Together Apart – Remote Working in Corona Times

Derek Mowbray’s Tips for Strengthening the Resilience of Remote Workers

2020
Introduction

I became interested in the resilience of remote workers as a consequence of an invitation to talk on 'Challenges of the Lone Worker' at a Health and Safety Conference held in ExCel, London, UK, towards the end of June 2017. This conference was responding to the changing shape of working in the UK, increasing demands for flexible working, globalisation, and the application of technology making such changes possible.

The push for more people to work from home and remotely largely comes from the need to isolate as many people as possible from the threat of infection by COVID-19. Once this pandemic is over, there are likely to be more people continuing to work remotely for economic reasons. They may either remain employed or self-employed. Whatever their employment status, many face similar challenges.

Whilst there may be nothing we can do about the decision to work remotely and from home, we can control our response to this different way of working, and transform this situation into a challenge that we can rise up to, and turn to our advantage.

Personality plays a part in life generally. It plays a particular part in remote working.

Those with a preference for socialising (between 60% and 75% of the population are extraverts) as a means of getting their energy will find remote working more challenging than introverts who prefer to obtain their energy from self-reflection and reading. Those who like to plan and have a structured existence (a little over half the population and favouring females) may find structuring their remote working more easily achieved than those who enjoy flexibility and spontaneity. Those who prefer spontaneity may find the ‘freedom’ of remote working a joy but probably won’t get much work done!

These tips have been compiled to provide ideas for working remotely from the organisation’s base or from other workers and clients. They cannot address all the challenges. For example, the single parent working remotely with hardly any back-up. I hope, however, that some of the tips will be applicable to such a situation.

Whilst many people enjoy the freedom and flexibility of working from home, some will need to strengthen their resilience against the possible effects of working remotely from others, such as poor management, managers unskilled in remote working, lack of motivation, boredom, sense of abandonment, lack of feedback, and the inability to cope.

These tips are mainly addressing people working remotely who have jobs that require cognitive dexterity – who need space to think, to analyse, interpret, reflect, write and communicate with others. People who normally receive feedback on their work, who may receive supervision, fairly close management, and who may need to report their progress to others on a daily or regular basis.
I have divided these tips into subjects:

- resilience – what is it, and why do you need it?
- your control over remote working;
- your control over your psychological wellbeing;
- your control over your physical health;
- your control over working effectively with others;
- your control over your self-discipline.

This booklet contains explanations followed by tips. Tips are tips of icebergs – there is much more behind (or beneath) the tip than meets the eye. On the surface, a tip may sound simple, and common sense. I’m hopeful this is the case, because anything complicated and which doesn’t sound right won’t be used. However, tips require effort on your part when coming to apply them into practice. You will need to practice the tip until it becomes part of you, and you don’t need to think about it anymore.

I hope you find this booklet helpful and wish you every success in achieving success, happiness and psychological wellbeing with your remote working.

Derek Mowbray PhD, FBPsS.

Acknowledgements:
The preparation of this booklet has been a family affair. I’m grateful to Heather Mowbray and Céline Lamée in Beijing, Hazel Mowbray in London, and Barbara Leigh in Cheltenham, (my co-director of MAS) for their ideas. The booklet and its contents, however, are down to me and Barbara.
What is resilience and why do you need it?

What is resilience?
Resilience is our capability to rise up to a potentially stressful event, and overcoming it without experiencing the negative aspects of stress (strain and distress). If we experience strain and distress, we tend to lose mental control, feel terrible and can’t do very much because our memory is shot and we want to hibernate.

The positive aspects of stress are pressure and tension; they stimulate our concentration – which is what we want when confronted by something we have to deal with and overcome.

For our resilience to kick in, we have to perceive an adverse event, not as a threat to our sense of equilibrium (a potentially frightening interference we think we can do little about) but as a challenge to our pride (an interference that pricks our defences and piques our interest). When we perceive events as a challenge, we feel degrees of pressure or tension that arouses our motivation to do something about it. We find the energy to rise up to the challenge, overcome it and move on, leaving the event behind. The event no longer remains in our mind.

