

Whitepaper A safe and healthy working environment during the coronavirus pandemic

Employers are obliged to protect the health and safety of their employees. Employers should therefore also be expected to protect their employees as much as possible against coronavirus infection. The main measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus are currently washing your hands regularly and avoiding personal contact. It is important that you follow the current advice from the regional GGD (Municipal Health Service) and the RIVM (the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment).

The most up-to-date information about the coronavirus (among other things) and the precautions to prevent its spread can be found on the RIVM website. You can find information about the approach to the virus, the latest updates and the most important questions on the National Government's (Rijksoverheid's) website.

You can find useful tools on the website of our holding company 'Zorg van de Zaak' (www.zorgvandezaak.nl/corona):

- Business continuity plan
- Checklist for companies
- Inventory of critical activities
- 'Oplettend afwachten' (Wait attentively) protocol

In addition to all the practical tips, legal measures and important information for business operations, we can imagine that you also have questions about how your employees should be dealing with this crisis and what you can offer them.

The corona crisis is causing feelings of restlessness, fear and gloom. The coronavirus brings about tension, stress and anxiety caused by a number of factors:

- Because of the risk and the threat. 'Will I stay healthy? Will I keep my job? Is the value of my home decreasing?'
- You can also see a lot of gloom around you because people are losing something. The structure of a daily routine has gone out the window. You have to find a new balance – and that can make many people feel down.
- The uncertainty - what awaits us? It works as a pressure cooker. People start coming up with their own scenarios. One will worry, the other will have trouble sleeping, another will become physically restless, irritable or have increased breathing etc. Different people will experience all kinds of anxiety symptoms.

- The sense of control is lost but the official advice is just to wash your hands and keep your distance. That won't really be enough for many people. People will then take measures themselves to gain a sense of control, which could be hoarding, but might also be anxiously following the news.

What can you do?

Call on the collective in your organization. Employees who get sick and those who have to take care of their children after schools close will drop out. Discuss this topic within your company. Employees who are willing to work more could, for example, take over tasks from others. If your employees work from home, ensure mutual contact via app groups, such as Zoom and Skype: this should not only be for business meetings, but also to share experiences about working from home. If there is a sense that people are working together during this difficult time, it creates a more pleasant atmosphere at work.

Continue to speak to individual employees. Discuss what they are experiencing and clarify what you do/do not expect from them in these circumstances. It gives an employee peace of mind when expectations are clear.

This current pandemic also has a far-reaching impact on employees' private lives. 'Gimd', affiliated with 'Zorg van de Zaak', has therefore opened a Telephone Helpline for your employees. They can call this dedicated helpline to discuss the personal tensions they experience due to the coronavirus's current developments. The line is open for your questions during office hours.

We are sharing two articles with you: in the first article you can read about what the impact of a major event such as the coronavirus is. The second article provides tips for working from home.

Safety during the coronavirus pandemic

We humans are excellent worriers. We have the ability to think about the distant future. We can look forward to the fun things that await us and we can dread the less pleasant things. When we are confronted with problems that we cannot solve, these problems lurk in our subconscious and occasionally present themselves in our conscious thought (the so-called 'Zeigarnik effect'). This is useful because it means you don't forget that there are things you need to resolve. But what if there is nothing you can do to resolve the problem? What if the problems are so big and complex that you can only watch from the sidelines? Then there is a good chance that we, as humans, will start to worry en masse.

Which is exactly the situation we find ourselves in now. The most recent insights from stress science tell us that, when we feel safe, we calm down and worry less. The front part of our brain (the neocortex, the part which enables us to put things into perspective, solve problems, etc.) suppresses our emotional brain (which controls the stress response and reacts sensitively to unknown, uncertain and unclear situations). The 'safety' that helps to subdue our emotional brain includes experiencing control and a degree of predictability. Control and predictability are now missing: how long will it last? Unfortunately, there are no concrete answers to this. And that is a reason why people who have difficulty with new things, uncertainty and ambiguity start to worry a lot.

Although the policymakers and the people in healthcare who fight the virus – trying to control it directly (or at least to ward off the danger to others) have a role to play, there is little for most other people to do. If you can't fight the crisis directly, what can you do? How do you still create a feeling of security for yourself and for your loved ones?

