

# Effective working from home: course guide

The coronavirus situation means that a huge proportion of the workforce will be forced to work from home for weeks or months. For many people, this will be the first experience of working from home (WFH) for an extended period. And so it may present challenges in how to stay productive, connected and emotionally positive. This course handbook – accompanying our webinars and online course – can help you adapt to this new reality and even use it as a rare chance to learn and develop personally and professionally.

The course includes some of the best advice out there about effective home-working practices. We build on these with some wisdom and practices from mindfulness-based approaches to help you make best use of your brain, so that you can get the most from your working day.

We then take things deeper to look at how to use this challenging time as an invaluable opportunity for positive change. That's firstly about developing healthy relationships – both with others who you may have to share your space with for an extended period, and also the relationship with yourself if you've been thrust into more solitude. And secondly it's about using this time to cultivate or return to interests and hobbies that really sustain you in the long term. This can be part of a wider process of really getting to know yourself – your values and the direction you want your life to go in.

Guided meditations accompanying this guide (prompts below) are available at [risingminds.org.uk/wfh](https://risingminds.org.uk/wfh)

## 1. Grounding: adapting to the new reality

To state the obvious, having to work from home entirely for an unknown period of weeks or months is going to be a sudden and huge transition for many people. Recognising this, the whole thrust of this course is about setting aside just a bit of time to consciously and deliberately adapt to this new reality. It's about creating some space for you to process the shift, with all its challenges (and opportunities), and then to set up some wise habits and practices to make the best of the new situation.

So let's start with thinking about some very basic but important considerations about the best general conditions for effective working from home. What follows includes some good standard advice that you'd find through a simple Google search on the topic. We've distilled the best bits, refining some of them in light of what will follow in sections 2 and 3.

### Good basic conditions and habits for effective working from home

#### Set up a working space

Ideally, have a dedicated working space that means you're sitting at a desk or table. It's good also if you can sometimes stand for a while – you can get inexpensive [standing desk adapters like this one on Amazon](#). Don't work for long periods with your laptop on your lap, or in bed. It's not good for your body (or brain). It's good also, if possible, to have your working space separated from the parts of your living space where you enjoy non-working pursuits. If not possible, then it's good to clear away your working stuff when you've finished for the day so that you can step out of working mode.

## **Treat this like a real job**

Get up, get dressed. It can really make a difference to how you feel, and to your productivity. On the whole, keep regular working hours. Though you can enjoy the extra time saved from not commuting to enjoy other things too (more in section 2). In other words, don't end up working longer hours. It's not worth it.

## **Communication and negotiation with others**

If you're having to share your space with others (family, or housemates) – and often this will be for far longer periods than normal – it's really helpful to discuss and agree with each other how that's going to work best for you, in terms of how you use the space, when you'd like not to be disturbed, when you are going to spend time together etc. You may need some give and take, and some sensitive negotiation. We recognise that if you have kids and that they're going to be at home now for quite a while, this isn't going to be totally straightforward. We'll come back to this in section 3 on relationships. Similarly, if you work in a team, it's useful to let your colleagues and boss know some basic things about your working patterns and hours, depending on what say and flexibility you have around this. The same goes for communication with clients and customers. Err on the side of too much information.

## **Take breaks**

Take a proper lunch break. If that wasn't your habit in the office, now is a good time to form it. Take other smaller regular breaks (more on this in section 2).

## **Stay connected (with others, and/or yourself...)**

On the theme of communication, make sure you stay connected to others. For some of you, that may not be a challenge as you'll have no choice but to be spending longer with family members or housemates! For others, you may be thrust into longer periods of solitude. If that's you, reach out for connection on the phone and Zoom/Skype – as much as you feel you need. Use these methods as much as possible, rather than relying too much on emails, WhatsApp and texts. Having said that, you may also find that you choose to use this time as an opportunity to learn how to be with yourself in a new and different way, with less external stimulation and contact. There can be real value in that too. There's more on this in section 3.

