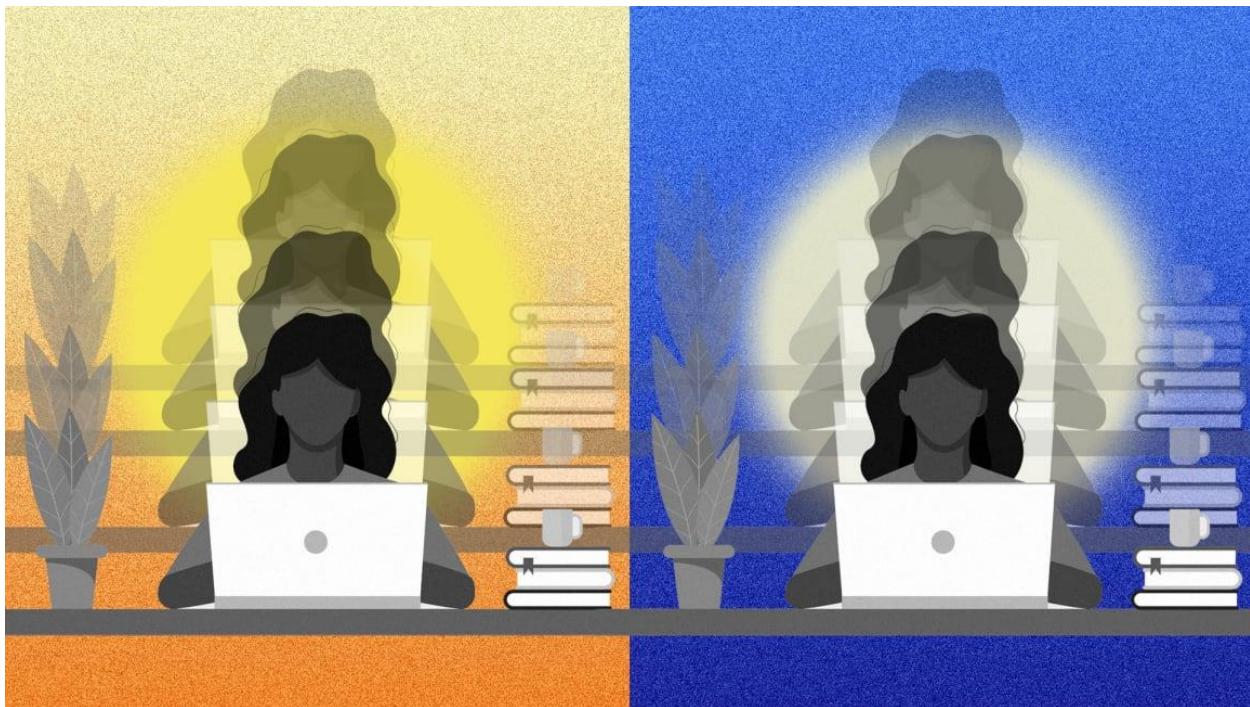


The red-flag signs you may be burning out while working from home

In a remote-work world, setting up clear boundaries is integral to protecting your mental health and personal well-being.



[Source illustration: Tatiana Zabrodina/iStock]

BY AYTEKIN TANK | fastcompany.com

Picture yourself this February, blissfully ignorant about the long and stressful road that would unfold before us once the calendar flipped to 2020.

Perhaps, like me, you were in the process of planning a family vacation, or regularly enjoying post-work happy hours with colleagues. Perhaps you were participating in a soccer league or looking forward to a new weekly yoga class at your gym. Maybe you'd been saving up for home renovations.

Then March arrived, and the pandemic put most of those activities on hold for the indefinite future. A thought may have crossed your mind: "What would fill my calendar now?"

For many of us the answer is work.

The pandemic continues to shape work culture, chipping away at the rhythms we once knew. This new reality was not all bad. Take flexibility—the 9-to-5 work structure may

be a thing of the past as more and more people can work from the comfort of their own homes, on their own schedules.

But remote work comes with a few risks to your mental health—and it's important to set appropriate boundaries to protect your well-being.

If work is taking up more space in your mind and life than you'd like, you may be on the brink of remote work burnout. Here are four telltale signs to look for.