If the event remains perceived as a threat, we will find ways of coping, but the threat remains – we can never let it go or leave it behind. It sits on our shoulder. The event might disappear on its own, after which we might revert to being able to walk without leaning to one side – some people call this bouncing back.

Why do you need it?
We need to be resilient to deal with new events or situations we haven’t confronted before, or we have confronted before and couldn’t deal with effectively. Remote working, and from home, might be entirely new to many. Some may have tried this before, and it hadn’t worked out very well.

In the current circumstances, with a pandemic, we have the added ingredient of terror of being infected – particularly if you happen to be ‘at risk’.

There’s not much we can do to control the pandemic which we perceive as a threat; that’s a matter for the experts; but we can control our response to it, transform the situation into a challenge, and do something that’s to our personal advantage.
Your control over remote working

Basically, your day could be seen as an empty space that needs filling with domestic and work activities. Instead of being in a working environment that might trigger your need to react, you are in a home, or other place, that requires you to act rather than react. These tips are designed to help you act and take control of your remote working.

Work out your 168.
168 are the hours in a week. Work out how you spend your time. Once you’ve done this you have a degree of control over your time. You can begin to shift activities around to suit your new reality.

Work out how much time you should, or would like, to be spending doing some productive work, per day and per week. Productive work doesn't mean you have to spend 8 hours at it every day; in fact, spending 8 hours a day isn't a good idea and is, probably incompatible with being productive. What is important is output and agreeing how much output is expected each day and measure this instead of the hours spent producing it.

Working remotely and from home has ‘freedom’ attached to it.
You may want to dip in and out of work, especially if you are being creative about something.

Routine is the enemy of excitement.
If you have the opportunity, you may consider choosing a period during each week when you don’t follow a disciplined regime, but do whatever you wish.

Work out if you can structure your day.
Place yourself under pressure for 50 minutes in the hour, then take a 10 minute complete break doing something else like walk around the house and garden, or, perish the thought, look at emails. Then start again placing yourself under pressure for 50 minutes. Take a decent break in the middle of the morning, lunchtime and middle of the afternoon, such as 20 minutes and double this for lunchtime.

Shut down distractions during your 50 minutes in the hour.
This means no interruptions of any kind. Close down your telephones, mobiles, and video conferencing programmes. During the 10 minute breaks you can re-engage with the wider world, as long as you close everything down again once your 10 minutes is up.
Work out all your uncontrollable activities.
What are the experiences during the working week which you think are uncontrollable (interruptions from your manager; the delivery guy turning up when you’re in the loo; your animals wanting to be let out… and let back in again)? Now, think about all the possible solutions to these ‘uncontrollable’ events. Decide on the most viable solutions and stick to them (negotiate the time your manager talks to you; a notice on the door telling the delivery guy to leave the goods – no signature this time; leave the animals outside all morning or until their barking drives you – and your neighbours - up the wall).

Construct a working day around what you would normally do.
Wear work day clothes that make you feel good about yourself. Have a commute to work (by reading the paper on an imaginary bus or train). Start your working day by doing the most difficult task on your ‘to do list’; then give yourself a reward; maybe have an online timed agreed chat with someone; do the easiest task next; have another reward; and so on, trying to link this with the formula of working under pressure for 50 minutes in the hour followed by a ten minute break.

At the end of the working day review what you’ve done.
What have you learnt? What has been a success grasped from the jaws of failure? What have been the failures that should have been successes? Learn from this so you can avoid the same situation again.

Plan for tomorrow the evening before.
Place tomorrow’s most challenging task as No. 1 on your ‘tomorrow’ list. Leave work at your agreed time. Build in your commute home by walking around the house, flat, garden, wherever you can walk. In non-virus days, you have the freedom to go for a much longer commute walk. When you get home, change out of your workday clothes (if this is what you normally do).

Write a diary.
Not everyone thinks this is for them, but the new adventure will contain hilarious moments of sheer joy which you should try to capture. There will, also, be times of utter frustration, and, possibly, deep unhappiness. Such moments can be alleviated by writing about them in a diary.