## **Get out of the house**

Of course if you're self-isolating, your movements may be severely or almost totally restricted. If we go into total lockdown, that may apply to all of us. But until that happens, you can still go for a walk round the block – taking care of yourself and others in the process of course.

## **Take care of your body**

Eat regular meals, and eat well. Get some exercise (obviously moderate this advice depending on your current state of health and your body's limitations). You can do great exercise even if you can't (or choose not to) leave the house, by following excellent aerobic routines on YouTube, like [this one](#).

## **Manage distractions**

While it's good to take breaks and do some different things to break up your day, take care not to allow yourself to get too distracted. In particular, be vigilant around social media and rolling news. It's dangerously addictive at times like this, and can be draining. Of course, stay plugged in, but don't burn out through it. If necessary even block access to certain accounts for a while. There is the concept of a positive distraction – we'll come back to this in section 3 on using this time to cultivate or rediscover nourishing hobbies and pursuits.

### Plan and structure your time and tasks

This is perhaps even more important than when you are in an office, due to the challenges of more potential distractions. We'll come back to this in section 2.

### Background noise or silence?

Most people work best in silence. For some though, silence is deafening – and the sound of a TV or radio in the background helps the sense of being connected. For others, music really helps. Experiment and find out what works for you.

## Find out what works for you

It's really important to state that all of the points above are generalisations. What works for you may be subtly, or even dramatically, different. As you'll come to see in sections 2 and 3, if you can use this time as an opportunity to *really get to know yourself*, then you may find that some of the advice or 'rules' above don't actually work for you. Or they may work differently on different occasions. Maybe it will turn out after all that you really thrive working in your pyjamas, with heavy metal music blasting in the background, and having little or zero contact with anyone! **So, find out what works for you and do that!!!**

Take some time to reflect on this, and to experiment with things, perhaps over a few days, and then you could write below the key conditions and 'rules' for your best basic conditions for working from home

**My best working-from-home conditions and 'rules'**

## 2: Refining – working with the grain of your brain

Having found out and set up your best basic working-from-home conditions, it's worth exploring how you can get the most from your working day. So in this section we look at how you can be most productive and effective – based on how the brain works, and how you can use mindfulness-based approaches to get the best from it. What follows is taken from some of our longer courses on resilience in the workplace and leadership development. We've picked up and summarised the most relevant bits for the context of making the transition to working from home.

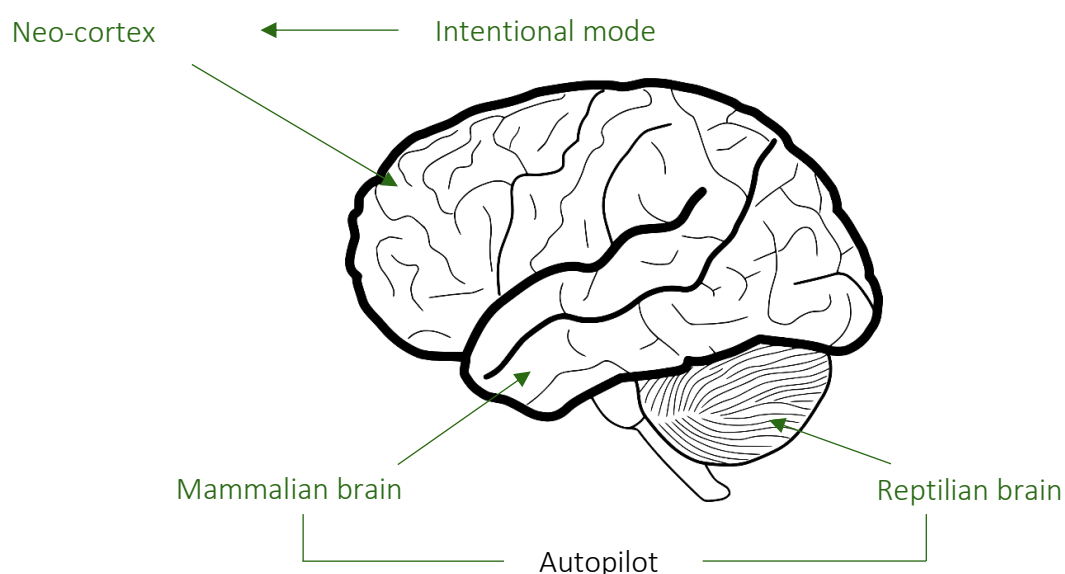
### Background: how your brain works – autopilot and intentional mode

The human brain is an extraordinarily complicated organ, the result of millions of years of evolution. Without oversimplifying things, we can however make a very broad distinction between two modes of the brain – 'autopilot' and 'intentional'.

