

Mayo Clinic Q & A - Dr. Greg Couser - Working from Home - 06...

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Halena Gazelka, Dr. Greg Couser, Narrator

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- N** Narrator 00:01
Coming up on Mayo Clinic Q&A,
 - D** Dr. Greg Couser 00:03
We also receive our identity from our work. And so, when we don't have that sort of daily contact with our colleagues that shifts our identity just a little bit.
 - N** Narrator 00:15
During the height of the pandemic, many people were forced to find new ways to work. And while some are heading back to the office, many companies are allowing or even asking their employees to work from home. That can mean learning new skills, like how to stay in touch with colleagues and keeping family life in balance.
 - D** Dr. Greg Couser 00:33
Part of this would mean your family needs to know there are times you probably shouldn't be disturbed or can't be disturbed. Your work also needs to know that there are times you

need to turn off work and not be available to them so you can be fully present for people at home.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 00:48

Welcome, everyone to Mayo Clinic Q&A. I'm Dr. Halena Gazelka. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the way that people work. As vaccination rates increase, some people are returning to the office, but many companies have opted to keep their employees working from home permanently. This change has both positive and negative side-effects, including the mental health aspects of working from home. With me today to discuss this is psychiatrist and occupational medicine specialist. Dr. Greg Couser. Thanks for being here today, Greg.

D Dr. Greg Couser 01:20

My pleasure. Thank you.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 01:22

I think this is such a fascinating topic, because we have really changed a lot in the last year with COVID. And only part of it is working from home. But there are so many mental health aspects of COVID. It's amazing. Tell us about teleworking. What are the changes for individuals from a psychological perspective?

D Dr. Greg Couser 01:43

I think the main part that you just said there was changes. Anytime there's changes, it can be challenging for people, particularly when you're not used to working from home, I think there's a big issue for people of setting up good boundaries between work and home. So, that's a big challenge. And we also receive our identity from our work. And so, when we don't have that sort of daily contact with our colleagues, that shifts our identity just a little bit.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 02:16

That's interesting. What do you mean by boundaries between work and home?

D Dr. Greg Couser 02:19

Well, I mean, normally, we have a very real physical boundary between work and home

because we leave home, and we go to a certain place and we work. And when you work from home, you know, some people are working from their living room or they don't necessarily have the best office setup, and they don't necessarily leave or even change their clothes.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 02:46

What are some of the ways that COVID-19 has emotionally impacted workers who are now working remotely?

D Dr. Greg Couser 02:54

Well, this is something that's mixed. In some ways, it's been better for those to be at home because they're able to stay closer to their family. So, there's some advantages there. But there are also some disadvantages. And part of the downside of that was we're always talking about the boundaries between work and home. People get a lot of identity from their work, and they want to be around other people. And some people have lost that sense of direct contact with people, or they can feel disengaged with the workplace. And at the same time, of course, because there's been lots of changes, they might be struggling with how to keep up with new policies and procedures and that sort of thing.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 03:36

Well, that makes sense. It seems to be at least somewhat personality driven. When I inquire of some of our workers who have gone to work at home, some of them absolutely love it, feel they are more productive than they have ever been in their lives and others, oh, they just really aren't enjoying it and wish that they could come back to the office.

D Dr. Greg Couser 03:56

Yeah, that's absolutely right. That's what I see too. It depends a lot on what our individual personality style and preferences are. And I've seen a lot, I tend to be more of an introvert, and I liked some of the changes. Although I, I love my colleagues too, so I love being there. I noticed that some introverts are mourning the return to meeting in person, or as those who are more extroverted, they may prefer to work on site, and they can't wait till they're able to do so.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 04:28

For those workers who don't have the option and wish to stay more connected, what are

some opportunities that they can take or tips that you can give for staying connected in spite of being remote?

