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# The New Normal: How to Stay Productive Learning from Home

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These are unprecedented times in the world of education. Students, teachers, parents and administrators face weeks of social distancing and learning from home as we work to slow the spread of COVID-19. School officials and educators are figuring out the best long-term remote solutions to keep students learning as efficiently as possible. Parents and teachers are facing unprecedented pressures as well. To help, we have put together some tips and suggestions to help keep the learning moving forward efficiently and creatively.

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## IMPERATIVES FOR A PRODUCTIVE STUDY SPACE

For most students and teachers, the classroom is a highly structured environment with a set schedule and a desk that's a personal workspace. Learning and teaching from home for the first time can be disorienting when those things are missing. In an environment like this, one strategy is to try to replicate the class experience at home. It puts everyone in the right mindset to be productive.

### 1) Start with a Dedicated Place to Learn From

For those who are not at home alone, they should try to choose a room where they can close the door and keep distractions out. Setting a dedicated workspace creates a physical distinction between "study time" and "home time." If the home doesn't have a dedicated office, can they use a bedroom, dining room, or bonus room? It helps a lot if family and pets can't wander in.

Working from the kitchen or dining room table can be a short-term fix, but a dedicated workspace allows them to be comfortable and productive. That space doesn't have to be something formal with a traditional heavy wood desk and filing cabinets. A simple modern desk paired with an active ergonomic chair may be all that's needed, and they pack away more easily when not in use.



Investing in these two elements is a wise decision and should provide a good return on your investment during these trying times. Desks and chairs also get students positioned with the proper posture and support. Many modern home office desks easily adjust up and down so they can sit or stand and move around throughout the day to help keep them active, comfortable and productive.

A good-quality chair also helps because they come with lumbar support and all sorts of adjustability, from back position to moveable armrests, so they're lined up just right for typing for long periods.



## 2) Manage Time Wisely

Parents, students and teachers should try to set regular hours for themselves and develop a routine. Make sure to have guidelines on when study/class time can be scheduled and try to leave some time to decompress at lunch – just like you would at school. Burnout can be a real issue when learning from home. In a school environment, you're moving from class to class and shifting your environment on an almost constant basis. When learning home, you will probably be in one seat, looking at one screen for many hours a day. Providing time to take a breath mid-day is going to improve productivity in the long run.

## 3) Keep the Right Supplies On Hand

Unfortunately many of the supplies that students need may have been left in their lockers or desks in school – but they're still essential to keep the learning process thriving at home. It's a good time to do a supply stock-up on notebooks, comp books, pens, pencils, poly folders, binders, printer paper and more.

## 4) Add Accessories

Depending on where you're learning and what you need to get comfortable, a few accessories may be useful, too. From good quality lighting to read small print to an ergonomic keyboard and mouse to help prevent carpal tunnel syndrome, a small investment can pay big dividends in productivity. A mobile file cabinet can help with organization while also acting as an impromptu laptop stand if needed.

## TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS FOR REMOTE COLLABORATION

Even if you have never learned or worked from home, you likely have an Internet connection with Wi-Fi. You may even use a streaming service like Netflix or Hulu, but that may be about as much as you've thought about for your home technology. Transitioning to remote learning leverages some of that same tech, but there are special considerations around security

and speed. You may need better equipment or want to customize devices with some add-ons to improve your overall experience.

## 1) Stay Secure

It's sad but true. A big increase in the number of people learning remotely is an opportunity for hackers. You should check to make sure you have security software like anti-virus installed on your personal devices. Check to make sure it's updated, and that your home Wi-Fi network is set up securely. The name of the network, also known as the SSID (Service Set Identifier), should be changed to something other than the default name so hackers can't immediately tell what kind of router it is. The name used should be something that doesn't identify the home and be combined with a strong password. "John Smith House," for example, just lets a hacker know which network belongs to you over a neighbor's. Strong security measures are something people should be doing anyway to protect themselves.