The autopilot mode is carried out by the first two brain parts to have evolved in humans: the reptilian brain, and the mammalian brain. What these two brain parts have in common is that they operate automatically, without us having to consciously 'think' or work things out. They are responsible for the vast majority of what we do on a daily basis, and also for our fight/flight response to perceived threat.

The other main mode of the human brain is the intentional mode. This is carried out by the neo-cortex, which is the most sophisticated part of the brain, and the last to evolve in humans. It's responsible for complex social interactions, advance planning, abstract thought and imagination. We need it for the complicated challenges of the life, especially in our work.

We need autopilot mode to keep us alive and functioning in the world around us. The problem is that sometimes we get stuck in autopilot mode, stopping us from engaging our intentional mode.



The good news is that it's possible to train oneself to step out of autopilot mode when that's needed, and into intentional mode instead. When you're in intentional mode, you feel calmer and in greater control, and you don't get overwhelmed by complicated challenges. You're able to stand back from situations and see more clearly what's going on. You're then far more likely to come up with creative and effective solutions.

## The ABC of Mindfulness (for productivity and effectiveness)

In order to step out of autopilot and engage the intentional mode when you need it, the key is to become more conscious and purposeful more often. And the fundamental approach to make this happen is to *develop greater awareness in the present moment*. This is what mindfulness is. It includes noticing when you've got stuck in autopilot. Each time you do this, you're well on the way to engaging your intentional mode. And the more you do this, the better able you are to *choose wisely where to place your attention*.

Training yourself in this way involves very simple 'awareness' techniques: including mindfulness meditations, and other mini routines throughout your day. We use a really simple ABC model here:

**Awareness** – of what is happening in your experience, in your mind and body, including when you've got stuck in autopilot mode.

**Being with your experience** – understanding and working effectively with your thoughts and emotions, and allowing yourself to experience them before rushing to fix anything. It's about pressing the pause button – stopping incessant 'doing' or problem-solving – and spending time in just 'being'. This gives your brain and body a much-needed rest, to regulate and process your thoughts and emotions.

**Choosing wise responses** – instead of *reacting* automatically, allowing the most helpful actions and choices to emerge, by engaging the intentional mode. This happens in the neo-cortex, which requires a lot of energy to function effectively. So we need to learn how to engage it when it's most required, and to give it regular recharging rests by spending more time in the middle stage of 'Being'.

Getting going with mindfulness: Use our ['Waking up to yourself' meditation](#) – 10 mins

## High quality thinking: reflection not rumination

Based on the above, we can make a key distinction between two different kinds of thinking. Firstly, there's rumination – which is what we do when we're stuck in autopilot mode. It's generally unproductive, circular and repetitive, and often draining and depressing. It's easy to get stuck here when we are thrust into difficult circumstances, or feel under pressure.

Fortunately there is a second kind of thinking: reflection – which is possible when we engage our intentional mode. It's a more flexible and productive kind of thinking that allows you to step back, 'clear the decks', and see things more clearly. It's vital to access this at certain points of our working days.

You can cultivate the ability to step out of rumination and into reflection. The key first step is simply to notice that you are currently caught up in autopilot thinking. The common signs of this are: feeling like you're going round in circles, a sense of rushing and straining very hard, and tension in your body.

Once you've noticed you're stuck in autopilot mode, simply stop what you're doing and take a moment away from the task at hand. If time allows, take a proper break away from your desk – even if that's only for a few minutes.