If there is someone else working at home or remotely with you, you have to set boundaries.
Separate working spaces, preferably in different rooms; agree times when interference is permissible; mutual starting and finishing times; agreements over using common equipment (such as a printer); mutual expectations about behaviour at work; recognition that each person has their own agenda to complete; agreements about how to handle household interferences during the day; agreements on how to handle equipment breakdowns should they occur; agreements over rotas for cleaning and tidying up after the working day; agreements about how the commute plays out before the day turns into the early evening, and the early morning turns into the working day.
Work out what work tasks are important, and which are urgent.
Which tasks are important but not urgent; which are urgent but not important, and which are neither urgent nor important?

The last group of tasks need not be done. Everyone says their tasks are important and urgent, so you need to establish with whoever set the task, just how important is the task, as an important task will always remain important. Then establish the level of urgency for the task. If it turns out that you are convinced a task is both important and urgent, you should do it. Otherwise place the task in a line of important tasks and do them according to how challenging and difficult it is compared to other tasks of importance. Urgent tasks that are not important can be left aside. You may need to be assertive with whoever set the tasks, to reach a conclusion that not many of these tasks are genuinely urgent.

Work out the mutual expectations that exist between you and all those you work with.
These may be team members, your manager (if you have one), others in your organisation, clients and customers, and those with whom you may be sharing your workspace. What are they expecting from you; what are you expecting from them? This will help work out what are the important and urgent tasks and how to set priorities between them.

Setting priorities can prove to be really hard.
Work through some criteria to judge if the task is important, for example, to what extent does this task help to make my business/organisation/team/project more successful tomorrow compared with today?

Don’t try to complete a large task all at once.
The brain likes bite-sized activities, so break down large tasks. Write a couple of pages on day 1, then a couple more on day 2 and so on until the task is complete. Because the brain likes bite sized activities, it likes 50 minutes in the hour under personal pressure followed by a break.
Your control over your psychological wellbeing

You feel psychologically well when in mental control, and having the sensation of feeling success and happiness. You feel good about yourself.

Psychological wellbeing is important as it helps us retain and maintain our mental clarity. Having a clear head that can concentrate, solve problems, remember actions and events, is the essence of everyday life, and enables us to perform at our work.

If you are in a job that demands understanding, assimilation, analysis, making judgments, evaluation, innovation, experimentation, knowledge transfer, making adaptive decisions, taking action, and dealing with uncertainty, you need to be on top of your game mentally.

These tips are to help you maintain your psychological wellbeing during the working day and whilst remote working.

**Sleep is vital for your psychological wellbeing (PW).**
You need between 6 and 8 hours (anything outside these times contributes to your vulnerability).

Preparing for sleep requires you to tell your brain you are going to sleep. An hour or so before going to sleep, switch off all forms of entertainment, including mobile phones, and settle down quietly. Don't drink anything stimulating such as alcohol or coffee. Prepare your bedroom by opening a window, closing curtains, warming your bed and putting on low lights (before you switch them off!). By the time you settle into bed, the brain should know you intend to sleep. Sweet dreams!

**Keep news snacking to morning and pre-dinner in the early evening only.**
Never last thing at night.

**First thing in the morning, speak to yourself, out loud and in front of a mirror.**
Tell yourself that today is going to be a fantastic day. The most sensitive part of the brain is hearing, and when you speak out loud to yourself the brain picks up what you tell it and looks for opportunities to reinforce what you say. The brain will look out for anything that makes your day fantastic and pass on that sensation to you!
Select five of the attributes in the image below that you feel are special to you. Write them down. In the morning, as part of your mirror regime, tell yourself you are these attributes you’ve written down. You’ll find you feel much better about yourself throughout the day as you may keep on reminding yourself of how fantastic you are.

At the same self talk-session, talk through any difficult events you anticipate coming up. If you have a particularly challenging activity coming up during the day, talk to yourself in the mirror about it, working through the steps you’ll take to rise up to the challenge. You’ll discover that the intensity of feeling about the challenge dissipates, allowing you to have greater mental control of the situation, when it arises. Anticipation is a key feature of being resilient as it helps prepare the brain to work out what to do before the adversity presents itself.

