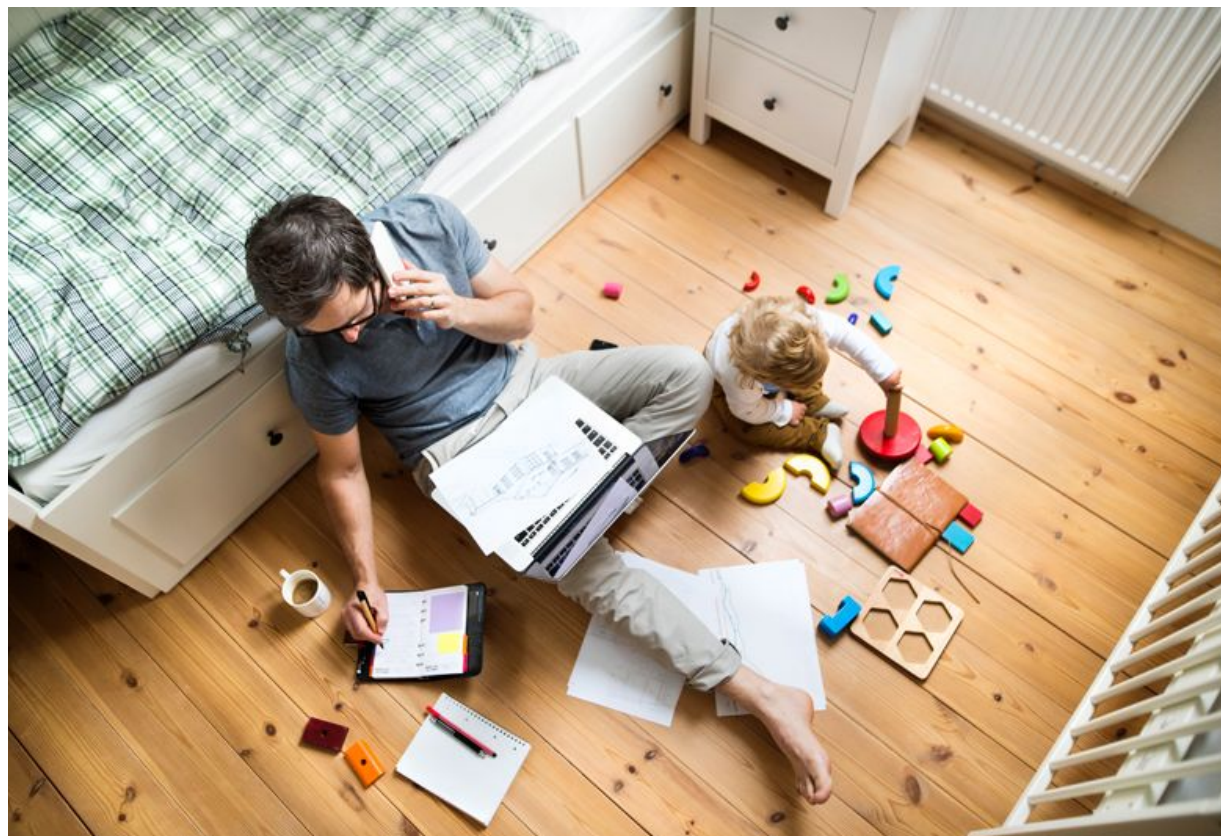


Ten work–life balance tips for researchers based at home during the pandemic

If you struggle with home working but are having to do it because of the coronavirus, Lucy Taylor has some advice.

Lucy A. Taylor



It can be difficult to keep your work and personal life separate while working from home. Credit: Getty

I find it really hard to work from home. I have tried it on numerous occasions over the years, including when writing up my master's thesis and, more recently, in my postdoctoral work, but I am still not great at it. There's always something else I could be doing: eating snacks, watching television or even rearranging my room. It's easy to think 'I could just do this later', but, often, 'later' gets pushed back further and further. Eventually, this results in a breakdown of my work–life balance: I'm not productive when I should be working and I feel guilty relaxing at other times because I feel like I should be working.

