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**HEALTH & SAFETY
NEWSLETTER**

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MARCH 2022

When was the last time you **really** laughed?

Want to fast-track your productivity AND feel amazing? Oh, and improve your physical health? Laugh. It's good for you.

Laughing is one of the best things you can do for your physical, mental and emotional health – and even your productivity. A real, genuine laugh will:

- reduce stress hormones
- increase your mood-boosting hormones
- relax your muscles
- improve your immune system by releasing neuropeptides that help fight stress and potentially more serious illnesses
- relieve pain by causing the body to produce its own natural painkillers.

University of Warwick economics professor, Daniel Sgroi, says laughter gives you a productivity boost, as it fast-tracks networks in the brain that help you concentrate and focus.

"It's almost like being happy generates more time."

Sgroi says someone who is happy might be able to do in one hour what it takes someone who is less happy to do in an hour and 20 minutes.

How laughter works

According to Sgroi, laughter can trigger neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin, which are also mood-boosting hormones.

Mayo Clinic explains it further. They say laughing enhances your intake of oxygen-rich air, increasing your brain's release of endorphins.

"A rollicking laugh fires up and then cools down your stress response, and it can increase your heart rate and blood pressure. The result? A good, relaxed feeling," says Mayo Clinic. ✕

Want a quick laugh now?

Even if you're working from home, you can still break up your day with one of these ideas:

- Crack a silly joke – even if it's a lame joke, the silliness will make you laugh.
- Get everyone (yes even those at home) to get up and do a funny dance.
- Look for funny things. Humans are primed to look for problems. It takes effort to look on the light side. For the rest of the day, challenge yourself to find three things that make you laugh.
- Learn to laugh at yourself. Next time you make a silly mistake (it's ok, we all do it!) see if you can find the funny side. Imagine turning it into a funny anecdote for friends. It's a great way to take the pressure off and realise it's not that big a deal.



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20 March is International Day of Happiness, a global event organised by the United Nations. The ultimate goal is to spread awareness that progress is not only about increasing bottom lines and encouraging economic growth, but wellbeing and human happiness as well. Find out more at nationaltoday.com/international-day-happiness/

Your 2022 guide to *working thriving* from home

It's 2022 and working from home is no longer a special privilege – for many of us, it's a standard part of working life.



While it can be a huge relief to cut the commute and hang up the business clothes, you've probably discovered some of the challenges of working from home: keeping yourself motivated when energy drops; avoiding back and neck pain from hunching over a screen that's too low; or the awkwardness of seeing your own face on Zoom (and asking yourself is that really how you look?!)

Here's a quick guide to not only coping from home, but thriving from home:

STEP 1: SET UP WELL

Set up your work station

Many of us started working from home at the start of the pandemic, thinking it was only for a short time. We hunched over laptops, or sat on dining chairs at the kitchen table.

It was far from ideal, and not sustainable.

For long-term work, you need a proper ergonomic setup. It doesn't have to be fancy, and small adjustments will make a huge difference to your mental health and risk of injury.

Adjust your office chair

For a start, try not to lean forward. Lean back and unlock the backrest.

Make sure your feet are flat on the floor. If they don't reach the floor comfortably, use a footrest rather than lowering your seat.

Whatever you do, don't cross your legs as you work! Sitting asymmetrically puts a strain on your hips.

Bring your keyboard and mouse closer

Your keyboard and mouse need to be as close to you as possible, so you don't have to lean forward in your chair to use them. Make sure you can type with your wrists straight and resting on the desk. Try to move the mouse with your arm, instead of isolating your wrist.

Check the height of your monitor

Your monitor should ideally be about an arm's length away from you, with the top taskbar level with your eye height when you're sitting down.

Take care how you use your laptop

When used for prolonged periods, laptops can strain your neck, back and shoulders.

If you have to use a laptop all the time for work,

you should consider investing in a laptop stand and a separate keyboard, or a separate monitor, so your keyboard and monitor can both be at the right height for you.

Set up your routine

A routine gives structure to your day, creating more time to focus and relax.

Start with the breaks: Schedule in a break for lunch and mini breaks throughout the morning and afternoon. As a general rule, allow 10 minutes break every hour. Get up, stretch, move and give your brain and eyes a rest.

