



■ A device revolution?
Image: Special Projects

HOW TO KEEP WELL WHEN TEACHING FROM HOME

The need to manage our relationship with technology is more important than ever. **Neil Rickus** offers some practical advice around digital well-being when teaching remotely

The sudden shift to teaching remotely has led to the blurring of boundaries between our home and work lives. In particular, the constant distraction of messages, notifications, and always-on access to our digital devices means it can be difficult to take a break from work, which can have damaging effects on our physical and mental well-being.

There is a range of approaches to help us use technology effectively and at an appropriate time, as well as ways to successfully manage a working environment from home.

Notifications and access

It can take around 25 minutes for us to refocus on a task following a distraction. An email arriving, or a message notification on a phone, can lead to a task taking

significantly longer, even if we are undertaking work that requires little focus. Most digital devices, particularly phones and tablets, offer a do not disturb feature. While many people use this at night-time, it can also be helpful when you wish to limit disturbances. This is especially useful if you are taking part in a live learning activity, such as a video call with a class. You can also control permissions for notifications from certain apps, meaning you don't have to receive a message on your phone every time someone makes a comment in Google Classroom, for example.

On certain occasions, other solutions may be required to limit access to digital devices. While we may not wish to turn our devices off, as this may mean we miss an urgent phone call, apps such as Hold reward the user with virtual currency for not touching their phone for 20-minute

periods, which can then be exchanged for other items, such as discounts on physical products.

Last year, Special Projects took part in Google's Digital Wellbeing Experiments, a collection of open-source projects to help users be more aware of how they use their devices and reduce their screen time. These include Paper Phone, a printout that contains important information for the day, and Envelope, where a user places their phone in paper packaging that limits use to phone calls or photography. While these whimsical projects may seem far-fetched, they serve as a reminder that there are ways to step away from our devices.

Social media usage has increased significantly during the coronavirus pandemic, and notifications from these platforms can be distracting. Most platforms allow the user to specify the type of



■ An envelope that restricts phone functionality from Special Projects

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notifications displayed, such as only direct messages, which can be an alternative to turning off notifications completely. Interacting with family and friends is more important than ever. However, social media can put pressure on individuals to learn or try new things during this period. This can be a particular challenge for those with unexpected extra responsibilities; the potential negative effects of this hustle culture, such as the impact on our spare time, should be carefully considered.

Where feasible, it is also important to try and manage the digital well-being of others. Receiving emails at unsociable hours is often cited as a cause of anxiety, and at the moment, this can be difficult to avoid, particularly if you're having to manage changes in working hours and caring responsibilities. Many email platforms let you delay the sending of emails until a future time. For example, if you compose an email at 10pm, it is possible to ensure that it won't be sent to the recipient until the following morning.

Physical environment and exercise

When teaching in a traditional classroom, we often spend a significant amount of time on our feet, moving around the room and supporting students. The shift to spending large amounts of time sitting at a computer

can also have an impact on physical well-being. The Health and Safety Executive outlines the importance of taking regular breaks from using a machine and provides a useful guide for setting up display screen equipment. A correctly positioned external monitor can contribute to improving posture.

As for many of us our home has now become our workplace, the distinction between the two can be difficult to manage. Packing away any technology, books, or resources you have been using, or closing



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WHERE TO FIND SUPPORT

Professional support to manage your well-being can be accessed through your employer, your union, a medical practitioner, or from these organisations:

Mind, the mental health charity, has produced a guide examining coronavirus and well-being: helloworld.cc/mindcovid.

The Education Support Partnership (educationssupport.org.uk) has a free, confidential counselling service for teachers, on 08000 562 561. Their support is not limited to work-related issues.

Further practical advice is available from a range of teaching-related organisations, including NASUWT: helloworld.cc/nasuwtcovid.

The Samaritans (www.samaritans.org) offer free and confidential support 24 hours a day, and you can call their UK helpline on 116 123.

the door to any dedicated working space that you may have, can help you transition away from work at the end of the day.

The need for exercise is regularly highlighted as important for improving well-being, and the opportunity to leave the home is a vital part of the day for many of us. A number of apps allow us to track our exercise and share it with others, although whether you wish to use a digital device in this manner will depend on your personal preferences. Strava enables you to measure your performance against other people that have also visited a similar area and to share your workouts, which has the added benefit of receiving kudos from others. Sweatcoin allows you to earn virtual currency through exercise, which can then be exchanged for other products, including physical items, in the real world. Finally, Geocaching allows you to find physical items in the real world, which can be logged and tracked online.

How are you managing your digital well-being while teaching remotely? Do you use other strategies? Perhaps some of the suggestions in the article have been beneficial. Do get in touch on social media and let the Hello World team know. (HW)