



Working from Home- A Guide for the Busy Clinician

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Introduction

In the week since SARS-CoV-2 has been declared a global pandemic, healthcare workers have found themselves in the midst of an unprecedented global health emergency, amongst them are thousands of medical students. As the majority of hospitals suspend clinical placements, many medical schools are turning to distance learning with students "Working From Home" (WFH). For medical students to remain productive whilst both physically and mentally well is of paramount importance so here are 3 key tips to remember when working from home:

1. Set realistic goals
2. Look after yourself
3. Look after others

Set realistic goals

As I write this article, sixth-year medical undergraduates at my institution, Imperial College London, have taken their final year assessments online in a world-first¹ and set a precedent for online examinations at other medical schools. Keeping on top of your academic workload may thus appear important but so will ensuring proper self-care. Structuring regular breaks into your work schedule using techniques such as Pomodoro² (working for 25 minutes, followed by 5-minute break) and Getting Things Done (breaking big projects into smaller actionable items) can boost productivity by maintaining motivation

and concentration. An example would be to calculate how many questions from a question bank need to be completed over the coming week and then dividing it into manageable 25-minute sessions. We are lucky to live in the digital age and so working together remains an option: Facetime and Skype to catch up with friends easy as well as more professional services such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams to work with colleagues can provide a level of accountability as well as help with mood.

Look after yourself

Personal goals will vary greatly during this period of uncertainty and from individual to individual. Working from home can blur the line between your personal and professional life so it is important to set boundaries early on; this can be done both in terms of time and workspace. Try and keep your bedroom as a place to relax and unwind as well as occasionally disconnecting from social media and messaging services. Acknowledge that your mood will fluctuate during this extended period of uncertainty and it is completely normal to feel anxious and worried about what lies ahead. Looking after yourself and others is key to developing emotional resilience. Small things such as simply getting ready and getting dressed in the morning are small victories that are not to be overlooked.



There are a number of electronic resources currently available that have been made free to access to help healthcare workers deal with current levels of stress and anxiety. App stores are full of mindfulness apps, one example is Headspace that is currently offering 3 months of premium access providing guided meditation sessions⁴. In the current lockdown, individuals and household can still go out to exercise once a day and with the NHS recommendation of 150 minutes of moderate intensity activities remaining.

Look after others

Many students will now find themselves at home looking after both older parents and grandparents as well as younger siblings. With schools having been suspended, childcare will be a chief concern to many people. In response to this a number of online communities have sprung up to provide ad-hoc childcare to healthcare staff as they work on the front-line. A network of “National Health Supporters⁵” operating through regional Facebook groups connects volunteers to staff to provide help with childcare as well ancillary task such as shopping and dog-walking. General Practices are also recruiting volunteers to help staff telephone lines as well provide other administrative support. Those of a medical background living at home with family will undoubtedly become a major source of information over the coming weeks. Whilst it is important to remember the limits of our expertise, the role of fact-checking messages that family members receive on WhatsApp and other forms of social media will be incredibly useful to prevent paranoia and the spread of fake news. Advocating for proper sources of information such as Public Health England and NHS.UK is also crucial in for proper education.

Conclusion

There is currently no set deadline for self-isolation with timescale of between 3 weeks to 3 months⁶ currently being discussed by the government. In a pandemic not so long ago, it was the heroic efforts of 200 medical students providing round the clock ventilation to over 300 patients⁷. Similar efforts may be required to help reduce the predicted 250,000 casualties to below 20,000 as per the

Imperial College London report⁸. Ensuring you remain well in what will may become more of a marathon than a race is essential. As medical students, our responsibilities are two-fold; both as diligent citizens and as possible members of the hospital workforce.

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