Then add the time-dependent events:

Mark your daily calendar with any meetings or scheduled phone calls

Now, treat your tasks like meetings:

Block out time to work on your main tasks for the day. Put it in your calendar as though it's a meeting.

Last but not least, schedule the fun:

Add in something nice for yourself after hours. Actually write it in your calendar like an appointment. If it's not scheduled, it won't get done!

Set up your boundaries

Set clear hours that you are available for work – and stick to it.



Zoom doom: how to manage online meetings

It's not just you. Everyone hates seeing their own face on Zoom and other online meeting apps – but we can't seem to tear our eyes away from our own eyes. Why?

1. We're comforted

One theory is that our own image is familiar and comforting, especially when we're looking at a lot of faces in a stressful environment.

2. We're horrified

On the flipside, we may be dismayed by how we look online. "Is that really what I look like?" we ask ourselves. "Do I really frown that much, or look that tired?"

Either way, it's tiring to be constantly worried about how you look and whether you're measuring up to expectations – all while trying to take in an enormous amount of visual information.

To deal with this stress, Dr Julie Ancis, professor and director of cyberpsychology at New Jersey Institute of Technology, advises us to remember that the only person hyper-focused on your face is you.

"All those other people, they're concerned with how they're looking," Dr Ancis says. "They're focused on themselves, you're focused on yourself, we're all focused on ourselves."

Just because your phone and computer are there at the time doesn't mean you have to be available all the time.

Discuss your hours of availability with your manager. Then make these hours clear to everybody, using technology such as an email signature, or setting your G Suite, Office Teams or Slack to "Offline".

Most importantly: respect your own availability. When you are officially unavailable, resist the urge to "just reply to a few emails", or "quickly finish that task". If you don't take it seriously, others won't.

STEP 2: THRIVE WELL

Now that you're set up, it's time to tackle some of the challenges of remote work.

Manage your energy

Without the drama and chatter of the workplace, you might find daily work a hard grind. It can be particularly difficult for extroverts who feel energised from having lots of people around.

To keep your energy up, try working in sprints: short sharp bursts of intense concentration. You could use a timer like pomofocus.io (try to avoid using your

phone as it can lead to more distraction.)

When you feel your energy and motivation flagging, get up and shake about. Even jumping on the spot can help. And as a bonus, no one can see you!

Manage your household

And no, we don't mean procrastinate by doing more housework than usual. Quite the opposite.

It's tempting to think that because you work from home now you can... pop up to the supermarket for that missing ingredient for dinner...clean the showers because you ran out of time on the weekend...pick up that thing for your spouse/mother/child.

It's also extremely tempting for other members of your household to expect you to do more now too.

Be realistic and crystal clear about the time you can spend on household matters during the work day.

If you don't have a door you can close, create a way to tell others when you're working. This could be as simple as putting up a sign, or putting Do Not Disturb on your phone.

Think twice before using this word

Like a needle, this little word can pop the balloon of all the good, positive things you've just said.

You're in a meeting, and you hear:

"On the whole your performance was good, but..."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but..."

Or let's say you're talking with your partner or friend:

"It's great being with you, but..."

"I like your new haircut, but..."

These words sound positive – at first. However the word 'but' negates everything that came before it.

Our brains translate the word 'but' as 'here's the catch'. And when you hear there's a catch, you go on the defensive. Not ideal when you're negotiating at work or having an important discussion with someone.

The word 'but' "acts like a mental eraser and often buries whatever you've said before it," says communications consultant Dianna Booher, author of *What More Can I Say: Why Communication Fails and What to Do*

About It. "It makes communication spiral down instead of spin up."

What to say instead

Switch it around. There's nothing wrong with using 'but' as long as you're aware of how it might influence the other person's thinking. You can use it in a sentence, but switch around the negative and positive statements, to emphasise the positive.

"That wasn't your best result, but I know you will do better next time."

"We didn't do so well that time, but we can learn from our mistakes and move on."

Swap it. During your next tough conversation, swap one three letter word for another: 'and'.

"Yes, I agree with a lot of what you're saying and I'd like to examine this particular point."

