



## **Perspective/Opinion**

# **A Room With A View: Strategies to Care for Yourself and Use Screens Less When Working From Home**

By Michael T. Braun, PhD

*In this essay, Dr. Braun considers options for remote work that does not involve staring into a screen...*

Recently, at 3:30 in the afternoon, I stumbled (yes, literally stumbled) my way upstairs from my basement where my desk lives these days. I was having trouble focusing my eyes and felt nauseous. What was this? The flu? Yet another cold my children are desperate to spread to me? (My three year-old son now knows the word “communicable” because I had to explain to him why I keep getting sick after he and his sister are ill.) Thankfully not, but it was another disease: Screen Strain Syndrome.

### **Love Work From Home, Less Crazy About Screens**

For those of us who work from home, we spend as much time celebrating the flexibility (no commute!) as we do missing office life (no office friends). And the one thing we spend most of our time doing is staring at screens. My computer screen is my window into every piece of work that I have to do, from email, writing, and research, to meetings, work socializing, and podcast recording. Those 14 inches of screen are all I have to interface with my job.

Does it have to be thus? The answer is no. Over the past few weeks, I’ve considered the ways we can get away from our screens and still be productive when working from home. A computer may be the way we interact with our work, but it doesn’t have to constrain all our tasks. As Friedrich Nietzsche would have said about today’s work: “When you stare into the screen, the screen stares back at you.” Here are a few ways to beat Screen Strain Syndrome.

## **1. Look Away! LOOK AWAY!**

My optometrist said, “Follow the 20/20/20 rule. Every 20 minutes, spend at least 20 seconds looking at something at least 20 feet away.” That’s a good starting point, but we need to do even more to make sure we are looking away from the computer screen. One option: Find a room with a view to work in. If you’re lucky, it’s your office. (And that’s no criticism for my basement office—for an unfinished space in a hundred year-old house, it is remarkably pleasant!) And if not, then how about a cafe? Another seat elsewhere in your house? A co-working space? A friend’s house?

A room with a view means there are things to look at when you turn your eyes from your computer! You can do more than mindlessly obey the 20/20/20 rule and instead give yourself something interesting to see.

## **2. Remember the Phone**

The irony of pandemic remote work is that we had all the technology to facilitate remote work before the pandemic, but few people had the option to use it. At my previous employer, pre-pandemic, I used a small conference room for all my meetings. My couple colleagues who lived out of state participated via phone. I mean no criticism of these team members when I say it was a pleasure *NOT* to see them! I could instead look at the others around the table, instead of having to stare at a screen.

There’s no reason we can’t recreate these same conditions. Using video chat for meetings has become a default, but there’s no reason that needs to continue. Try having meetings via phone. Try turning off your camera and looking away from the screen during your next video meeting. There is little to gain from staring at a screen during a meeting, and it can be another opportunity for less screen time.

## **3. Paper Pleasures**

I outlined this *Transformational Times* piece the “old fashioned” way—I wrote it on a piece of paper! Paper is the ultimate antidote to Screen Strain Syndrome (though the same 20/20/20 rule applies when looking at anything at close distance). You can find ways to bring paper back into your life.

First, make sure you have paper and writing utensils at hand. We’ve quickly relegated desk space to techno gadgets, so clear them off and have a notebook (most any kind will do) and pen you like. Then, remind yourself to be paper first! Don’t default to the screen for any writing task. Take notes by hand during a meeting. Research says taking notes by hand is better for

recall. Outline something you need to draft by hand. Nothing will force you to be more reflective and creative than slowing down your work via paper.

Take things a step further, if you can, and try to read things on paper too. Printing out your emails to review seems wasteful to me, but what about books or journal articles you need to read? Reading them in print is a nice break from the screen. And if paper isn't an option, then at least consider a screen you can adjust more, like an iPad. It's still a screen, but I find the eye strain less pronounced.

#### **4. Save Tasks for Screen-Free Time**

Split your time between screen and no screen by grouping tasks you can complete when you turn off your screen. As noted at the start of this article, mid-afternoon is often a time when my eyes and body are telling me, "Get off the screen!" By saving up tasks that I can do off-screen, I don't have to feel like I'm shirking my duties just because I shut my computer. Work time without screens can be a time you look forward to—a time of greater reflection, deep thinking, and creativity. Save those tasks for the special times you are screen-free.

#### **5. Availability is Your Greatest Ability**

This comes straight from the world of sports: A player who isn't able to play due to injury or poor conditioning can have the greatest skills in the world, but their first ability is availability. And your availability to do your work is the reason you are in your position right now. When you compromise your availability through excessive screen time, those you serve lose the most important thing you have to provide. Don't compromise your availability (whether during the day, the week, or long-term) because of Screen Strain Syndrome! Find ways to get away from the screen.

How are you finding ways to get away from your screens these days? Do you have any tips or tricks to share? Let me know ([micbraun@mcw.edu](mailto:micbraun@mcw.edu)). I'd love to compile more ideas to share in a future edition of the *Transformational Times*, an ideal publication to print out and read at your leisure.

*Dr. Michael T. Braun is program manager in the Robert D. and Patricia E. Kern Institute for the Transformation of Medical Education.*