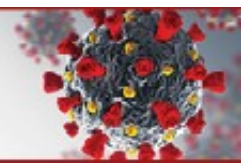


# APS Backgrounder Series: Psychological Science and COVID-19: Working Remotely

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Human behavior is one of the most important factors dictating the severity of pandemics for both the spread of the disease and the psychological impacts it triggers, such as anxiety, isolation, and uncertainty. Through an ongoing series of backgrounders, the Association for Psychological Science (APS) is exploring many of the psychological factors that can help the public understand and collectively combat the spread of COVID-19. Each backgrounder features the assessments, research, and recommendations of a renowned subject expert in the field of psychological science. This content has not undergone separate peer review and is provided as a service to the public during this time of pandemic.

Expert commentary from [Tammy Allen](#), Distinguished University Professor in the department of

psychology at the University of South Florida. Her interests include work-family issues, career development, and occupational health.

A PDF of this material can be downloaded [here](#).

## **What are the psychological science aspects of working remotely?**

Many workers are experiencing full-time remote work for the first time. They may have concerns with regard to how this will impact their job performance, relationships with coworkers, social isolation, and ability to maintain work and non-work boundaries.

According to “[Commentary on How Effective Is Telecommuting? Assessing the Status of Our Scientific Findings](#),” published in 2015 in [Psychological Science in the Public Interest](#), those who work primarily away from the office may face isolation and are less able to collaborate effectively with colleagues. Working from home may also blur family-work boundaries and lead to increased amounts of work during “non-work” hours. Telecommuting appears to confer the most benefits when practiced to a moderate degree, which is not happening under the current conditions.

## **How does transitioning to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic affect people?**

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced millions of workers to rapidly switch to remote work from home arrangements. However, many organizations and institutions remain unprepared to accommodate a remote workforce and lack insight into best practices as to how to promote the continued productivity and well-being of the workforce in such arrangements. Psychological science can be useful in helping people adjust to working remotely.

## **What are the 2-3 most relevant findings in your field that the public should know and understand?**

Employees who have had to rapidly shift to remote work are vulnerable to feelings of uncertainty, being overwhelmed, and social isolation. At this time, it is essential that employers create opportunities and practices to help employees experience less ambiguity (e.g., providing clear expectations), reduce stress (e.g., offering employee assistance programs that provide short-term counseling and other confidential services), and maintain social cohesion (e.g., virtual happy hours and other social functions).

Maintaining high-quality interactions with managers and coworkers is important to worker performance and well-being within remote work situations.

## **What should people be aware of as this crisis endures?**

The rapid shift to remote work is likely to impact both physical and psychological health. Millions of workers are currently working from their home sofa, kitchen table, or other makeshift home office

spaces. These spaces are less likely to be ergonomically sound than offices within organizations. We could see an influx of muscular-skeletal disorders as a result. Moreover, the lack of work/non-work boundaries may make it more difficult to psychologically connect and disconnect from work, which has implications for psychological well-being.

The shift to working from home may have a greater impact on women than men. Many workers are struggling with balancing work and non-work issues, such as caring for dependent children who are home from school due to the pandemic. Most of the work of dependent care falls to women.

## **What is the one message people should know that psychological science teaches us?**

With the need for social distancing, the ability to continue essential business functions through effective remote work arrangements is a key means of addressing the global health crisis. Workers need support from their supervisors and organizations in effectively making this transition. This includes accommodations for workers, such as parents providing at-home childcare, support and training for getting up to speed on new digital platforms required to maintain business functions, guidance on setting up a home office, and clear communication to help reduce uncertainty.

## **Are there any published articles that are particularly insightful on these topics?**

Allen, T.D., Golden, T., Shockley, K.M. (2015). How effective is telecommuting? Assessing the status of our scientific findings. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*. 16(2), 40-68.

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