## 2) Up the Speed

Collaboration technology, like videoconferencing, requires a significant amount of Internet bandwidth. You may have a broadband plan that is much slower than what schools have. So, before the connection crashes, it's an excellent time to see what you have and consider increasing it. There are many websites where you can run a test like Fast.com and Speedtest.net. Streaming companies like Netflix recommend at least 5 Mbps for high-definition TV, but it's a lot higher than that for the new 4K standard. The more users you have, the faster the connection you need. Homes with multiple streamers may need 50 Mbps or more.

If you have an older Wi-Fi router, that may be a bottleneck too. Newer multi-band routers give you the ability to connect to 2.4 GHz and 5 GHz channels. The additional channels in 5 GHz allow for more bandwidth, which is better for teleconferencing, and the large file size transfers needed for remote learning. And even if you do have a fast connection and modern router, strength of signal throughout the home could still be a problem. Consider upgrading to a mesh networking solution that amplifies your home Wi-Fi signal.

### 3) Get the Right Tools

In addition to connection speed, be sure you have the right equipment and software in place to increase efficiency. This is not the time to be stuck with an old, slow computer because that drastically affects productivity.

If you're using PCs or Chromebooks, make sure they have the horsepower to run the applications your students need.

Consider also if you will need the ability to scan documents and print in your homes. The fact is that home printer/scanners technology has improved significantly in the last couple of years. And while we may only print a few pages a month in our private life, learning from home can drastically increase that volume. This may be the time to upgrade to a home printing solution that is affordable while still help turn documents around quickly. A shredder may be needed too to protect private information that is printed in the home before it goes in the recycle bin.

### 4) Make the Laptop More Like a Desktop

If you are used to big keyboards and multiple monitors in class, switching to a laptop at home may be a less-than-positive experience, but you can change that. Adding peripherals like a mouse and more monitors is relatively simple. If you need to connect more devices than you have USB ports, then consider adding a USB hub.

### 5) Improve Videoconferencing with an External Web Camera, Microphone, or Headset

While just about every modern laptop has a built-in camera, microphone, and speakers that can be used for videoconferencing, they're not always the best. The video quality can be poor, and if the angle of the monitor isn't just right, people may only see the top of a person's head. Built-in microphones often pick up the sounds of typing or force people to lean in and speak very loudly to make themselves heard.

External cameras and microphones are relatively inexpensive yet deliver crisp pictures and sound. One of the least expensive upgrades is a simple headset/microphone combo that also shuts out any background noise.

### 6) Think About Support

How will you handle tech support if things aren't working smoothly at home? This may be the time to find an IT partner who can offer 24/7 Service Desk support to help troubleshoot any unexpected issues.

## STAYING PHYSICALLY ACTIVE AND MENTALLY ENGAGED

A big part of the challenge of learning from home is the feeling of being locked in and stagnating without activities and social interaction. Be sure you're getting exercise and making time for self-care practices like leaving the house to be in the yard or walking around the neighborhood while practicing social distancing.

There are small things you can do around your personal workspaces, like adding plants. Some sources suggest that plants help to improve mental outlook and reduce stress throughout the day while giving the immune system a natural boost. Plants can improve air quality and add humidity in the home, both positive factors for a better breathing environment. Studies have also shown that they can improve productivity and even learning capabilities.

If you don't have a green thumb, consider an air purifier to capture household odors, pet odors, and cooking odor.

It is important to stay active for health, even if gyms or favorite workout classes are closed. Regular exercise can help prevent or manage many health issues, including high blood pressure, depression, and anxiety. Studies have also shown that exercise can improve mood, boost energy, and help with sleep. This may be an excellent time to pick up some simple home fitness equipment and check out these free at-home workouts.

- Planet Fitness free at-home workouts, even for non-members
- Peloton offers free 90-day subscription trial for its at-home workout app
- Free workout apps to keep you fit while social distancing

Keep in mind this information does not constitute a medical consultation and cannot replace medical advice. Any information should never be used as a substitute for the advice provided by a physician or other health care provider. Before you start working out, you should get a medical checkup or otherwise be fit for the type of activity.

## MAKE REMOTE LEARNING SUCCESSFUL

These are challenging times, but we can all make remote learning more successful by taking small steps. The current situation could go on for months, so getting it right now is the best thing to minimize disruption and help keep everyone healthy and happy.