How looking after your willpower can help you reduce stress and stay productive, wherever you are working

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The COVID pandemic led to big increases in psychological distress for many people, including symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression. The

negative impact on mental health has been substantial and is likely to be long-lasting, with many people experiencing psychological distress even now.

One of the ways in which this kind of stress might affect you is at work, particularly the [40% of the UK workforce](link) that still works from home to some extent.

[Our research](link) seeks to understand how psychological [distress](link) created by the pandemic has affected how productive people are at work. To investigate this question, we looked at data about working individuals from the [Understanding Society COVID-19 survey](link), which measures the experiences and reactions of the UK general public to the pandemic.

We found that during the early stages of the pandemic, in 2020, the perceived risk of contracting COVID was linked to higher levels of psychological distress, and this in turn caused lower self-rated productivity at work.

This happened, we believe, because psychological distress depletes your capacity for [self-regulation](link)—commonly known as willpower. Self-regulation helps you deal with emotions, suppress unpleasant thoughts, and get through uncertain situations. It also helps you keep going at work.

People generally have a limited capacity for self-regulation, so the more you worry about something—such as getting infected with COVID—the less willpower you have left to do your job well.

Remote work, productivity and stress

Remote workers can be particularly vulnerable to this. [Our study](link) shows the impact of psychological distress on productivity during the pandemic

was even more pronounced for people who worked from home.

One of the reasons might be that homeworking led to fewer spontaneous interactions with co-workers. Such exchanges are important for sharing knowledge and coordinating work, but also for receiving emotional and social support.

Remote workers also reported that boundaries between work and home are often blurred, with workspaces and job-related tasks intruding on home life. These homeworking challenges further depleted people's capacity to self-regulate during the COVID lockdowns in particular, making it more difficult for homeworkers to stay productive.

Our research shows psychological distress can have an even stronger impact on productivity for self-employed people. They already experience income insecurity, risk of business failure, long working hours and complex job demands.

All of these worries make strong demands on self-regulation. And the COVID pandemic heightened many of these challenges for self-employed people, making it more difficult for them to stay productive.

Finally, our data shows that the negative impact of the pandemic on productivity is especially prevalent among self-employed women. Psychological distress, self-employment status and gender can act together to reduce productivity to the point that self-employed women experience the strongest decline.

Pandemic-era lockdowns are now firmly in the past, of course. But unfortunately, other situations can still cause stress that affects productivity at work—whether that's a health issue, bereavement, a divorce or other major life events.

So, what can you do to try to cope, and even maintain your productivity at work, during such stressful situations?

Get the right support when stressed at work

Whether you're self-employed or in paid employment, working in an office or at home, our research shows support to combat psychological distress helps maintain productivity at work during stressful times.

This can include support from family, friends and colleagues, but also mental health and financial support. Sufficient recovery time after a stressful event and, more generally, sleep and breaks from work can also replenish your self-regulation resources. This will help you cope better with psychological distress.

Your employer can also help you replenish your self-regulation resources, by promoting peer support, for example. Increasing your autonomy at work could also help, as could providing you with more of a voice—for example, by giving you more input in decision-making.

As our research shows, organizations need to support employees who work from home in particular. Because homeworking relies on electronic communication, which is less rich than face-to-face interactions and does not necessarily provide people with reliable cues regarding their performance, homeworkers need frequent and detailed feedback.

It's hard to gauge someone's body language from a Zoom call, so homeworkers have to seek more information about tasks, or put in extra effort to resolve misunderstandings and conflict.

Managers should also take individual preferences for homeworking into account, and make sure homeworkers have sufficient control over their

work. This includes helping employees maintain healthy boundaries between their work and homelife—for example, by establishing guidelines to prevent an "always on" culture where employees feel obliged to be constantly available.

If you're self-employed, you might consider joining a peer support group to help reduce psychological distress. For self-employed women in particular, such groups can help with ideas for coping with domestic demands and decreasing work–family conflict, in particular.

Overall, remember that self-regulation, or willpower, can help you deal with emotions, suppress unpleasant thoughts, and get you through difficult times. It's up to you and your employer to make sure you have the necessary tools to maintain your willpower, and ensure you are happy and productive at work.

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