Use your imagination. Try to use it in a positive way. If you imagine the day ahead in a positive way, your brain will pick this up and you’ll experience a more positive day than if you didn’t imagine it ahead of time. The strength of resilience partly depends on anticipation, and using your imagination helps anticipate what may happen and prepares the brain for the reality.
**Write notes all the time.**
These can be notes of things to do throughout the day, or summaries of ideas, actions, thoughts or anything. Not only do these notes add to your diary, they remind you; and relieve your brain from the anxiety of having to remember, which keeps you in mental control. Making notes keeps the brain active, as you have already summarised what you want to write a note about, and this keeps your brain alert. Reading your notes triggers the brain’s memory, which keeps the memory going as well.

**Write humorous notes.**
Try to record thoughts and ideas which you think are funny. If you can see your life as entertainment, you may be able to see the humorous side of most events, even though you are working remotely and the circumstances might be otherwise not be very exciting.

**Work out what makes you feel a strong sense of psychological wellbeing (success and happiness).**
Think of 8 aspects of your life (home and work) that makes you feel great. Conventionally, people select items such as – family, friends, travel, sport, socialising, faith, singing, gardening. These headline activities need refinement because they contain a load of other activities within them, not all of which make you feel great. So, refine family – spouse, children, dogs, family gatherings, meal times and so on until you discover which aspect of family really makes you feel great. You need to refine each of the headings until you nail down what makes you feel the sensation of success and happiness. Once you’ve completed this cycle of self-inquisition, you’ll end up with a list of about 8 specific items that should make you smile when you think about them. Your task now, as a remote worker, is to work out how you intend to ensure you maintain, and improve, your relationship with these items, so your PW improves at the same time as you are working remotely.

**Maintaining your important and strong relationships is of vital importance to your PW.**
Plan, over the course of a week, those with whom you need to talk to, either on the phone or using a video link. Send them an email beforehand and mutually agree when contact can be made.

**You can extend this idea to form local groups meeting virtually for lunch or dinner.**
You can form choirs, or organise singing lessons online. You may wish to have a virtual hug with someone during the working day – all these ideas brighten the spirit and help PW.

**Think about the moments in your life to date that make you feel a ‘rosy glow’ – a sensation of pure joy.**
Write down those experiences in a notebook; place the notebook on a shelf that is easy to access. When you feel out of control during the day (or at any time), take out the notebook and re-read what you have written. This will transport you back to the occasions, give the brain a break, and get you back into mental control.
Create a Rosy Glow Photo Album.
The same process can be used with photographs you have of moments in your life which made you feel fantastic.

Have the pictures printed and put them into a photo album with the location and date written alongside the picture. Put the album away in some accessible place. If and when you feel any anxiety or a poor mood, take out the album and look at the pictures. You'll find you regain mental control because you are transported back to the occasion of the photograph, and you've given your brain a break from whatever was causing you lose of control in the first place. A note of caution – using your mobile phone and other devices for this tip doesn’t have the same impact if you are viewing the pictures on a regular basis. It is the fact you don’t see these ‘rosy glow’ pictures very often that enables the impact to be stronger when you do see them.

Using breathing to regain your mental control.
If you are feeling anxious and your breathing is running away from you, you need to regain control of your breathing in order to regain mental control. What follows are some techniques for regaining control.

Try closing your eyes and listening to the sound of your breathing.
You may find your concentration on your breathing is drifting away, in which case you must bring your concentration back to the sound of your breathing. Concentrate on the sound of your breathing for 5 minutes or more. You'll find you have regained mental control, as you've diverted the brain away from whatever was causing the anxiety in the first place, and ‘forced’ it to focus on the sound of your breathing – you took control of your brain.

Try breathing deeply down to your diaphragm (your tummy area) over a count of six seconds.
Hold your breath for 12 seconds, and then breathe out over six seconds. Do this several times until you have regained control of your breathing. Anxiety manifests itself with a loss of control of your breathing, and this exercise gets you in control again. You've told your brain what to do, and you’ve regulated your breathing, at the same time. You’re in charge!

If you need help, ask for it from your manager, colleagues, and friends.
Remote working is challenging for many, and you may feel the need for some help, or simply contact. There is no shame in asking for help. Most people are in the same boat and will feel the same feelings.