Use the [three step breathing space or mindful minute](#) – mini meditations ideal for this purpose

## Mindful planning and prioritising

A very useful specific application of this reflective approach is for planning and prioritising tasks. This is particularly helpful at the start of each working day, or when you return to your desk after a break. You can set aside a few minutes – before you dive in to any tasks – to reflect in a relaxed and conscious way on whatever is demanding your attention. Not only does this help you to plan your day ahead, it also gives you high quality, creative thinking time for whatever problems or challenges are facing you.

- ***Start by grounding yourself using the three step breathing space.***
- When you feel settled, ask yourself: “What tasks and activities need my attention?”
- Allow each thought to come to mind, then allow it to fade and make way for the next one.
- Don’t plan yet. Just notice what’s calling for your attention.
- Notice feelings and sensations. This is important information. It tells you about your energy, motivation and fears, which will help you to choose where to direct your attention.
- Take a few deep breaths, and re-connect with your surroundings.
- Use the template below to capture your key insights.

The chances are that the activities you surveyed fall into 4 categories:

1. Important activities you are motivated to do
2. Important activities you are less/not motivated to do
3. Less important activities you are motivated to do
4. Less important activities you are less/not motivated to do

This being so, you can start to see where it might be appropriate to direct your attention. So if something is important and you are motivated to do it (1) – you need to prioritise it. If it’s not important and you aren’t motivated (4), relegate it. It’s the other two you need to take care about. If it’s not important but you’re motivated (3) then it’s a distraction to be rationed. And if it’s important but you aren’t motivated (2) then you need a strategy to get it done. Here’s a template you can use for this reflective planning exercise:

1. High importance and high motivation	2. High importance and low motivation
3. Low importance and high motivation	4. Low importance and low motivation

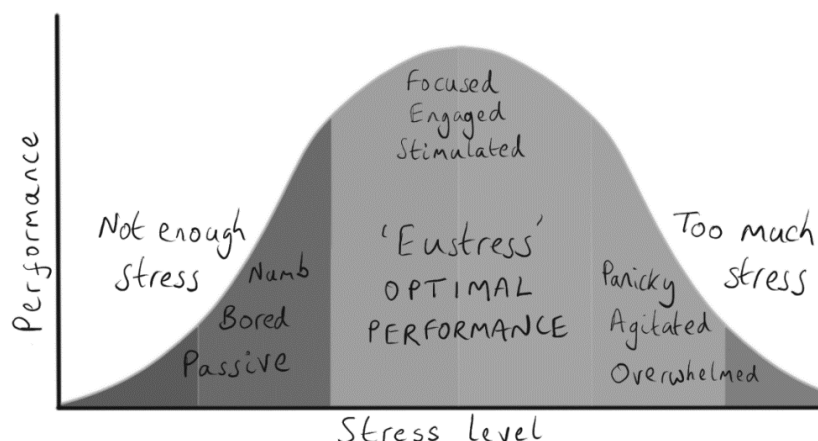
## The 'perspective spectrum'

A key skill that mindfulness teaches is the ability to notice both the 'big picture' and small detail, and to move flexibly between the two. The ability to move freely along this 'perspective spectrum' is very useful when it comes to thinking and reflection.



As you cultivate the ability to spend more of your time in intentional mode, you will be able to consciously decide where on the perspective spectrum you need to place your attention. This ability can be absolutely invaluable in being more productive in your working day.

## Pacing yourself



Despite all the negative connotations of the word 'stress', not all stress is bad. In fact, we all need just the right amount of 'stress' to perform at our best (known as 'eustress'). If there's too little stress we can get bored, passive, and numb. Our thoughts will tend to be pessimistic, and we may shut down or freeze internally. If there's too much stress, we can feel overwhelmed, agitated and panicky. Our attention gets fractured, our thoughts race and we may flip into the fight/flight response.

In the middle of the two extremes is the 'window' of optimal performance – where there's enough stimulation to keep us interested and creative, but not so much that our brains can't process the information we're taking in. So it's really helpful to use your mindful awareness skills to check in regularly with yourself and your body before you plough ahead with things – to ensure that as far as possible you keep yourself in that window of optimal performance.