Using 'and' or 'yes, and' adds to the conversation and invites further discussion without negating what anyone has said. Practise doing this for seven days and you'll start to get out of the habit of using 'but' in the wrong place. ✕

Words that make you sound less confident

How we speak determines who gets heard, who gets credit, and what gets done, says Deborah Tannen, professor of linguistics at Georgetown University in Washington, USA.

While there is no such thing as right or wrong words, some common words can put us at a disadvantage.

1. "Um", "Ah", "Like" and "You Know". When you're temporarily lost for words it's easy to throw in a crutch word like one of these. But they can make you seem less confident. If you feel a crutch word on the tip of your tongue, take a brief pause instead.
2. "Just". Phrases such as "Just wanted to ask a question", or "Just checking in" weaken your statements, making you seem less sure of yourself. Drop the extra word and talk like you know what you want.
3. "Actually". This has become the new "basically" or "literally". It's usually unnecessary. If you feel yourself about to use it, leave it out.



What **panic attacks** are ... and aren't

If you've ever had a panic attack, you know how scary they can be. When you're in the middle of one you can think you're having a heart attack, stroke, or other life-threatening crisis.

Panic attacks are surprisingly common. Up to 40 per cent of us will experience one at some point in our lives, says Beyond Blue. The anxiety related to the pandemic and its impacts may result in many people experiencing panic attacks for the first time.

Despite how terrifying they can be, panic attacks are not inherently dangerous, although the fear of having another can limit your daily life.

"At its core, a panic attack is an overreaction to the body's normal physiological response to the perception of danger," says Dr Cindy Aaronson, clinical psychiatrist at Mount Sinai Health System in New York.

What triggers a panic attack?

A panic attack typically happens when you're under physical or emotional stress. The effects of stress can accumulate so slowly that you may be unaware of the extent of your stress until a panic attack happens.

A panic attack starts with the amygdala, the brain region involved in processing fear, explains Dr Aaronson. When the amygdala perceives danger, it stimulates the sympathetic nervous system, she says, which triggers the release of the hormone adrenaline.

Adrenaline prompts an increase in the heart and breathing rate to get blood and oxygen to the muscles of the arms and legs. But during a panic attack this response is exaggerated beyond what would be useful in a dangerous situation.

The intense rush of fear or anxiety you feel during a panic attack is usually accompanied by at least four of the following symptoms, says reachout.com.

- racing heart or palpitations
- sweating
- shortness of breath or feelings of choking
- dizziness, trembling or shaking
- numbness or a tingling sensation
- hot and cold flashes
- fear of dying or of losing control
- queasy stomach or nausea
- feeling detached from yourself and your surroundings. ✕

How to react to a panic attack

Panic attacks come on rapidly, but usually subside within 10 to 15 minutes. Dr Aaronson believes the most important technique to help you ride them out is recognising that you're having a panic attack and not a more serious medical crisis.

"Just knowing what it is helps people," she says. To be sure, double check that you're not experiencing any heart-attack specific symptoms such as pressure in the chest or pain that builds or radiates into the arms or jaw.

If you see someone having a panic attack (or are experiencing one yourself), try not to 'feed the fear' by responding with anxiety or fear, advises Justin Kenardy, Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Queensland. He suggests the following:

- Calmly remind the person that even though the experience is unpleasant, it's not dangerous and will pass.
- Help to re-focus their mind away from the thoughts that are causing stress.
- Help them to slow and pace their breathing. For example, calmly ask them to breathe in for four seconds, hold their breath for two seconds, and then breathe out slowly over six seconds. Repeat for a minute or so, or as needed.

How hearing loss sneaks up on you

Would you know if a sound is loud enough to damage your hearing? Evidence shows that you could be ruining your hearing without even knowing.

Most noise-induced hearing loss is not caused by a sudden loud sound (although it can be) but by exposure to louder-than-recommended noise over a long period of time. Because this type of hearing loss happens gradually, many people don't realise they are affected until it's too late.

Who is at risk?

Workers in certain industries are known to be at risk for hearing loss, which is why there is legislation in place for industries such as manufacturing and construction. If you're in one of those industries, your employer would have control measures to reduce the risk, and you must always wear any PPE provided to protect your ears.