Each day, work out what you want to achieve.
This is your purpose of the day. Your PW is enhanced when you have a purpose or several purposes. Try to achieve your purpose, but if you don’t, re-define the purpose in a way that you think ensures you do achieve the purpose another time. The next day, think of another purpose. A note of caution - don't use a generic purpose as part of this tip as that doesn't help you – so, don't use 'get me through the day' as your purpose, as it lacks imagination and won't help you. The brain needs something more tangible and specific to aim at.
From your working experience, think of when your work gave you a real buzz.
It could have been anything – writing a brilliant report; a piece of translation that was perfect; a discovery. Try to replicate the experience whilst remote working. It will enhance your working day.

Think of someone you can thank for doing something for you.
Then, thank him or her, over the phone, in a letter, using any online video links. You'll find you feel much better for doing this.

Look out for others.
A quick contact with others who may be working remotely can make a big difference to your and their spirits.

All work and no play never did anyone any good.
During your working day, use the rewards after completing tasks as providing yourself with something pleasurable. This may be something unusual (no one’s watching!) as well as anything else that you take pleasure in doing.

At the end of the day, write down your successes of the day.
Write down whatever happens during the day, even the disasters of the day. Write these in a notebook, and put the notebook away, out of sight and then out of mind. You’ve effectively closed down the day…..but wait, you need to work out your tasks for tomorrow before today is completely closed down!

After work.
Do something that calms you down. Do some gardening, plant a window box or nurture your house plants. Feed the birds and watch them enjoying their meal. Watch nature, if you can. Take a walk and absorb what’s happening around you.
Your control over your physical health

Physical health and fitness are known to have a positive impact on psychological wellbeing (PW). When working remotely, you may find maintaining physical health and fitness an added challenge as it usually requires special effort that may not fit easily into the rest of your activities. Nevertheless, physical activities need to form part of your day, perhaps as a reward or in the middle of the day, over the lunchtime break.

**Work out when you can set aside time to dance on your own, or in the company of others using video links.**
Dancing has many positive aspects to it – physical fitness as well as raising the level of PW. Vary your dance from Zumba to The Pogo! You could try line dancing with others over a video link. Remember to agree who is supplying the music!

**If you can, purchase a standing desk, or create one with materials you have available**
This is a ‘big ask’ as they are expensive. However, the benefits of standing up and walking around are huge, as it keeps your cardio vascular system pumping your blood around your body. Endless sitting is not good.

**There are many physical exercises you can do.**
Just walking up and down your stairs (if you have them) will keep you fit. If you can go for a walk at different times of the day, then do so, and at a pace that gets the heart beating.

**Sit properly.**
If you are using a computer, especially a laptop, try to make sure the screen of the laptop is at the level of your eyes and that you are not bending or tilting your head downwards to look into the screen. Generally, sitting up straight is vitally important in preventing trouble with your back. If you are flush with money (after buying a stand up desk) you may wish to purchase a chair designed to support your back, for the times you will need to sit down.

**Ensure you have a balanced diet.**
For a healthy diet you need to eat a range of food from across groups 1-4 and sparingly from group 5. Group 1 – bread, cereals and potatoes; Group 2 – Fruit and vegetables; Group 3 – Meat, fish, nuts and eggs; Group 4 – Milk and dairy foods. Group 5 – eat sparingly from foods containing fats and sugar.

**Keep hydrated throughout the working day**
Drink plenty of water throughout the day regardless of room temperature.
Your control over working effectively with others

Linking your remote working with others will be a feature of working life for many. It means dovetailing your work with other team members, and receiving from them feedback as well as requests.

Always establish mutual expectations with your manager and others you work with, and agree what these are. If they need changing, don’t hesitate to re-negotiate. It is better to know the mutual expectations than not to know them. Assuming others know what you expect from them is a grave mistake and can lead to considerable distress through misunderstanding.

Try and agree a weekly programme of activities, so you know when to complete your part of the programme. This allows you to use your time appropriately to deal with work as well as the consequences of remote working.

Find a reliable platform for conference calling. Popular systems include FaceTime, Skype and Zoom. Different operating systems favour different conferencing systems, so you’ll need to check out what works best for you and those with whom you wish to maintain contact.

