Work from Home Guilt: The side effect of Freedom

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Introduction
One universal truth I have figured out is that Lockdown makes days longer and they become even more longer when we are anxious, or lonely or when we try to complete multiple responsibilities like taking care of the family members and working from home.

Working from home was a known and widely accepted idea in the IT sector, in fact many employees used to look forward to work from home in Pre Covid days. What started as a short-term leave from the office has transformed into an entire workforce transition. In current scenario when everyone from cloud architect to kinder garden teachers are working from home is not something to be excited about. As the entire workforce of the India which is a staggering number of 500 million people moved their work place into their homes, they brought in much more than the work.

Although advantages are numerous (no commute time, less office distractions, more personal satisfaction, increased independence, cost savings), there is a phenomenon which threatens to cut the joy from this experience and turn it into a kind of ordeal or misery. We all are suffering with constant need to be seen online most time of the day, we all have the urge to respond to mails and messages as soon as they arrive irrespective of time and the constant worry about not being productive enough as compared to their colleagues. All of this is identified as symptoms of Work from home guilt.

As the number of days of work from home kept increasing, the amount of stress and anxiety also kept on increasing. This increasing pressure has impacted both business productivity as well as the overall health of the workforce.
When the entire work force moved to their homes for work, many Industrial Psychologists believed that it will lead to an increase in productivity as seen in many previous researches (1st). Quiet surprisingly and much against the popular believe, remote work seems to trigger feelings of guilt in workers. Making them fall into the trap of having negative feelings about themselves and their work. WFH also makes employees doubt their own performance or their commitment to the company. They experience burnout, can’t find motivation or separate home from work life.

Some of the causes of this negative impact of Work from guilt are:

**Lack of Structure**

WFH can be confusing as there is a lack of structure. Employees don’t have tangible separation between work and home. They can no longer just mentally “turn off” their work, which in turn causes difficulty to set boundaries for themselves and which further gives them a sense of working all the time. They might be cooking while attending a meeting, which does not give them satisfaction of completing a task; Neither on the work front nor at personal front.

Since employee are not officially “starting their day” or officially “ending it”, taking personal breaks feels like being unproductive. Working around the clock could be affecting employee’s health and they’re experiencing exhaustion to a great degree. They are not eating on time, they’re making unhealthy choices regarding food and snacks and they have little to no time to focus on self-care.

An ASU research paper by Blake Ashforth (2nd) described the necessity of transitioning from “home” to “work” as a result of boundary-crossing activities. These transitions include putting on work clothes, getting ready for the day and commuting to work. Experiencing these physical and social indicators of a change helps in creating compartment between the two aspects of your life. While skipping them feels like less work, maintaining these habits is critical for well-being and work engagement.

**Difficulty Setting Boundaries**

When working from home, you may experience challenges like setting up boundaries especially in Indian context, in joint family culture and cramped
living spaces with people who forget that working from home is still working. Family members, friends and neighbours constantly asking for help or to engage with them during working hours. Employees may even experience some frustration on their end if they note that they are unavailable.

**Inability To Disconnect**

In a typical work from home day, employee wakes up to emails andWhatsapps messages while still being in bed. They attend conference calls while eating or cooking and many a times working on some pending work late in the evening or post dinner.

Even for a kinder garden teacher, work device have now become an extension of them. This increase in merged working hours and shift in setting are causing some profound social and personal struggles.

**Working “around the clock”**

There are so many people who are working long, intense hours right now. Not only Healthcare workers, but also people in technology and social industries who are working to adapt their products and services to meet these new demands. There are people whose 40-hour/week job has become a 60-70 hour/week job and those are real hours actually spent working!

When the pandemic started, there were multiple articles on the internet regarding how to handle “extra” time, but for many employees that doesn’t exist. Many employees are working harder and longer then before, since they are saving a lot of their time which they generally spend commuting.

**You check your email/Whatsapp notifications like clockwork**

One of my friend recently confined to me, saying that she is addicted to her email more then she is addicted to her social media. One of the common source of burnout for employees in WFH setting is constantly checking work communication platforms at all hours of the day and night. One thing that employees need to understand here is that it’s fine to unplug them. One thing the employers need to understand here is that they should not shamed or judge employees for unplugging themselves. If employees
don’t pull their head out of work every now and again, they won’t be able to properly recharge and tackle your workload.

**Overworked**

One of my friend, recently got married, instead of celebrating she is worried that she might lose her job. Her fears are based on various assumptions such as What if the boss thinks she is slacking off? What if he suspects that she is actually taking care of house chores instead of professional tasks? Balancing home schooling, parenting, work, spending time with family or with a spouse and caring for one’s own needs has resulted in the fact that people forget or neglect to take breaks during work hours, whereas many of the ones who do put their activity on pause feel guilty afterwards or worried that their productivity could decrease or they might lose their jobs. To prevent themselves from this uncertainty and guilt, employees start working longer hours and dedicate more time to work.

