 4 hours left, in which you have to fit in 3 hours work and 1 hour for whatever else you need, i.e. household chores. You can block 1 hour for work from 17 to 18 and 2 hours from 21 to 23 and household chores from 18 to 19.
5. Now is the time for your calendar. Fill in all tasks, in the hours designated for them. Write daily and weekly plans and strictly follow them. Besides helping with being able to manage with all your tasks, this will also give you sense of control, which is very good for reducing stress levels.

If you wonder why we included the time for sport, for proper breakfast, dinner and lunch and spending time with your family in the “must haves”, the short answer is that healthy lifestyle (exercise, sleep, healthy food) is essential for our physical well-being, while connecting is essential for our psychological well-being. Both are prerequisites for protecting and replenishing our resources and consequently are very important for our ability to manage stress. For more information, you might want to check the Modules Work – Life Balance in the Digital Era/World and Healthy Workstyle in the Digital Workplace.

Download [Example](#)

Download [Worksheet](#)

### Activity 3

If you are like most people, you will find out that the allocated time for work, homecare and family is not enough. Don't slip into the slope of neglecting sleep, sport and relaxation, and family time. This road will lead to more stress and maybe even health issues. Now carefully look at the prioritization charts you have done in Activity 1 and make a list of:

- a. Tasks that are not completely necessary and may not be done. Usually these will be from the quadrant Not important/Not urgent.
- b. Tasks that it is not necessary that you do yourself. For example, your husband/wife could also spend some time helping the kids with school. For these tasks in the next Activity you are going to solicit help.

### Activity 4

Work as a team / Solicit help

Most probably in the previous activities you found out, that even though you gave it a good thought, the time plan is pretty tight and you might not be able to stick to it. If that's so, then it is time to look for external resources. In order to manage your own time effectively you need to work as a team with all the members of your household. Call in a family meeting and discuss your time plan with them. Ask them to share with you their schedules, needs and plans. Brainstorm together how they can help. Agree about:

- Who takes what part of the domestic chores? For example, the cleaning, the cooking, the shopping.
- Set up a basic schedule for the whole family, including uninterrupted time for you to work (as well as for the rest of the family).
- Balance responsibilities with your partner.
- If necessary, look for additional help (from grandparents, caregivers and s.o.)
- If necessary, decide together on what you want to sacrifice (for example it may not be necessary that you eat a hot meal 2 times a day.)
- Set clear guidelines and basic rules. For example, no loud noise from music or videogames, while you work.

When ready, write the rules and agreements, including a weekly table of domestic chores and who is responsible for them and stick it on a place easily visible for the whole family.

### Activity 5

Organize your workspace

When working from home it is much more difficult to delineate work and leisure. There are two important things that you can do to achieve this:

- set up a special place for yourself, which will put you into working environment (physical boundary) and
- develop routines that help you draw the line between working time and leisure time (psychological boundary). For example, putting on your “work clothes”, instead of staying in your slacks all day, could be such a routine.

First let's focus on setting the physical boundaries and creating a comfortable space for work. Here is some advice and ideas what to think about when setting up your workspace in the home office. Even if you are from the large number of people who live in relatively small flats and maybe have to create not only your home office workspace but also a "learning workplace" for schoolchildren, please go through the ideas. They are designed to help you make the best of the difficult situation that you are dealing well with.

- Choose your place for work. If possible, it should be a place where you can isolate from the rest of the people in your house. For example, they shouldn't have to pass behind your back when needing something from the kitchen. Ideally screens and devices should not be in your bedroom. When you see them, your brain sends signals to desire high stimulation, which may interfere with your sleep. You should be looking for a way to create a quieter and calmer space for work, which will help you increase your agency, see Module Agency and Trust.
- Declutter your workspace. Disorder impacts negatively your thinking and productivity. If you clean up your workspace from all unnecessary objects this will lower distractions and help you improve your organization. Think about conference calls. What is behind your back? What will people see when they talk to you in online?

## Activity 6

Next step is to think about ergonomics or how to create the best possible work environment under the circumstances. In the office this most probably has been a task of someone else, but now you have to take care of yourself. Due to home office constraints, you may not be able to create the perfect workplace, but our checklist may help you improve it. It will be good for you to pay attention to the following aspects of your workplace:

- ✓ Adequate temperature, humidity, and ventilation. Don't forget to regularly let in fresh air.
- ✓ Adequate lighting (including daylight) to perform tasks efficiently, accurately and in a healthy way. It is good if daylight comes from your left side or from a window in front of you. Having the light in your back and looking at the wall is not a good idea.
- ✓ Adequate internet connection and telephone lines (if necessary).
- ✓ Display screen equipment and workstation:

- Keyboard: it is best that your keyboard is separate from the screen, levelled with your hands (neither too high nor too low); it is good if your keyboard tilts, so it is easier for you to see and type; the characters on the keyboard should be clean and readable.
  - Mouse: the device should be close to you and there should be support for your wrist and forearm. The speed of the mouse should suit you, a slower mouse creates stress, which you might not even notice.
  - Display screens: it is best if your display screen is on an adjustable stand, so you can adjust it according to your height, so that you neither look up nor down. Characters should be clear and readable. Images should not flicker and the screen should be free from glare and reflections. Have you adjusted brightness and contrast as per your needs? The screen should be able to tilt, if not you may need to build in a tilt mechanism or change the screen.
- ✓ Ergonomic work furniture (adjustable, adequate for different ICT tasks). You need work furniture that helps you maintain a comfortable, neutral body posture. This will reduce the strain on the muscles and skeletal system. Pay attention to:
- The work surface should be large enough for all your necessary equipment and other materials; you should be able to comfortably reach everything you need.
  - It is very important that you have a suitable chair: you should be able to adjust seat and seatback height and tilt. You should adjust your chair so that you sit with your back upright but the small of the back should be supported by the seat back. Your forearms should be horizontal and your eyes should be roughly at the same height as the display. Your feet should be flat on the floor, if not, you need a foot rest.
- (!) you need to ensure regular interruptions from sitting in front of the PC. Frequent short breaks will help you avoid eye fatigue and fatigue from prolonged sitting.