With the outbreak of coronavirus, many early-career researchers such as myself are being advised or forced to work from home full time. In these circumstances, a good work–life balance becomes even more important – and even more difficult – to maintain. I am fortunate that, at least in the short term, my own research has not been affected by coronavirus. I work mainly with elephant GPS tracking data and, unlike us, wild elephants are not under lockdown, so we can continue to study

them remotely. I am, nevertheless, struggling to focus. I have to keep reminding myself that we are in the middle of a pandemic – it is OK to not to be OK or productive.

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What has helped me is to try to get some sense of normality and routine back into my life, even if I am less productive than normal. Here are some tips that have helped me:

Schedule your working hours

I aim to treat my working hours as if I am in the laboratory or at the office, and try to stick to them. This does not need to be 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday, because you do have slightly more flexibility, but I find it really helps to have some structure. Be kind to yourself when setting your hours. It's a pandemic, not a work retreat. If you have childcare

or other commitments, just try to schedule in a small amount of work per day (1–2 hours, say), and see how you go. Setting up dedicated times for work will help you to relax in your downtime.

Discuss your work schedule with others

It can be a good idea to talk your schedule over with others beyond your supervisor and colleagues. If you live with other people, for example, it's important to discuss how you will work from home, and perhaps set some ground rules to allow you to maintain your work–life balance. I live on my own, but I still discuss my work and work schedule with others because it helps to create some accountability, which helps me to stick to it.

Create a morning routine

Although it can be tempting to stay in my pyjamas all day, I find a morning routine helps to get me into a 'working' mindset and mentally prepares me for the day ahead. You could just follow your normal workday morning routine, or do something as simple as having a coffee at a similar time each day. My father likes to review the previous day's work over breakfast to set himself up for the day.

Establish a dedicated working space

In an ideal world, this would be a dedicated desk away from where you sleep or relax, but during a pandemic you just have to do your best. This could mean using the kitchen table or even just a chair. Do what you can to make this feel like your work space. I set up my space with my laptop, a mug of tea and my notebook and pens.

Plan your day

Review your to-do list and make an outline for your day. This will help you to be more productive and focused in the time that you have. I find that setting SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timely) goals helps me to make a realistic plan.

Take regular breaks

Just like at the office or in the lab, remember to get up and move around. I try to limit the time I spend reading the news and on social media during my breaks, particularly at the moment, because reading the news on coronavirus makes me feel anxious. Keep yourself hydrated and try to eat healthily. I make sure I have a good lunch break away from my work. It's very tempting to snack all day when you work from home, but it's not healthy in the long run.

Prioritize social interactions

At home, you won't just bump into your colleagues in corridors, at the coffee machine or in the lab. Don't underestimate the importance of these interactions, both for your own mental well-being and that of others, and for your work. Schedule times to catch up with your colleagues, friends and family. I try to schedule such catch-ups for the afternoon, because I find I am more productive in the morning.

Remember to exercise and get fresh air

I go for a walk outside once a day, as currently permitted (with some restrictions) by UK government guidelines. If you are not able to go outside, just open your windows and try your best to do some light exercise at home. A pandemic is not a good time to start a strenuous new form of exercise – you don't want to have to see a doctor – but it is important to do something appropriate to your current fitness level. There are a lot of free resources online. I also enjoy following yoga classes on YouTube.

Mark the end of your working day

As at the start, it's important to mark the end so that you can switch off from work, 'go home' and relax. I use the same computer for both my work and personal life, so I make sure I close my laptop, walk away and do something else before I pick it up again to contact friends or watch television. It really helps me to divide my work from my personal life so that I do relax.

Don't be too hard on yourself

It's not easy to work from home and being forced to do so by a pandemic is not an ideal way to start. If you get any work done at all, you are doing really well. The most important thing is that you are happy and healthy and, if you are not, there is no shame in asking for help. Your family, friends, colleagues and health-care professionals are just a phone call away. You might be in isolation, but you are not alone.

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