Form a WhatsApp group (or similar such as Google Groups) of your friends and/or colleagues. Use this for regular updates and chats. Passing humorous items amongst groups using these types of processes lightens the day.

Try to agree with others when you can communicate using these video systems. This prevents interrupting others when they are concentrating. If you do interrupt concentration, the consequences normally include the other person starting all over again to work themselves into the piece of work they were concentrating on. This impedes performance. It may not be seen by others, but it can be frustrating for the person concerned.

Communicate with your supervisor or manager. Make sure you agree with your supervisor the time of your sessions during the week, and record this in your calendar.
Your control over self-discipline

Remote working smells like ‘freedom’.

It isn’t.

It’s an excuse to prevaricate.

This is something to avoid as you won’t feel good about yourself after a while.

Get up early before the rest of the world distracts you.
This provides you with the possibility of extra hours each week; imagine what you can do with the time!

Develop a structure to each day.
Decide on a realistic starting time, taking account of everything you have to do on your own. Decide when to take your midday break. Other breaks happen after completing tasks and rewarding yourself.

Make a decision at midday when you want to finish the working day.
This may vary according to the intensity of what you are working on; whether you are bored; and how you are feeling about the day. Try not to put off today what you think can be done tomorrow, because you’ll do the same thing tomorrow and a great pile of tasks will be sitting, waiting for you on Friday, and you’ll decide you have to work on Saturday to clear everything. Not a good idea.

Turn off social media during the day.
Hide your phone for the self-imposed pressured 50 minutes in the hour. Ignore knocks at the door during your self-imposed pressured 50 minutes in the hour.

Use your calendar on your computer to remind you of key activities you have agreed with others to complete.
Use the calendar system for your own purposes, such as reminding yourself when to stop work!
Conclusion

Resilience is about seeing and anticipating threats as challenges, being able to rise to them, overcome them, and then move on, leaving the challenge behind.

These tips aim to strengthen your resilience as a remote worker by giving you ideas of how to handle daily events, and to prevent events from causing you distress. The tips, clearly, only scratch the surface, but you will find by adopting them, other ways of rising to challenges not covered here will appear.

About Derek Mowbray  BA., MSc., MSc(Econ),, PhD., DipPsych., CPsychol., CSci., FBPsS, FIHM., FISMA..

Derek Mowbray is a Chartered Psychologist and Chartered Scientist, with a doctorate in the psychology of leadership. He specialises in the primary prevention of psychological distress. His work approaches and interventions are well recognised and adopted throughout the UK and internationally. His work in the stress prevention field focuses on the problems at work that may trigger adverse reactions in people, causing them to feel unwell and under intense pressure resulting in under performance.

Derek has a special interest in organisation health psychology, which aims to harmonise the relationship between organisations, their leaders and their workforce. His approach is to use positive psychology to help organisations create and sustain ‘the workplace as a fabulous and high performing place to work’. He is the originator of Psychological Responsibility, which places on the individual a responsibility for feeling psychologically well, as well as a responsibility to do no psychological harm to others. He is, also, a sponsor of the method of ‘sharing responsibility for the future success of the organisation’ as a principle underpinning organisational success and high achievement.

Derek’s mission is to ensure individuals have a fabulous experience from work and the workplace.
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Further information can be found in Derek’s Guides - available from [www.mas.org.uk/publications](http://www.mas.org.uk/publications). (For bulk purchase contact MAS – barbara.leigh@mas.org.uk)

- Derek Mowbray's Guide to Personal Resilience
- Derek Mowbray's Guide to The Manager's Role in Resilience
- Derek Mowbray's Guide to Team Resilience
- Derek Mowbray's Guide to Organisational Resilience
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For further information, contact barbara.leigh@mas.org.uk or go to our website [www.mas.org.uk/personal-resilience-elearning-programme.html](http://www.mas.org.uk/personal-resilience-elearning-programme.html)

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- **Strengthening Personal Resilience Programme** for your remote workers
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These programmes are ideally delivered via a series of short sessions. Email Barbara for further information about our programmes for on-line delivery.

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