- First of all, realize that it is very human to feel rotten under these circumstances and to keep thinking about the problems and dangers that exist. It's okay if you feel tense, it's completely normal. These circumstances simply trigger our fight or flight response (physical) and our worrying (mental). Don't be too hard on yourself.

- Try to figure out the areas over which you do have control over the virus – which consist of, for example, following the RIVM guidelines. These help to tackle the problem. Are you not convinced? Then ask yourself if you are in a position to exercise even more control over this. Do you find a guideline unclear? Then try to discuss this with people around you, share your concerns. Don't search endlessly on the internet for the perfect solution; we have to accept that not everything is 100% clear and conclusive.
- People are creatures of habit. The routines in our daily lives provide us with security. Try, therefore, to stick to these routines as much as possible. These, in turn, will provide some sense of control and predictability. It won't always be easy (don't be too strict about it either: you will have to adjust the demands on yourself and those around you, you will be less productive and perhaps more irritable because you are treading on each other people's toes more), but there are some basic things you can influence:
 - Wake up at the same time as you usually do
 - Take care of yourself to the same extent you always do.
 - If you can work from home, do this too. Start the day with a short walk, or get some fresh air in your garden/on your balcony to create a break between 'home mode' and 'work mode'. Try to replicate your normal routine as much as possible.
 - Are the children at home? Focus on them, or agree with your partner how you'll provide home education or a daily routine; who does what, and when? Many initiatives and ideas can already be found online about this subject.
- Allow yourself time to think about things other than the coronavirus. You can simply distract yourself by thinking about pleasant things, for example by watching a nice series on Netflix. I say this because we know from research that worriers prefer to be vigilant, because they find it uncomfortable to be thrown from one emotion to another (they prefer not to be surprised by emotions such as fear and gloom after they have allowed themselves to relax). By keeping a busy with the coronavirus problem (following the news, continuously checking the BBC news app, reading Twitter, getting news updates on your phone) you may get the idea that you have some control over the situation, but this type of control is just an illusion. You do, however, have control over how often you expose yourself to the news. Make a deal with yourself (and any loved ones) that you will only watch the news once or twice a day, for example. Devote the rest of the day to focusing on the here and now/your life i.e. on your work, your physical health, on your loved ones, etcetera.
- Try to put things in perspective as much as possible. Obviously, it's very frightening if you or your loved ones are affected by the virus and we, in no way, want to downplay the situation. But the point remains that, as long as you are still healthy yourself, you can put your mind to use thinking about how we will look back on this at the end of the year. We will deal with this crisis together. You can focus on the many positive initiatives that are now being developed (e.g. the students who are helping the elderly), how our vulnerability has been exposed (not particularly pleasant, but true), how we can clean up the earth a bit by travelling less, and how we can strengthen our resilience now. What are you still able to do? Be inspired by the saying, "turn defeat into victory," what can you learn from this situation?
- You are more likely to keep worrying if you have a lot of tension and nervousness in your body. Make a concerted effort to stay active and relax proactively (worriers are often unaware of the level of tension in their bodies and therefore stay in 'worry mode' longer, which you can help to break using the tips below):
 - You can help to reduce physical tension (which can keep you in a worried state) by doing relaxation exercises (progressive relaxation, in which you first tense your muscles and then relax them, is an effective way of calming your body and reducing anxiety - at least temporarily: <https://youtu.be/fu9GD3yQJcc>)
 - Keep moving. Take advantage of the fact that we, in the Netherlands, are still allowed to go outside by walking, doing some work in your garden or get some exercise. There are many instructional exercise videos available on YouTube on how to work up a sweat. We know from research that exercise and sport are effective barriers

against stress. Nature also has a positive effect on stress levels in our brains; we recover faster in nature than in an urban environment.

- Groups promote safety: keep in touch with your loved ones. From an evolutionary point of view, groups have always offered protection against external threats. Let's take advantage of that now and turn our concerns into thoughtfulness. Even if we have to keep our distance from each other, this doesn't change the fact that we can easily still have contact with each other in the modern age. Facetime, Zoom, Skype, the possibilities are endless. Keep in touch. Share your worries. And take care of each other; focus your energy on that. You can get more control by thinking about what you can do for your older neighbor than by anxiously awaiting the next news report.

