

# A Guide for Remote Work Employees



Put your best foot forward at work, even if you're not going into an office, with these expert tips and strategies to be productive, effective and successful as a remote employee.

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There's a lot to love about working remotely. For one thing, you'll skip a commute (unless you count the brief journey to your home office), and you may find yourself wearing less constrictive, more comfortable clothing between the hours of nine and five. But it's not all blissful. When your home and workplace merge, it can become tricky to prioritize breaks, even for essential things like lunch, or to know when to shut down your computer. Also challenging: Creating deep, collaborative relationships with coworkers and maintaining your mental health.

In this guide, we'll share ideas and tips from remote workers, interior designers, psychologists and other experts for maximizing your happiness and career success while working remotely.



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## Create a Well-Designed, Productivity-Enhancing Home Office



Part command center, part personal brand, and part protector of the separation between personal and professional, a dedicated home office space serves many functions. But if you're still using a haphazard setup from early pandemic days or haven't yet abandoned the dining room table in favor of a separate work area, it may be time for a refresh.

Review our tips for creating a home office design to maximize your productivity and showcase your personal aesthetic.

## Let form follow function

Before embarking on your design journey, you must first determine what role you want your home office to play in your home—and life.

*“I don’t get asked to produce a calm workplace as much as a productive one,”* says Meg Behrens, founder and lead designer of Meg Behrens Design. Many times, clients have been working at the kitchen table and are in the middle of the family action. In remodels, we are closing in the formal dining room to create an office.”

Stephanie Pohlman, owner and head designer of Stephanie Pohlman Designs, is seeing an increased need for a functional home office.

*“If you find it would be more useful to get multiple uses out of the space, think about built-ins or flexible solutions to give you exactly what you need,”* Pohlman says.

## Stop the flow—sometimes

Behrens believes having a door is critical to the home office experience, creating a physical boundary between work and home life.

*“This helps so you can have quietness and actually think when working, or close out the noise while you’re on a Zoom call,”* she notes. “But many people still like to know what the household is doing, so they are opting for a steel and glass door.”

So, just how much might this home office project cost?

*“We typically budget 8-10K for a full room design,”* Pohlman says. “The cost can vary based on how elaborate you go with furniture and cabinetry.”

Behrens says final costs can depend on the room’s square footage and what is already in place.

“If you have to add walls and glass doors, it will be more expensive than an office that is already enclosed. Good office furniture I like to see as an investment, because you use it five out of seven days and spend a lot of time with it.”



## Clear the clutter

To ensure you're staying on task, think sleek and simple. Behrens wants clients to remove any TVs from their home office, while Pohlman believes personal items should be kept to a minimum.

*"This creates a separation of your work and life balance," she notes, adding that clutter can make a work environment more stressful or distracting. "We like to incorporate built-ins or furniture pieces with storage for extra electronics and paper files to keep them off your desk," she adds.*

Installing floating shelves can also help you easily access what you need, increasing your efficiency and thereby reducing stress.

## Choose calming colors

Another stress reduction component to a home office comes from your choice of furniture and paint colors.

*"We like to keep the overall color palette neutral for a calming environment," Pohlman says. "Keeping artwork and accessories simple, yet eye-catching, is important!"*

*"I love to have a cute potted plant in the corner or one on a desk," Behrens adds. "This connects you to the outside and actually helps you breathe as well if it's a real plant."*



## 10 Ways to Be Productive While Working Remotely



Working remotely can feel tremendously freeing. You may find your morning alarm going off hours later since you've cut your commute out of the equation. Still, skipping showers, working in pajamas, and sitting on the couch with the TV aren't recipes for long-term success as a productive, effective employee.

Try these strategies to take advantage of the perks of working remotely while still hitting work milestones and making key achievements that will further your career.

### 01 **Establish a morning routine**

Get up with your alarm, shower, put on real clothes, and eat a decent breakfast. Dress semi-professionally. While there's no need to don work pants, leaning into sweats may not summon your most productive self. Experiment with what kind of work-from-home uniform works for you, balancing comfort with how clothes can help set the tone.

## 02 Plan out your day for maximum productivity

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Chicago-based Dionte Pounds, partner and director of client services at Sentic, has been fully remote since 2019. He first dabbled in remote work a decade ago while at an advertising agency where employees could work from home a few days a week.