### 3. Going deeper – turning challenge into opportunity

Hopefully the first two sections will help you deal with the challenge of adapting to working from home. But you can go further in using these periods – however challenging they may seem at first – as opportunities to develop and grow, and to bring about long-lasting positive change. So in this section we look at two main ways you can do this: firstly, in nurturing healthy relationships with both others and yourself. And secondly, in how you can use this time to learn more about yourself – your values, life goals, and the activities and pursuits that really nourish you.

#### Developing deeper relationships with others: compassionate communication

The current situation may mean that you are thrust into long periods of solitude, which may feel challenging. We'll come back to this shortly. For others, you may now be sharing your living space with others for much longer periods in the day than normally. Of course, if you have kids, with schools closed they are going to be around too. This may feel like an extra challenge – like an extended school holiday. The more you can get conscious about what is happening, and can get into good, open communication, the better. In what follows all the same principles apply to children as to adults. In fact, it's probably wise to treat your children in as grown-up a way as possible in relation to the current challenges.

In section 1, we looked at agreeing and communicating with others your hours of work, and when you'd prefer not to be interrupted. You will probably find all sorts of other aspects of your lives together that will benefit from the same clear communication and negotiation. You will, no doubt, already have all sorts of useful strategies and methods of managing your relationships with those you live with.

We'd like to offer one simple model that you may find helpful. It's taken from something called [Non-Violent Communication](#) (NVC). This is an approach to communication and relationships that honours fully both oneself and other people. It's based on a fundamental principle that all humans have the same universal needs. Everything we do and say is our best attempt in that moment to meet a need – either in ourselves or others. However, the way we communicate sometimes doesn't actually get that need met. And if we're caught up in strong difficult emotions (like anger or fear), then our language and actions can come across as blame, judgments or accusations. Others may get hurt. We may get hurt too if we feel we're not being heard.

NVC offers us a simple model to help us communicate things more clearly and cleanly, taking the sting out of language so that the meaning is still the same, but the 'tone' or 'attitude' becomes more positive and kind. When we can do that, others are more likely to be able to take on board what we're really seeking, and to respond to it rationally and helpfully. And vice versa, when you're familiar with this approach, you're more likely to be able to hear and understand what others really need.

1. **Observation:** describing how you see the situation without evaluating the other person as good or bad
- ↓
2. **Feelings:** saying what you feel in relation to the situation
- ↓
3. **Needs:** saying what needs you have that is making you feel the way you do
- ↓
4. **Requests:** saying what you would specifically like the other person to do to meet your needs.

Cultivating compassion: [kindness meditation](#) – 10 mins



## Developing a deeper relationship with yourself

Some of you may now be thrust into longer periods of increased solitude or isolation. This may feel very challenging. That's why it's important, as we looked at in section 1, to ensure that you feel well connected to others. Reach out if you need to, and make best use of all that technology offers today. If you're not yet familiar with video conferencing/call services like [Skype](#), [Zoom](#), and [WhatsApp](#), then now's the time to get used to using them.

Having said all of that, there's also a golden opportunity here to discover some deeper sources of inner contentment and wellbeing that are natural aspects of our humanity – within ourselves, available always, and not reliant on the uncertainties of how others might behave towards us.

Mindfulness-based practices are a great way to cultivate this inner contentment, because they are about becoming more familiar with a simple, pure state of 'Being' that's accessible to all of us – so long as we allow ourselves to open up to it. The meditation below is particularly good at doing this. The kindness meditation from the previous section is also great at cultivating a great relationships with ourselves (as well as with others).

*Becoming more comfortable with 'Just Being': [Open Awareness meditation](#) – 15 mins*

## Doing what nourishes you

Meditation and mindfulness are not the only tools available for developing a good relationship with oneself. This can also happen through all sorts of activities we can do throughout our day. In the current situation when many of us will have so much more time at home, and away from social gatherings and events, there's a great opportunity to cultivate or rediscover home-based interests, hobbies and pursuits that you find really enjoyable and sustaining.