But it's not just workplaces that are potentially hazardous to your hearing.

A report by the World Health Organisation estimates that nearly half of those aged between 12 and 35 – or 1.1 billion people – are at risk of hearing loss due to prolonged exposure to loud sounds, including music they listen to through personal audio devices.

We already live in a noisy world, but by listening to music or watching videos using headphones, you can be amplifying the noise and causing damage to your ears.

"People generally don't know about safe listening levels, and in a culture where headphones are everywhere, that's dangerous," says UK audiology specialist Francesca Oliver. "If you have a particularly noisy commute and turn the music up to hear it, try listening to it at that volume in a quiet room. It's painfully loud. So imagine what that's doing to your ears."

How loud is too loud?

Sound is measured in units called decibels (dB). Most audiologists agree that sounds at or below 70dB (a dishwasher or shower for example) are unlikely to cause hearing loss even after long exposure. The 'safe sound threshold' is 80 to 85dB (kitchen blender,

vacuum cleaner, or alarm clock). After eight hours' exposure to 85dB, your hearing can be damaged.

After that, each increment of 3dB doubles the pressure. A hairdryer is a surprising 90dB, a nightclub or MP3 player at full blast is around 100dB, while a rock concert is 110dB. The louder the sound, the shorter the amount of time it takes for hearing damage to occur. If you know you're heading to a loud environment, take some earplugs that filter loud sounds.

3 March is World Hearing Day. For more information visit www.who.int/campaigns/world-hearing-day

You can do an online hearing test at resound.com/en/online-hearing-test ✕



Ask an expert about ...

Q How do I listen safely through headphones and earbuds?

Hearing Australia replies:

Maybe you use loud music as a motivator when exercising or to create your own zone while you're commuting. Often without realising it we'll nudge up the volume – particularly when trying to hear our favourite tunes over the traffic or nearby conversation in a noisy gym.

Drowning out background noise leads to higher listening levels, which will increase your risk of long-term hearing damage, but there are some simple steps you can take to optimise your listening:

Choose headphones or earbuds that fit.

Our advice is to choose well-fitting headphones or earbuds that have a good seal to stop the background noise from reaching your ears. Some people opt for noise-cancelling headphones, which can also help to keep your volume low when you're listening in noisy places.

The 80-90 rule.

Listen at no more than 80 per cent volume for no more than 90 minutes per day. Keep in mind, this adds up to around half of your

daily sound dose, so if you're exposed to other loud sound during your day you might need to make other adjustments to stay within your daily sound dose.

Use your phone to help you listen safely.

If you have an iPhone you can use the Health app to track your headphone audio levels. If you don't have an iPhone, you can set an upper volume limit for your headphones, or try an app designed to help you set a limit on your device volume or listening time.

App
of the
monthDecibel X: dB Sound
Level Meter

Have you ever wondered how quiet your surroundings really are, how noisy your workplace is, or how

loud a concert or football match are? Find out with Decibel X, the app that turns your device into a professional sound level meter. It can detect harmful environmental noises, and help protect your hearing and health.

Available free from the [App store](#) and [Google Play](#).

How to eliminate
procrastination

New research from the University of Otago, New Zealand, has found that if you want someone to help you out with something – whether it's a colleague at work or your partner – it may be best not to set a deadline at all. But if you do, make it short.

Professor Stephen Knowles from the Otago Business School and his team tested the effect of deadlines on task completion. Participants were invited to complete an online survey in which a donation goes to charity. They were given either one week, one month, or no deadline to respond.

The study found responses to the survey were lowest for the one-month deadline, and highest when no deadline was specified. No deadline and the one-week deadline led to many early responses, while the longer deadline seemed to give people permission to procrastinate, removing the urgency to act.

Professor Knowles hopes his research can help reduce the amount of procrastinating people do.

"Many people procrastinate," he says. "They have the best intentions of helping someone out, but just do not get around to doing it." ✕

Coffee may lower your
Alzheimer's risk

Those of us who can't face the day without a coffee will be happy to hear that drinking higher amounts of coffee may make you less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease.