1. YOU DON'T TAKE TIME OFF (EVEN THOUGH YOU HAVE IT)

I wasn't working remotely, but I encountered burnout at one of my first jobs. But I didn't realize how much time and energy I had devoted to work until the end of the year, when I only had a month to use my two weeks of vacation. It dawned on me I hadn't taken a single day of PTO since my start date.

Maybe you, like the majority of remote workers, are experiencing something similar—neglecting to take the time off you've rightfully earned.

According to a recent survey by Monster, more than two-thirds of workers are experiencing burnout while working remotely. Even though these employees are burned out, they're not taking time off: 59% reported taking less time off than normal, and 42% weren't planning any time off for self-care.

One telltale sign of burnout is refusal to pause for self-care. Maybe you feel like you don't deserve a break, as though you'll get behind if you do. Maybe you don't want to log off and face the stressful reality of life in a pandemic.

Either way, if you're not carving out time for yourself, you're likely inching toward burnout.

2. YOU USE YOUR WORK AS AN ESCAPE FROM STRESS

In the early part of the pandemic, I caught myself logged on to my work computer laptop more often than I wanted to be. I started to view my family's presence as an interruption, and would grow irritable when asked to finish up for the day. Work seemed far more appealing than facing my new, uncertain reality.

It turns out, I was using my job as an excuse to avoid the new, stressful reality. My job was something I understood and could exercise some control over. Navigating a new routine in a pandemic? Not so much.

Keeping busy with work can be a welcome distraction from everyday life, and it's not always a bad thing to increase your productivity. But there comes a point when you need to face reality, even if it's hard. Numbing yourself by staring at your computer screen or scheduling nonstop meetings means you'll miss opportunities to deal with problems (or issues before they become problems).

And in my experience, these stressors only grow when we ignore them. If you view your job as a respite from everyday life (or worse, if you've begun to feel hopeless and without

purpose unless you’re working), it may be time to take a much-needed break to address the things you’re ignoring.

3. YOU LACK BOUNDARIES IN YOUR REMOTE-WORK SETUP

Not everyone has the luxury of a private, at-home office. And your kitchen table or a makeshift desk in your bedroom can function just as well as a cubicle or office.

But lack of boundaries with time and space is another story.

If you consistently try to fit work into random pockets of the day (like checking emails while you brush your teeth or working on a project while watching a movie), you may be at risk for burnout.

Remote work looks a lot more like the gig economy than it used to, thanks to lack of job security and flexibility with work hours. Still, treating your job like a “gig” when it isn’t can compromise your job and your personal life.

Interspersing your work throughout your day and home can disrupt your focus, stifle your creativity, and worst of all, slowly lead you to burn out. If you associate your entire home with your job, it will be difficult to truly relax when you need it most.

Instead of viewing your whole home as your office—and your whole day as your workday—pick a designated area and time to hunker down on a routine basis.

Boundaries around your “working mode” will only benefit your job and your mental health.

4. YOU’RE OBSESSED WITH JOB SECURITY

Public health wasn’t the only area of life that took a hit due to COVID-19. A dwindling economy forced many industries to lay off workers, creating a sense of anxiety

Whether or not your job is secure, you may find yourself “panic working” to manage your anxiety. It makes sense to work a bit harder so you can make valuable contributions to your organization.

But fixating on job security by working harder comes with a cost, Gianpiero Petriglieri, a professor of organizational behavior, tells Bloomberg:

“It costs us our connection to reality, to our experience, and to others. We become incapable of appraising the situation, acknowledging our feelings about it, and being present to others. We become numb. Eventually, we fall apart because we have tried too hard to keep ourselves together.”

If you’re using work as a way to prevent feelings of powerlessness, be cautious. You might protect your job, but you’ll lose your well-being along the way. And that’s not a risk worth taking.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM BURNOUT

Living in a global pandemic is uncharted territory for all of us—and the worst part is, it's riddled with uncertainty. It's fair to say that just about every area of life has been disrupted, and who knows for how long.

Maybe you'll head back into the office soon (or maybe you already have). Maybe you're going to work remotely for the indefinite future.

Remember: These changes in how you work don't have to throw you for a loop, or compromise your mental health. New territory simply requires a new strategy: one that prioritizes your well-being so you can contribute in meaningful ways, whether you're working in a cubicle or in the comfort of your living room.