*“I have a list of my projects, so I know what I have to do, and I plan my time accordingly,”* he says. Pounds recommends establishing a routine to handle remote days successfully.

*“Whether you’re going for a run or taking your dog out, it’s good to build in a quick activity that can get you out of your house for a bit so you’re not just sitting constantly,”* he says.

Think about the times in the day when you feel most alert and productive, and schedule your tasks accordingly.

## 03 Set a dedicated workspace in your home

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This might be an office or a desk, 1,000 square feet or 30. Just as your bedroom should be a space that makes your brain rest, your office space should make you clock into the work mindset.

## 04 Work consistent hours

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Part of the appeal of working remotely is setting your own schedule, but it is difficult to feel like part of the team if you aren’t involved in at least a little real-time conversation and collaboration. Depending on your particular role, you may not need to work a traditional 9-to-5 shift every day. But even if you don’t, make sure to log at least a few hours while the rest of the team is engaged.



## 05 Repeat after us: No TV



Your productivity will fall if you work with the TV on. Plus, you may find it harder to distinguish between time spent working and time spent relaxing. How excited can you be to watch a new show with your partner after dinner if you've already spent hours watching the tube?

If it's not a distraction for you, play background music or even podcasts.

## 06 Get a coffee shop rewards card



A change in location can make a big difference. If you're feeling unmotivated in your home office, try going to a coffee shop—or to the library or a friend's coworking space. A new location can do wonders for productivity and energy levels, as can being around others.

## 07 Go for a walk



Yes, it's great to cut a commute out of your day. But that doesn't mean you should stay inside—or that you're not allowed a break from the computer screen.

Fresh air will clear your mind after hours spent staring at the computer. Consider going for a walk in the morning before diving into your workday, and enjoying another walk in the afternoon, when energy levels often dip.

## 08 Track your productivity



Because you're isolated from the team, it's easy to feel like a one-person operation. You may start to feel overworked and underappreciated. So measure your productivity—know how much you are accomplishing.

Start by tracking how many hours you work each day.

If your supervisor doesn't regularly conduct reviews, do your own quarterly analysis. Naturally, your review will be biased, but taking a critical look at your work is important. How do you feel about your contributions, the team, your workload and your accomplishments?

## 09 **Fold your laundry during particularly long conference calls**

This is the kind of multitasking that makes working remotely so ideal! During work hours, accomplishing work-related tasks should be your primary focus, but when there's a golden opportunity to tick off a personal task, take advantage.

## 10 **Communicate your schedule to be productive when working remotely**

Given that his clients and colleagues are in different time zones, Pounds' typical day might fall outside the standard workday hours. So, should he need to log in earlier or later than usual, he'll give his direct colleagues a heads-up on his availability like he would in a physical office.

*"There are so many ways to communicate these days, so if you need to be reachable, a lot of times you can be, even if you're not at your desk,"* he says.

Like many things in life, this isn't a one-size-fits-all judgment call. It's up to each employee to:

- > Determine when and how they're most productive.
- > Define what success looks like with their manager and team.
- > Ensure they're completing deliverables and making deadlines.
- > Set their own balance. An early evening call with your West Coast colleagues might mean you pick up your dry cleaning mid-morning. Or, working through lunch for a few days might mean you power down your laptop early Friday afternoon.



As long as you understand your team's expectations, communicate your availability, and make a plan for your day, you'll be able to maximize your productivity, no matter the environment.

## Don't Skip Lunch—Here's Why

Taking lunch breaks—especially while working from home—is essential for productivity. You need a break, not to mention the nutrients.

Allyson Conklin, founder of Allyson Conklin Public Relations, oversees a remote team of six, serving around 20 clients at a time. *“Our employees are required to take a 60-minute lunch during an eight-plus-hour workday. We invite them to take this at any point during their day—just as long as they take it,”* she says.

After years of skipping lunch while in her early 20s, Conklin calls herself a “lunch evangelist,” interested in ways to fuel the mind and body throughout the day. *“Pouring energy into something for eight-plus hours a day, much of that time in front of a computer screen, was depleting,”* Conklin says. “Lunch became a remedy. It wasn’t a cure-all, but it helped.”