Even though employees are putting in more hours it is important to note here that negative emotion like shame, remorse, guilt or fear eradicate productivity, efficiency and morale at work. This negative feeling associated with work can also trigger conflict and frustration in household.

**Too Many Distractions**

When working from home, employees may experience distractions and interruptions throughout your day. Some distractions may include:

- Receiving deliveries
- Getting non-work related calls and texts
- Notification from social media.
- Caring for pets.
- Dealing with unexpected family needs.

All these unorganized distraction creeps up during work hours and the more time employee spends on these distraction, the more the guilt grows.

**Procrastination is at all time high**

Mr. M is a senior manager at an automobile insurance company, he had a meeting packed day yesterday having more than 8 meetings in a day. He has not slept well and drags himself for calls today, his inbox is filled with mails but he has no will to respond. Today he feels like doing everything except work. At home, employees have comforts that can be tempting to indulge in. For example, if someone had a
discouraging interaction with a client or management, in an office setting they just have to continue with the sad mood and get on with your workday. If they work from home, they can actually withdraw and go play video games until you feel better.

Procrastination can take a toll on mental health. When humans don’t have goals toward which they are working, even small ones, they can feel like they are failing. Many research suggests that not having aspirations to actively achieve something can hamper overall morale.

Procrastinating is easier to come about when employees don’t have the pressure of needing to wrap up a project so they can leave the office to go home, meet up with friends for a happy hour, head to a sporting event, or some other evening activity. Procrastination typically leads to feelings of guilt, especially for people who are achievement-driven.

This isn’t simply one time emotional response; the chronic stress that results in burnout changes the anatomy and functioning of the brain. These changes in turn effect the cognitive skill (ability to think, learn, reason and pay attention) and neuroendocrine systems (which release serotonin and adrenaline).

**A Supportive Environment Is Missing**

Sustainable connections are keys to both our work lives and our personal lives. Working without others can be a blessing and a curse. Blessing in a sense that there is lesser travel time and the downside of this is lesser possibility socialization. But working alone and socially isolated makes you feel as if you don’t have anyone to support you. When you work remotely and a problem arises, you’re alone in the isolation of your home office to cope with the impact and find a solution.

According to Steve Cole, the director of the Social Genomics Core Laboratory at UCLA, losing a sense of community and connection changes a person’s perception of the world, leading one to feel threatened and distrusting of others and activate defence mechanisms.

**Social Loneliness**

This problem affects a group of employees who were not able to move back with family or friends and had to spend entire lockdown alone. During normal situations their work is an important social aspect of their life. With remote
work, which socially isolates people, there is an added component of living alone and loneliness. Research has shown that obesity reduce life span by 20% and smoking by 50% but loneliness reduce life span by 70%

It’s easy to tackle problems when it arise in office, entire office is there to help us. In isolated work from home scenario, employee is utterly alone to figure out any solution.

**Comparison with others and fear of being left behind**

No matter how many times we were told this in the past, but we just can’t stop comparing our work with others in order to see if we are doing good or not. Even in educational institute which are known for being less competitive, leaving before your senior is considered a sin. We are not talking about its health effects but for now it is definitely a norm.

This basic unhealthy need of comparison is not fulfilled in WFH scenario; they just assume everyone else is working harder and longer than them. This makes them, think they should also work longer and harder but other factor mentioned above make it difficult to work longer. It is easier to get in this trap of spending more time online but don’t we know all along working longer doesn’t necessarily mean better work and vice versa.

Employees are burning themselves out, thinking they are not performing up to mark and others are doing exceptionally good. This anxiety over others doing more than them can take a toll on your mental health and, equally, affect your work.

**Heightened fear of losing jobs**

One of the basic needs of humans after covering for their physical needs is safety. One reason why majority of people choose to work for someone else is for the Job security that it provides and the constant flow of money in their life in form of salary.

Due to Pandemic many businesses have a lot of revenue loss causing them to lay off employees. This is an extremely challenging and emotionally exhausting situation to be in, as you always stay in fear of being laid off next. Not being able to keep up with the demand, or starting to feel disengaged with the work as a whole during a time of world crisis can be really threatening. Previous research highlights Living in a heightened state of stress spark our brains to switch into “survival mode,” impairing ambition and responsibility. The “Survival mode” gives us the feeling of just passing life rather than living life.
**Conclusion**

It’s worth remembering that pre-Covid, being in the office from 9-5 was often the standard measure of day’s work. To make remote working successful long-term, it’s important to be kind to ourselves and let go of the notion that we must be productive every minute of the day simply because we’re now at home. Also always remember that working longer doesn’t necessarily mean working better.

You control your career; don’t let it control you.

And if this makes you wonder if Zoom Calls fatigue also exist, it does. It’s a Thing.

**Reference:**


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