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Tips for working from home

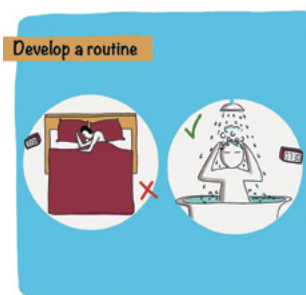
Under normal circumstances, a day of working from home is a pleasure for many employees. But the current obligation to work from home gives it a different edge. Perhaps your employees are missing their colleagues for extra fun or motivation? Or is their concentration put to the test by all the chaos and commotion? You still want them to be as productive as possible. So what is the best way to work from home? 10 tips to make working from home as productive and as pleasant as possible.



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Choose your work location carefully

Create a space in your home where you can work well. It might be a desk or, if you don't have one, the kitchen table with a comfortable chair. Make sure that you do not put strain on your back. Ensure that there are also as few stimuli as possible around you or on your desk. If there are, clean up. Really make it your space. Try to ensure that every other family member also has their own workplace. Children too for their school work.



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Develop a routine

Set your alarm clock. Okay, maybe an hour later because you don't have to travel to work, but get out of bed at around the same time every day. This should also apply to your children and other family members who are at home. Make a deal with yourself to be at your home office by 8.30 a.m. every day. Do you have recurring tasks? Also choose a fixed time to do these during your day.

Get dressed

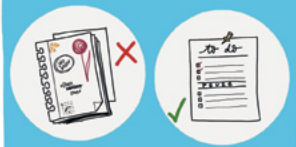
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Get dressed

Do you find yourself more in 'relax mode' than in 'action mode'? Then get out of your comfy clothes and into your 'normal' clothes. It works! You can keep your comfortable slippers on, as long as they don't distract you.

Don't skip your breakfast

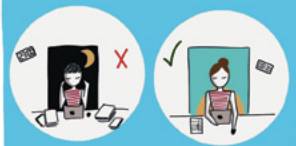
Take the time to have breakfast. Have a moment to yourself before you sit at your laptop. This way, you'll start the day with energy and full concentration.

Challenge yourself

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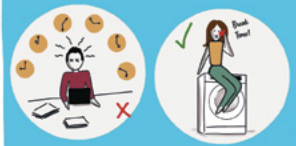
What exactly do you want to achieve today? Write it down. Make a distinction between what you want to accomplish in the morning and in the afternoon, for example. You can also do this the day or evening in advance. This way, you'll motivate yourself immediately for the next day. Put this in your diary as well. This also applies to any children who now have to continue their school work from home. Planning together in advance gives peace and clarity.

Eat that frog

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When are you at your best?

Are you most productive in the morning? Start your day with the most important items on your 'to do' list. It's better to take on tasks you can do on auto-pilot when your concentration begins to flag.

Work in chunks

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No one is able to concentrate for 8 hours straight. So plan 1 or 2-hour chunks when you can focus on your tasks and then take a short break. The advantage of working from home? You can switch the washing machine on during a break or divide your attention between your work and your children who are also at home. Make a schedule with your family.

Take proper breaks

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Take a walk outside during your break. Fresh air is good for everyone. Also important: prepare your lunch in advance and make sure your refrigerator is full. That way you won't have to go to the supermarket during your break.



Make it pleasant

If you miss the social aspect of communicating with your colleagues, then make your home environment pleasant too. Buy a bunch of flowers for the table or organize a daily call or FaceTime with a colleague or friend. This way you can avoid social isolation.



Stop on time

If you are working from home, the danger is that you might just keep working. Are you tired? Stop on time and make sure you start the next day afresh. And exercise. People often neglect to do this but it's just as important. Exercise ensures a clear mind and revitalizes you.

You see, working from home isn't that bad after all! You don't have to commute anymore, there are no more long meetings and you don't have to chit-chat too much, so you'll have more time. Maybe you're at home with your family, you can use some of that extra time to spend quality time with your family. No family? Then you have loads of extra 'me-time'; time for Netflix, a good book, a workout or a walk outside with a housemate/partner.

Source, the 'coronakrant': www.coronakrant.nl

More information

Would you like more information or does your employee need professional support? Please contact us

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