FRANZISKA BARCZYK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

VAXXED
BUT NOT
RELAXED

I'm stuck in my pandemic routine. As restrictions loosen up, how will I loosen up too?

By MARISSA CONRAD

In the early weeks of the pandemic, Samantha Heintzelman, an assistant professor of psychology at Rutgers University-Newark, noticed that people were more interested in her research than usual. It made sense: Heintzelman studies routines, which were disappearing faster than Clorox wipes. "A mass disruption," Heintzelman calls it, one that had people walking around the block as a fake commute or filling their schedules with Duolingo lessons and home improvement projects.

I fell into a cadence that was much quieter than my pre-COVID life: Work, family dog walk, cook, read or Netflix, repeat. I knew I was fortunate to be able to stay home, but the solitude felt uncomfortable, like shoes that pinched. As we watched our way through "Gilmore Girls," my partner and I spoke often of everything we would embrace when (if) there was a vaccine: dinner out, dance parties with friends, anything and everything that didn't involve our couch.

Yet now, vaccine complete, I'm strangely protective of my boring little routine. A friend texted. She was in the neighborhood, and did I want to get a drink? I didn't. I wanted to pour a glass of wine and read my book and see her in a few days, with ample time to prepare.

Heintzelman's research — which involves, among other things, asking subjects to rate themselves using a metric called

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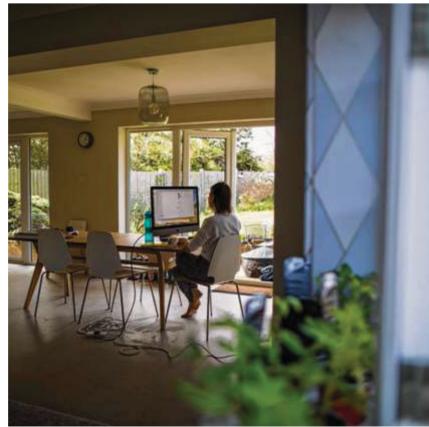CHRIS RATCLIFFE/BLOOMBERG

Having employees mix home and office work creates new management challenges. But if it's handled well, the setup might be an improvement.

How to keep hybrid work from burning everyone out

By ERIN KELLY AND PHYLLIS MOEN

As the COVID-19 pandemic wanes in the United States, many organizations are considering a hybrid workplace model that combines remote and in-person work. But skeptics wonder: Does a hybrid workplace make people feel disconnected, overextended, and burned out? Based on a rigorous five-year study, we conclude that the answer is: not necessarily. A hybrid workplace can be more effective than a traditional one — if it's managed well.

As part of a research team, we followed approximately 1,000 US employees and managers in the IT division of a Fortune 500 company over several years, before the pandemic. Executives at the company had brought us in because they were concerned about employee burnout and wanted to retain valuable employees.

We ran an experiment by taking 56 work groups within this IT

VAXXED
Continued from Page K1

the Disliking Disruption scale — helps explain my reaction. We use routines, Heintzelman says, "to make sense of the world and our place in it." And when our lives makes sense to us, we are able to see the meaning in them.

It's only natural that as we emerge from our COVID-era cocoons, then, we might cling to the routines — however mundane — we established in a bid to give our lives structure and, thus, meaning. But the idea isn't that we all should be living out some version of "Groundhog Day." "We need to have some flexibility around our routines," Heintzelman says. "We need novelty to learn and to grow." Being married to a routine leaves us feeling stuck, stifled, and distressed. If you've ever called someone "set in their ways," you probably didn't mean it as a compliment.

For me, this means that after a year that rewarded boundaries and fostered routine, I need to retrain my brain to embrace social calls and spontaneity.

Of course, if brain training were easy, we would keep every New Year's resolution. But we have less control over our behavior than we think, says Wendy Wood, provost professor of psychology and business at the University of Southern California. Wood studies routine's cousin, the habit.

"Context is really important," she says. Our surroundings "encourage us to repeat certain behaviors. That's one reason why people who live near parks get more exercise. It's not that they have more willpower than everybody else or they're more health conscious. It's that they just have more opportunities."

Over the last year, "we have all formed habits to work at home, eat at home, entertain ourselves at home," she says. "You have a habit to stay home and you're having to override it, because everything that activated that habit is still there. Your kitchen is still there. Your Netflix is still there." When my context starts to change

— when I go back to interviewing story subjects in person, when I return to the gym instead of wedging a yoga mat between the couch and TV — my social routine may naturally morph back to what it was before the pandemic.

Habits and routines often encompass a series of choices we don't realize we're making. Seasoned runners no longer think about what time to wake up, what to wear, or what route to take; they just do it, to coin a phrase. In contrast, someone trying to add a morning jog to their

routine feels the weight of all of those decisions. Wood writes about this in her 2019 book, "Good Habits, Bad Habits: The Science of Making Positive Changes That Stick." Until you've done something enough that you're operating on autopilot, each step is a potential exit point.

The jogging analogue for me is all of the small, trivial steps between an impromptu invitation to meet a friend and actually meeting the friend. Choices such as where to meet, how to get there, and whether I need to change out of my stretchy pants are minor but cumulative, weighing on me because they're not automatic.