You can [download the checklist](#) and fill it in.

## Activity 7

Setting psychological boundaries is as important as setting physical boundaries and will help you delineate between work and leisure in home-office.

In order to be able to draw a firm line between work and leisure, it is good to develop a morning and an evening routine. One to start the working day and one to end it. Maybe, you could dress up for the working day and go back to your slacks at the end of the day. Or you might decide that you want to do some sport, have a walk or do anything that gives you the sense that you are going to work and respectively that your workday has ended.

In view of the above we would like to propose the following activity to you:

Next morning, before you begin work, deliberately plan your working time in a way that it involves frequent short mental breaks and off-screen time. Try to include as many breaks as possible in which you are moving. Plan also time for your morning and evening routine, for example switching off the laptop. The first few days it may be difficult to follow this plan, but when they turn into a habit (in a few weeks), you will notice how much better you feel.

### Activity 8

Don't forget to proactively plan also how you are going to relax in your free time outside of work. Think for example about the fact that you only have 2 hours for relaxing, family and dinner in the evening. If you don't mindfully think and plan this time, it is highly likely that you will slip into routine news reading for example and you will not be satisfied in the end.

This activity involves planning your time to relax for the day: write down what you want to do in your free or family time and stick to it no matter what.

### Activity 9

Today's activity is about using an emotion regulation technique. Emotion regulation techniques were introduced to you in Module 2 Agency and Trust. They help us cope better in situations that create within us stress, anxiety, anger and other unhelpful emotions and feelings. With the help of these techniques we can better and quicker regulate our emotions and reactions. With this activity you will practice maybe the simplest but also surprisingly the most effective one: "Emotion labelling." This tactic literally involves coming up with a label to describe what you are feeling, for example, telling yourself "I am feeling angry" when you experience anger. Findings show that merely labelling your feelings lowers their intensity and helps control your stress levels.

Whatever emotions you feel, practice labelling them. Notice the effect.

### Activity 10

Connect

One of the reasons for drop down of motivation and increase of stress is related to not being able to connect to the team or to feel a sense of belonging to the company, while we work from home. If we want to protect and replenish our resources in a more successful way, we need to master new ways of connecting to other people on the job. Teleworkers have to deliberately schedule online meetings with their managers, team, vendors and customers in order to maintain contact and keep the positive working relationship. Among these meetings there should be also informal meetings, where they chat not only about

work, but also keep the informal contact alive. You can be creative and organize virtual coffee breaks, online games (try “7 Wonders” online for example), discussion forums.

Make a list of at least 10 people from your work environment that you want to build up your connection with. Figure out a creative way to connect online. Plan these activities for the next days and start doing them.

## Activity 11

**Practice self-compassion** (This activity is based on the material developed by Raj Raghunathan, a Professor of Marketing and Psychology at McCombs School of Business at University of Texas Austin.)

Maybe, you did all the activities from this module and you still feel that things are not going well. Maybe, you even get angry at yourself for not being able to manage. In such cases we are often our worst enemies when we haven’t behaved or achieved what we wanted to. For such situations prof. Raghunathan proposes that we practice *self-compassion*. That involves:

- Self-kindness - being kind to ourselves, treating ourselves as we would treat a close friend if they were in this situation.
- Common humanity – recognizing that we are only human and no one succeeds always or makes no mistakes.
- Mindfulness - being fully aware of what we are experiencing without denying or rejecting it.

Now let’s practice:

Step 1: Imagine that it wasn’t you, but rather, a close friend or family member who had failed to accomplish something important or still hasn’t managed to stay on top of stress. How would you approach your friend in this situation? What would you do and say? What would be your tone of voice? Write it down below.

Step 2: How you treat yourself? Think about how you generally treat yourself when you haven’t lived up to your standards. How you would typically respond to yourself in the same situation. Write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.

Step 3: See the difference? Did you notice a difference between how you treat yourself and how you treat others? Why is that?

Step 4: Make a change. Write about what you would say to yourself if you were your friend

in this situation. How would say it?

Step 5: What changes for you when you talk to yourself in a compassionate way?

Use [this worksheet](#) and do this exercise as many times as needed until self-compassion becomes a natural part of the way you treat yourself.

## Activity 12

Congratulations, you have successfully completed the Home-office Stress Management Module of the STRESS-LESS program! Here is what you have learned:

- **New approach to time management:** how to proactively manage your personal, family and work tasks and time and incorporate them in the same calendar. How to solicit help from others and to be compassionate to yourself if things don't always work out as planned.
  - **How to set boundaries:** physical and psychological boundaries in between your work life and home life are very important. You learned how to organize your workspace at home, including the main points about ergonomic work, but also how to create routines that divide time for work from time for leisure.
  - **How not to neglect your rest and connection to other people:** prioritizing and proactively planning time for rest and relaxation as well as for communication and connecting to colleagues and friends is extremely important for stress management. And it is also very often neglected. But not by you, anymore.
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If you want to continue the journey towards reducing digital stress, choose another module of this programme.