These can also be a very welcome and positive distraction from the relentless stream of social media and stress-inducing news. This isn't about burying your head in the sand, rather it's about taking some time away from difficulty to replenish your reserves of energy and wellbeing.

Generally speaking, when we look at the things we fill our time with – other than the stuff we absolutely have to do – we can divide them into two kinds:

**1) 'Up' activities** that energise, interest and sustain you. These are different for everyone, but common 'up' activities include: reading, writing, taking a long bath, playing or listening to music, study and learning, arts and crafts, puzzles, gaming...the list is endless of course!

**2) 'Down' activities** that deplete and drain you. We're not sitting in judgment, so we're not going to list these here – and you'll know, if you're honest with yourself, what they are for you. Some activities are actually 'up' ones for a while, but if you do them for too long then they become 'down' ones. The classic example being watching TV.

So you may find it useful to spend a bit of time reflecting on which 'up' activities you could do more of, and which ones you could do less of. You can jot down some thoughts in the tables on the next page.

'Up' activities (that energise, interest and sustain you)

What could I do more of?	How can I make this happen?

'Down' activities (that deplete and exhaust you)

What could I do less of?	How can I make this happen?

## Clarifying values, purpose and direction

The previous section can be part of a bigger process: really getting to know yourself. Look at these values below and choose your most important one. Write on the next page what this means for the direction you want your life to take.

<b>Freedom</b> Choice Empowerment Independence	<b>Achievement</b> Accomplishment Excellence Productivity	<b>Appreciation</b> Acknowledgement Recognition Respect
<b>Authenticity</b> Truthfulness Honesty	<b>Trust</b> Integrity Decency Fairness	<b>Beauty</b> Nature Art
<b>Peace</b> Calm Contentment Simplicity	<b>Flow</b> Ease Effortlessness Relaxation	<b>Change</b> Challenge Growth Learning
<b>Collaboration</b> Cooperation Participation Support	<b>Understanding</b> Patience Tolerance Forgiveness	<b>Love</b> Compassion Kindness
<b>Connection</b> Community Friendship	<b>Contribution</b> Generosity Helpfulness Service	<b>Creativity</b> Expression
<b>Determination</b> Strength Focus Dynamism	<b>Passion</b> Enthusiasm Romance Vitality	<b>Play</b> Fun Joy Humour
<b>Knowledge</b> Clarity Insight	<b>Order</b> Accuracy Efficiency	<b>Openness</b> Curiosity Spontaneity Flexibility
<b>Adventure</b> Discovery	<b>Meaning</b> Purpose Spirituality	<b>Wellbeing</b> Health

My top values are:

### What does this mean for me?

What direction do I want my life to take? What am doing that I want to do more of? What do I want to do less of? What deeper aspirations do I hold? What changes, big or small, do I want to make in my life? How might I go about starting these? Write freely over the coming days, weeks, and months...

### *And finally: about Rising Minds...and a polite request for your consideration...*

We hope that you've found this guide helpful, and that it continues to be of benefit both during these challenging times, and beyond. If you feel moved to do so, you may be interested in donating to our [Rising Minds Foundation](#), which allows us to work with people who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford professional coaching and training services.

If you want to go explore in further depth, through one-to-one coaching, any of the issues covered in this course, and what it may have brought up for you, please contact [tim@risingminds.org.uk](mailto:tim@risingminds.org.uk). Please note that further one-to-one work will be for agreed fees.

Also, if you have indeed found this guide and course helpful, then you (or your friends, families, colleagues, or employers) may be interested at some point in the future in our range of services...so forgive the marketing blurb that follows...

[Rising Minds](#) is a social enterprise providing coaching and training programmes both to leaders and teams in organisations, and to socially disadvantaged people in the community.

[Our services for businesses and organisations](#) include leadership development, workplace resilience training, team coaching & facilitation, and one-to-one executive coaching.

Through [our funded social projects](#), and bursaries supported by the [Rising Minds Foundation](#), we work with people who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford these professional services.

Our one-to-one and group programmes are rooted in an [innovative combination of coaching and mindfulness](#), which unlocks innate resources for dealing with life's complex challenges – leading to deep insight and transformation.