She and her employees don’t have to eat, but during that mandatory break, they walk their dogs, catch up on the latest episode of their favorite reality show, work out or practice yoga, run errands they wouldn’t dare during 5 p.m. traffic, sneak in a nap and even go out to lunch, she says.

*“They know I’m looking out for their well-being, not just their performance. I think this is even more important now since everyone on my team works from home, where there is very little to no separation between home and office,”* Conklin adds.



## Ward Off Video Meeting Fatigue



Renowned organizational psychologist and New York Times bestselling author Adam Grant said it best: “Zoom fatigue is not burnout. It’s boreout.”

Zoom fatigue leaves people too exhausted to engage properly. Fortunately, there are ways to combat this phenomenon (which can occur with meetings on any video platform, not just Zoom!). Here are a few tips on combating Zoom fatigue from those trying to put the spark back into virtual meetings, one innovation at a time.

### Try some better tech

If you are still using the same setup you used when you began working remotely, it might be time to check in with yourself and maybe your tech team. Are you optimizing technology to engage in meetings effectively?

David McQuarrie, chief commercial officer at HP, says keeping multiple speakers in the frame or showing various participants while whiteboarding at the same time can “create an experience where everyone has equal opportunity to engage.” He reminds users to enable stronger audio and video quality, removing distracting sounds for better focus.



## Swap small group check-ins for one-on-ones

Have you ever had coffee with a group of friends and couldn't get a word in? Then you know that a one-on-one coffee date might be much more enjoyable. The same is true for Zoom. Amanda Cross, content marketing manager for Nectar in Forrest City, Arkansas, instituted a streamlined model she uses with her freelancers and clients.

*"I work for a company that centers around helping employees feel more valued and appreciated at work. When I decided to run my meetings, I knew a large portion of that meeting should be about ensuring that my freelancer felt valued by myself and the company I worked for,"* Cross says. It wasn't immediate, but now she feels all her meetings are engaging.

In her monthly, 30-minute one-on-one meetings she discusses:

- Positive impacts the team member is making, including data analytics
- Company-wide updates to mission and values or survey results that might be relevant to that person specifically
- Briefings for upcoming projects

*"It's a fantastic way to start the month and discuss content with someone who gets it. It's also a great way to see another person's perspective on what we are creating,"* Cross says. "I mostly communicate asynchronously with my freelancer, but this meeting lets me get to know the person behind the content so that I can send her better/more informed briefs along the way."





## Challenge what you've been doing in the past

Change isn't easy. But for Cross, it has been essential to improving and fine-tuning meetings to be the most beneficial for all parties. She shares a recent example:

*"At one point, I changed how I displayed analytics. While I was trying to uncover what articles created the most impact, I could tell that this was too much information for my freelancer. The next month, I moved to a different format where I gave the total page views and a look into our top five pieces. This was a much more productive use of time because it's not her responsibility to consider what's not working. That falls on my plate to glean learnings from."*

She hopes others will not be afraid to experiment, consider a new format and let the conversation go where it leads.

## Combat meeting fatigue by getting more hands-on

Research on Zoom fatigue often points to the necessity of feeling like you are at an in-person meeting. Valerie Bihet, founder of VIBE Agency, an event production company in Miami, decided to get creative to overcome Zoom fatigue.

She made "reaction sticks"—a popsicle stick with printouts of various icons glued to the top—and sent them to each employee.

She used a heart icon to symbolize love for an idea, a lightbulb to indicate having a thought or idea to contribute to the meeting, and a winking face to show agreement.

Everyone has to use one stick at least once in the meetings, and whoever uses the lightbulb icon the most by the end of each quarter receives a prize.

Someone has to be in charge of the tally during each meeting, but this keeps team members incentivized to not only pay attention but also contribute to the meeting.

Some of Bihet's employees took it one step further, making additional reaction sticks with different emojis so they have a collection to choose from.

*"I have found that gamification is always very key to keeping people engaged. We inherently want to win. We are competitive by nature. So when you can create a meeting agenda that allows a little competition, it encourages those invited to not only attend, but be excited to attend to see if they can win,"* Bihet says.