Researchers from Edith Cowan University investigated whether coffee intake affected the rate of cognitive decline of more than 200 Australians over a decade.

The results, published in the journal *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience*, showed an association between coffee and several important markers related to Alzheimer's disease.

According to the lead investigator, Dr Samantha Gardner, "participants with no memory impairments and with higher coffee consumption at the start of the study had lower risk of transitioning to mild cognitive impairment - which often precedes Alzheimer's disease - or developing Alzheimer's disease over the course of the study."

Drinking more coffee was related to improvement in certain areas of cognitive function, and also seemed to be linked to slowing the accumulation of the amyloid protein in the brain, a key factor in the development of Alzheimer's disease.

Although the study didn't establish the magic number of coffees per day, Dr Gardener suggests that two cups a day could potentially lower cognitive decline by eight per cent after 18 months. ✕

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An easy healthy swap

We're all urged to eat more plant-based meals to help lower our risk of diseases like cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, and type 2 diabetes.

Eating more plants doesn't mean we have to cut out meat altogether, but replacing some animal protein with plant protein in the form of lentils is a smart swap, says *Tufts Health & Nutrition Letter*.

You can easily add lentils to your favourite mince dish whether it's bolognese, moussaka, burgers, curry or chilli. A quarter cup of cooked lentils is the protein equivalent of 25g of beef, lamb, pork, or poultry. Lentils also give you added fibre, potassium, folate and antioxidant polyphenols.

Visit taste.com.au for some easy ideas on how to cook with lentils.

1

THING YOU CAN DO TODAY



Bring the outside in

Do you love the outdoors but spend most of your time inside? Then introduce a variety of houseplants to your workplace or home. Here's how you'll benefit:

1. Phytoremediation – that's the word for plants clearing pollution from the air. NASA kicked off research into this back in the 1980s when it was looking for ways to improve the air quality in spacecraft. It found that the roots and soil of houseplants were able to reduce airborne volatile organic compounds (VOCs) significantly. Houseplants such as aloe, spider plant, bamboo palm and peace lily are among the best at removing indoor pollutants.

2. Less stress. Plants in your home or workplace can make you feel more comfortable and soothed, with one study finding interaction with indoor plants (like touching or smelling) reduced physiological and psychological stress.

3. Better brain skills. Keeping potted plants and flowers around your workspace can substantially improve your creative performance and problem-solving skills, found a study by the Texas A&M University. A similar study from the UK found indoor plants could improve concentration, productivity and boost staff wellbeing by 47 per cent.

Where to start

If you're new to indoor plants, search online for those that are hard to kill. And rather than sticking with just a pot plant or two, you'll get the most benefits with a "more is more" approach, and hang plants, display them on tables, stack them on stands, or mount them on walls.

EAT SMARTER

Ferment your veg

Fermented foods are back in vogue. Kombucha, miso, yoghurt, sauerkraut and kimchi all contain beneficial microbes that can support our gut health and immune system.

Fermented vegetables are sometimes called pickled vegetables, but not all pickled vegetables are fermented. The shelf-stable jars you see in the supermarket are pasteurised and pickled with vinegar – two processes that will kill off both harmful and helpful microbes.

Fermenting your own vegetables is surprisingly easy to do. You need a large jar, a little salt and time.

Salt kills harmful microbes and encourages beneficial ones, such as those that produce lactic acid. Submerging the vegetables in liquid – whether it's added or from the food itself – protects it from the less desirable microbes.

To make sauerkraut: Thinly slice one medium cabbage and combine with 1 Tbsp salt in a large bowl. Massage the cabbage with your hands for at least 10 minutes, until the mixture is wet. Add 1 Tbsp fennel, cumin or caraway seeds and mix.

Pack the mixture into a clean 1 litre glass jar as tightly as possible, pressing down as you go. The cabbage must be completely covered by liquid – add a little water if necessary.

Cover the jar top with fabric (to allow carbon dioxide to escape) and secure with an elastic band or string. Store out of direct sunlight and ferment for 10 days, checking the cabbage remains submerged. Replace the fabric with a tight lid, refrigerate and enjoy!

Note: this recipe may not be suitable if you need to follow a low-salt diet.



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