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Home office owners still face stress

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Traffic, long commutes, morning coffee runs; a familiar routine for some.

But what if, instead of the 6 a.m. wake up call and hurried breakfast, you could sleep in a little longer and lounge around before settling down to business?

It's possible, if you don't have to step out the door to go to work.

For Jeff Maynard, however, the supposed freedoms of working from home had their drawbacks.

The 30-year old Toronto graphic designer started freelancing five years ago in Port Credit. His office was his bedroom, and aside from preliminary meetings with clients, everything else was communicated through the phone or by email.

"There was no human contact," he says. "I would work straight for 18 hours, for days. There was no one to speak to. Two, three days of total silence would pass."

Maynard's feelings of solitude are not uncommon amongst those working from home.

Dr. Sheila Wilson is a psychologist specializing in workplace stress, which she says does not exclude home office owners.

"There's a loss of structure for those who usually have a morning routine.

"When you are home, you have a tendency to take your time. You don't get dressed; you don't brush your teeth. It affects your mentality."

Sitting alone without the chatter of co-workers and morning meetings can be detrimental.

"You need some social interaction, even if it doesn't mean finding profound friendships in the office," Wilson says.



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Maynard describes himself as a people person, but tends to be anti-social by nature. Continuing to work at home brought the second quality out even more. He started refusing to eat out with others, or go out and see friends.

"It started to feel less like a job and more like being a factory," Maynard remembers.

"There was no emotional satisfaction, and I was unmotivated because I felt isolated. I would leave things to the last minute, and rush through deadlines."

His physical health also deteriorated – he smoked up to 35 cigarettes a day and he didn't exercise.

Maynard also rarely ate breakfast, infrequently visited the supermarket, and only ever drank tap water.

"My diet sucked," he said, laughing. "Ninety per cent of what I ate came out of a box or went into a microwave."

Wilson strongly advises a regular morning routine to keep yourself motivated and in a working mindset. Meals and breaks should also follow a schedule, to maintain a sense of structure.

"People in regular offices don't wander at work eating," she points out. "You get your lunch break when others do. It's like a group meditating together. You have a common energy to drive you."

Laurie Pawlik-Kielen, a Vancouver freelance writer and psychology graduate, wrote about the potential disadvantages of working from home.

"If I became nervous or anxious on an assignment, that's when I would head toward the box of granola or bag of trail mix. I thought it was okay because it was healthy, but I saw I could easily overdo it."

It didn't help that her office was in the kitchen, either.

"The spare room was full of storage, and I discovered the kitchen counter was the perfect height for my laptop," she said. Her husband rigged up a wooden contraption for her to make it "ergonomically correct."

By a nutritionist's standards, Pawlik-Kielen was doing well in keeping only healthy foods at hand.

"That's the first thing," says Aviva Allen, a registered holistic nutritionist running her own consulting firm in Toronto.

"The next is to schedule time to eat proper foods, and have balanced meals."

Some freelancers say they don't have time to cook because most of their contracts demand gruelling hours within tight deadlines.

Allen has a few recommendations: prepare snacks in advance, don't skip breakfast, and make portions bigger so you'll have leftovers the next day.

And never eat at your desk, especially if you're working from home with no one around.

"When you're at the computer, you don't notice how much you're eating," she warns.

So eat somewhere else, and snack on something healthy.

"Whole-grain crackers with hummus, fresh or dried fruit, mixed nuts and seeds are all better than granola bars. Frozen fruits you can make or buy, and you can make energizing smoothies with them.

"Walnuts, almonds, avocados, and certain fish carry essential fatty acids like Omegas 3 and 6, which are all good for brain concentration."

While people working away from home can leave their office and work behind, those at home have looser boundaries.

Waking up at night or shortening meals to check up on work affects your biorhythm, Wilson says.

"Just like people coming home after work, everyone needs their decompression time."

She advises to set a time to quit working, and then put everything away. If you're like Pawlik-Kielen plugging away on the kitchen counter, drop your files into a container and wheel it away. Out of sight, out of mind.

Plus, not everyone has an extra room at home to convert into an office.

Dana Kosich, head interior designer at Toronto Hiatus Design Ltd., says you need to identify your personality type.

"Assess your weaknesses, your temptations, your distractions. If you're a person who likes to snack and you lack discipline, the worst place of course is the kitchen."

Orient your desk away from the window if you're prone to people-watching, and use different wattage in your light sources to comfortably illuminate the room.

The same goes for colour schemes. Stark white walls can be distracting; mix in a wall or two with deeper colours to soothe the eye and mind.

"You need to have the ability to close off your office space at the end of the day, whether it means a sliding door, a curtain, or piece of furniture," says Kosich.

"The longevity of maintaining a good office environment directly affects your quality of life."

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