## More Zoom fatigue remedies

Bihet's Zoom fatigue remedies don't stop there. Here's what else she recommends when your team is struggling with virtual meeting fatigue:

- Always start with an interactive icebreaker. Keep it short (15 minutes or so) and include some questions to get people started.
- Visual aids are key to avoiding Zoom fatigue. Slides, videos and photo sharing are all ways to break up the monotony. No one wants to have someone talking at them for the entire meeting.
- Use the polls and surveys feature. This is the fastest way to reengage attention because the feature pops up on attendees' screens. Plus, our curious nature means we'll want to see the results. To do that on Zoom, attendees have to vote or reply.
- Theme the meeting. If the meeting is more than one hour or a key monthly/quarterly session, add a theme to the agenda. Create a digital background and send it to all participants. It will pique their interest and create a unifying element.
- Include moments for movement. A general rule of thumb is to include a physical movement break every 90 minutes if the meeting is all day or multiple days.



So, choose an idea and surprise your staff with more engaging elements and features during the next meeting. Or better yet, make sure that meeting couldn't have been an email.



## 5 Strategies for Building Relationships with Remote Coworkers



If you're a remote worker, those days of making a mid-morning coffee run with colleagues or heading out to the pub across the street for happy hour with your coworkers seem like ancient history. But building friendships with coworkers is still relevant and important, even if you only see them during video meetings or as chat icons.



There's research to back that up: Studies show having a best friend at work continues to be a key driver of employee engagement and job satisfaction. However, according to a Gallup poll, only **37%** of employees felt they had a best friend at work in 2022, compared with **42%** in 2019.

*"We have lost these feelings that we matter to our colleagues and to our boss when we're not seeing people in person,"* says Erica Keswin, author of *Bring Your Human to Work* and *The Retention Revolution*. The result isn't just a lack of friends at work, but also an absence of empathy toward our colleagues. *We tend to give each other more grace when we've spent time together, and we are open about our personal lives and the challenges we face,* Keswin says.

But how do you make friends working from home when you rarely spend time together in the office? Rather than trying to develop a deep friendship with one or two coworkers, consider creating friendly relationships with a variety of colleagues, says Nancy Halpern, founder of Political IQ, a New York City consulting firm focused on developing corporate leaders and teams.

Here are five strategies for building relationships with coworkers virtually in today's office environment—which focuses more on remote work and hybrid schedules than in-office work.

## Offer to help



*“The best way to make a friend at work is to ask how you can help them,”* says Anna Goldfarb, author of *Modern Friendship: How to Nurture Our Most Valued Connections*. Reach out to a colleague through email or chat and say, “I’m noticing what you’re working on. I want to help; what can I help you with?” Goldfarb suggests. “That is a great connection starting point, and most people would be thrilled to have someone offer help.”

The key to a strong friendship is having a compelling reason to spend time together. At work that could mean offering to share resources, attending network events together, or even taking a class together, Goldfarb explains.

## Believe you have something of value to give



According to Goldfarb, when we work remotely, we worry that an email or phone call will interrupt or bother our colleagues, so instead of reaching out, we talk ourselves out of making a connection.

One way to minimize the uncertainty of approaching a coworker is to be upfront about how much time you’re asking for and what you’re interested in talking about. Telling your colleague whether you’re interested in having a 15-minute phone call or a five-minute video call makes it easier for your coworker to say yes. You’re offering them the gift of attention and camaraderie,

## Be more intentional

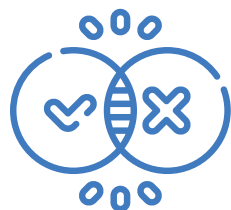


Halpern suggests another way to make friends as a remote worker is to be more intentional during video meetings. For instance, nodding your head when people are speaking shows you are listening.

Then, when it's your turn to speak, try to use your colleagues' names. Halpern suggests saying, *"I want to build on what Bob said,"* or *"Susan makes a good point."* Halpern explains that people rarely use colleagues' names and people love to hear their name.



## Connect over common interests



More companies are establishing employee resource groups that bring together like-minded people. For instance, your company might have an ERG for parents, veterans or employees who identify as LGBTQ+. Keswin suggests finding a group that resonates with you and going to a meeting, even if it's virtual. You might make a connection with someone at the meeting and find out they are in the office the same days as you, and then you can grab coffee or lunch with them.