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There's also the concept of identity consistency, Heintzelman says. The longer someone follows a routine, the more it becomes part of their sense of self: I am a person who does this. Part of my resistance to an unplanned outing may be less about disliking disruption and more about wearing an identity many of us have taken on: that of a person who keeps myself and others safe by mostly staying home and always planning ahead. "It's hard to change those thought patterns," Heintzelman says.

This may be especially true considering the anxiety, uncertainty, and loss of control that has flattened us these last 15 months. You don't just pop up after you've been hit by a steamroller.

"This was over a year of severe fear," says Karol Darsa, a psychologist who founded and runs Reconnect, a trauma treatment center in Los Angeles. "The more unpredictable outside life is, the more predictability and control we need." A routine can help us feel like we have control, and it's OK if we're not ready to give that up. "We were facing death of ourselves or of our loved ones. It's not possible to act like nothing happened," she says. "If we accept that, we might have an easier time with it."

Darsa suggests starting with "planned spontaneity": picking a night in advance to break from my routine but not choosing the activity until that night. "So there's a little bit of control," she says. "You can build on that."

As we all navigate this transition period, it's important to be open with friends and family about our feelings, Darsa says. "Maybe just say to someone, 'You know, I'm really trying to be more spontaneous, but I'm noticing some resistance to it,'" she says. "When you are honest and vulnerable in that way, it allows other people to be honest as well.'"

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SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Outdoor diners on Newbury Street. Some people have eagerly ramped up their socializing while others are finding pandemic patterns harder to break.

HYBRID
Continued from Page K1

division and randomly assigning some of them to participate in a work redesign initiative. The others continued working under the existing company policies, as a control group. In the work redesign initiative, teams collaboratively identified smart and appealing new ways of working — including greater options for remote work. However, this hybrid workplace model was just one element of a broader strategy that included retraining managers, rethinking meetings, and helping to prevent employee burnout in a way that also strengthened the company's bottom line.

Drawing on our study, we suggest five principles for creating a hybrid workplace that will work well for both employees and the organization:

1. Establish how people will work together. Successful hybrid work arrangements require careful attention to how employees connect with managers, customers, and one another, because there are often worries about how the work will get done when employees are in different locations. In fact, remote work can prompt conversations

about coordination that probably should happen in traditional workplaces but often don't. For example, as part of the work redesign initiative in our study, teams discussed how people would communicate, the time frame in which they would respond to each other, and how social ties would be maintained to promote camaraderie and effective collaboration.

One team created a new online dashboard so each person could easily see the status of a given project — regardless of whether they were working at home or on a different schedule. Another team began a routine of spending the first 15 minutes of their Friday conference call catching up on their social lives.

2. Provide employees with greater choice than many had before the pandemic, and support people's personal and family priorities. In our study, employees' perceptions of having choices and support was critical for improving their job satisfaction and mental health. It mattered more than the exact number of days in the office or the exact span of work hours. Employees in our study had almost full control over their work locations and schedules, but they still averaged 55 percent of their work hours on-site. This average

reflected different preferences: Some people chose to work at home most days, while others chose to work in the office the vast majority of the time.

3. Let work effectiveness guide decisions. The nature of the work needs to drive the options that are on the table. For example, people who provide direct customer service may need to be in the workplace at least some days (but not necessarily every day). Brainstorming and problem-solving tasks may flow better with in-person dialogue. In our study, many teams decided to hold certain "white-

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boarding" and client meetings in person.

Other pre-pandemic studies of remote work found that exclusively working from home is tricky, with moderate amounts of remote work usually the sweet spot. Such a hybrid model resulted in the highest job satisfaction as well as the strongest job performance and relationships with coworkers. Those who were *exclusively* working from home reported greater isolation that negatively affected their job performance.

With a hybrid model, employees need to explicitly dedicate time to connection and informal interactions, with managers providing support for virtual social time and for in-person gatherings.

4. Encourage staff to set boundaries to avoid burnout. Digital technologies enabling remote work often blur the boundaries between work and personal life, making it harder for managers and employees alike to set limits on their hours. Left unchecked, such "always-on" work demands can precipitate overload and exhaustion.

In our work redesign initiative, managers and employees worked together to identify low-value work — for example, a regular meeting that was attended

by more people than were needed — and reduced it. Unplugging from email and chat at times to do "deep work" was introduced as a smart strategy, and employees were encouraged to take time away from work to rest and recover and supported when they did it — on vacation days but also during evenings and weekends.

With those safeguards in place, we saw that working from home increased but total work hours didn't.

5. Train managers to adapt to a different role. A hybrid workplace requires new management skills. In our study, managers were asked to focus on managing the work results rather than employees' schedules. It's important for managers to let go of past attitudes about remote work — namely that working from home was often suspect and seen as an accommodation that was granted on a case-by-case basis. That model unintentionally reinforced gender inequalities as well, because more women and mothers pursued this stigmatized option. Remote work needs to be recognized as a fully legitimate option, with a focus on monitoring results.

Compared with their peers in the same Fortune 500 company

who served as a control group, employees in the work redesign experiment we studied reported higher job satisfaction, better work-life integration, better sleep, better mental health, and less burnout. The business also benefited because these employees were 40 percent less likely to quit than those in the control group. By reducing costs associated with employee turnover, the work redesign saved the company money.

There has never been a better time for organizations to redesign how work is done and create a hybrid workplace. Our hope is that after this past year's normalization of remote work, more organizations will stop rewarding face time in favor of a future where a variety of work patterns are recognized as productive and welcome.

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