Many companies also have Slack channels geared toward employees' hobbies and interests, such as hiking, biking or pets. Be active on the channels that interest you, and look for opportunities to make natural connections with your coworkers. *"Find the sweet spot between technology and connection,"* Keswin says.



## Engage in small talk

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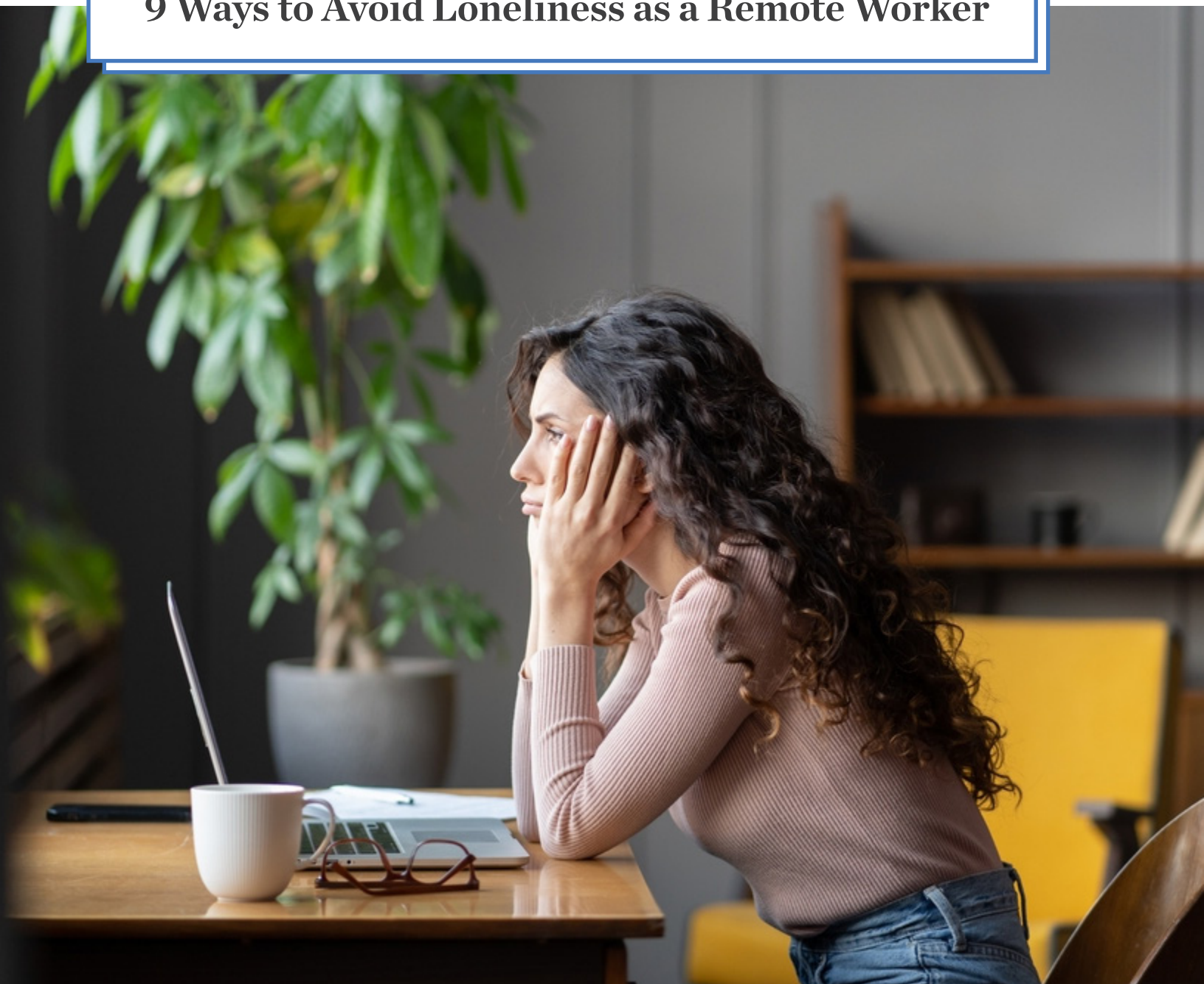
If you're ever in the office or at an in-person conference with coworkers, take time to chat with them. *"It doesn't matter what you talk about,"* Halpern says. It's just important to have a conversation, because small talk establishes a relationship between two people and makes our interactions feel less transactional.

Keswin suggests meeting colleagues who live nearby and going out for lunch or coffee near your homes rather than waiting until you're both in the office. If you have the opportunity to work on a collaborative project with coworkers, be fully present when you're together. Don't multitask or spend time on your phone.

*"You almost need to examine your own willingness to be vulnerable, because if you say, 'You know what? I want to make connections with people,' trust really is the foundation... of relationships,"* Keswin says.



## 9 Ways to Avoid Loneliness as a Remote Worker



As a remote worker, particularly if you're single or your partner works long hours, it's easy to grow isolated and feel as though you have no one to talk to when work slows down. Hours or even days can go by without speaking to anyone beyond texts with friends. The freedom to work remotely is awesome, but the loneliness can be pervasive.



Below, you'll find tips for avoiding loneliness while working from home

## 01 Grab lunch with a friend

Consider scheduling lunch or coffee with a friend once a week in order to have a little socialization on your calendar.

Hilary Billings, a speaker and influencer, calls these supercharged interactions.

*“Set up weekly routines that involve being around other people who energize you,” she says. “Whether this is creating a standing lunch appointment with a close friend, joining an after-hours workout class or Skyping someone for a daily 15-minute power conversation, having those connection moments to look forward to releases thought patterns of loneliness.”*



## 02 Volunteer once a week

A part-time job can help you get out of the house and have some social interaction, but another option is volunteering. Consider opting for a regular volunteer role that differs from your day-to-day work.

### 03 Head to the library

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Many people eschew coffee shops because they can be noisy and full of distractions. Plus, you'll need to spend money to use the space. If you fall into this camp, consider heading to the library instead. You'll get out of the house for a bit and have a quiet setting to work in. It's a win-win.

### 04 Keep meaningful photographs on your desk

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Lucy Harris, CEO of Hello Baby Bump, says one way she fights work-from-home loneliness is by keeping photographs of her loved ones near her workspace. *"Even though I may be alone, I look at the pictures to reminisce on the memory or the people in it, and suddenly I don't feel as lonely because I know there are others around me and in my life,"* she says.

### 05 Foster your weak-tie connections

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In life, we have both weak-tie and strong-tie connections. People like your parents, partner and friends are strong ties. Weak ties are people who aren't strangers but aren't friends, either: the front-desk clerk at your gym, the seafood guy at your grocery store, the barista at your favorite coffee shop. While the benefits of weak ties for social support have been questioned, studies have found that they can improve emotional well-being in older adults. Additionally, a study published in *Science* found that, to a point, weak ties can increase job mobility, particularly within digital and tech industries.

Business coach and marketer Stacy Caprio says she always makes a point of getting out of the house once a day. *"As you do, smile and say 'hi' to everyone you see, including your building's door manager, the janitor, any neighbor walking outside, the person taking your order at the restaurant, or anyone [else] you happen to see,"* she says. "These small social connections and conversations will go a long way toward making you feel connected and less lonely without being a huge time draw or anything you have to plan in advance."

## 06 Put on a podcast

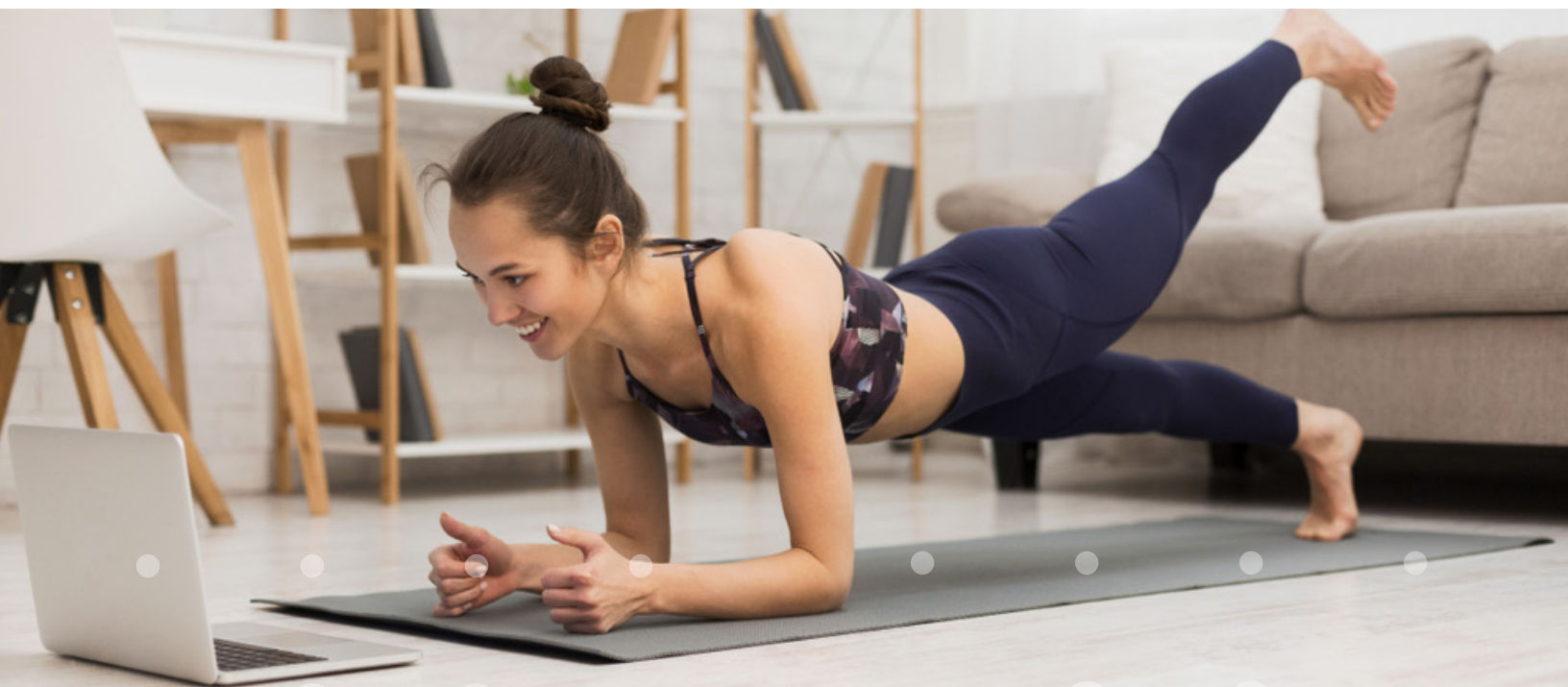
*“I listen to podcasts during work,”* says Sharon Rosenblatt, director of communications at Accessibility Partners. “While not ‘real people,’ it provides a nice background that is humanizing.”

## 07 Join a coworking space

Cities across the country are now filled with coworking spaces, with hundreds of thousands of people paying a fee each month to rent a desk or office in a shared workspace. Although these spaces can provide a sense of community for the work-from-home crowd, there’s one caveat: They can often be pricey. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce notes costs per desk range from “as little as \$200 per month and as high as \$700,” with an average of “around \$300-\$400 per dedicated desk in an open office floor plan.”

## 08 Get moving

No list of ways to avoid loneliness when working from home would be complete without mention of exercise. Exercise has countless benefits we’re all well versed in, one of which is improved mental well-being. If you’re not doing so already, head to the gym or join an intramural sports league for much-needed physical exercise.





## 09 Consider getting a furry friend

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A 2020 study published in PLOS One found that pets can serve as “potential social buffers for psychological distress and loneliness, regardless of species.”

Health psychologist and neuroscientist Sabina Brennan can vouch for the benefits of having dogs. *“I have four rescue dogs, and they help me address loneliness in so many ways,”* she says. “They have to be walked every day, so that forces me out of the house, and dogs are a great ice breaker—people will often stop to say ‘hello’ to you and your dog.”

Brennan also says simply smiling at her pets improves her mood. “Smiling is critical for our health: It boosts our immune function, it lowers blood pressure and it releases hormones that make us feel good—it’s a natural stress buster. Many of us see smiling as a reaction to something funny or in response to someone else’s smile, so if we work from home, we can forget to smile, which can compound feelings of loneliness. My dogs always give me something to smile about.”



## Bottom Line



Being successful as a remote worker is not as simple as finding your favorite pair of pajamas. Rather, you'll need to design a designated work space, keep up connections with coworkers, and structure your day to be productive and effective.

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