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Dr. Greg Couser 04:39

To provide some structure, just like you would in the normal workplace. So, scheduling times to work, even if you're working from home, there may be times that you schedule to meet in person and if that's not possible or feasible, then at least trying to schedule some maybe virtual coffee breaks, where you are able to get away and talk to people. And this is a time where supervisors are really struggling too. And it's important for people to get feedback, though from their supervisors and to feel connected to them. And so, having regular check ins can help even if that's something that's infrequent. And we want to leverage our technology here. Because this is where Zoom can be helpful. And when people understand that they do have other people that are still working with them on their team. And even if it's remotely when they know they're in it together, it doesn't have to seem so bad. And I also, I guess, would advocate for teams doing their own brainstorming about what those challenges are. Because most of the time people have their own best ideas about how to stay connected.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 05:52

I like what you said about coffee breaks, we've tried some of those in our department and it's actually been quite fun to meet and actually talk about, oh, to get to know each other personally, instead of just to talk as we do at meetings. Also, yesterday, we had the opportunity to do a Zoom Father's Day party for my husband with his adult children from Florida. And you know, you kind of think, well it's not the same as being in person, but it sure is an improvement over talking on the phone or texting.

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Dr. Greg Couser 06:21

For sure it is yeah.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 06:22

So, a lot of fun. How can people tell if they are feeling sad or if they're just suffering from depression? What's the difference?

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Dr. Greg Couser 06:33

That's a good question. Well, all of us are going to feel sad sometimes. And so, just the

sadness by itself doesn't necessarily mean that you're depressed. And what I look at is other things going along with that, and sort of the length of time. So, if this is something that's pervasive that the mood is low and continues to be low and doesn't seem to get up for things that would normally excite us, and it goes on for more than a couple of weeks, then I would be more worried. And oftentimes, when we're talking about something that's clinical, there are some physical manifestations to that too, like our sleep is disturbed, our appetite is going up or down. And there can be some other symptoms associated with that, self -, poor energy, poor concentration. And so, if you start to see a constellation of things like that, that's pervasive, then it's probably more than just being sad.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 07:26

And I think that one of the things that I thought about Greg, is that it seems that emotional health is only part of what plays into this being at home. There are other aspects to health and wellness that are affected by staying inside of our homes so much. What advice would you give about those topics?

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Dr. Greg Couser 07:44

So, yeah, that's a great question. And there's lots of things I could potentially talk about along that line. One of the things though, that I guess we have to remind ourselves, and I see a lot of physicians and nurses in my practice. And so, these are people who are well educated about health topics, yet they don't often necessarily follow their own advice about simple things like eating, sleeping and moving well. And so, I always tell people as a fallback, take a look at that stuff. Try to get on a schedule, plan for your day, you know, including what you're going to wear, and your meals, and scheduled time for exercise breaks. And recognizing sometimes people don't exercise because they think it's going to take away from productivity, where actually, that could be something that ultimately ends up bolstering productivity. I think I mentioned before setting good boundaries between work and home. So, part of this would mean like your family needs to know, there are times you probably shouldn't be disturbed or can't be disturbed. And your work also needs to know that there are times you need to turn off work, and not be available to them so you can be fully present for people at home. Part of this has to do with technology too. It seems like we're always connected to our phones and computers. And stepping away is a good part of keeping that balance. You can turn off those email notification pop-ups like the one I just had a little bit ago. I probably should do that because that would be helpful as well. If you could have a separate workspace that's helpful. Set a schedule, just like you would at work and try to stick to that. And if possible, if you can schedule in any of those wellness activities I was talking about during the day, that can be helpful as well.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 08:42

You know, you talked a little earlier Greg about sadness and depression. But anxiety seems to be a big issue. COVID is, as you said earlier, it's a season of change. And that's about what we can count on is that things are changing constantly. And that can be very anxiety provoking. How do you recommend that individuals begin to start working on their mental health symptoms or handling them?

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Dr. Greg Couser 10:00

Well, I think part of this is I spend a lot of time normalizing things for people, because we're all adjusting to things, it's normal to feel awkward when we're out of our routine. And change is difficult for everyone. So, a lot of my work is normalization, and telling people to practice self-compassion. So, and we all have, you were asking about the difference between depression and sadness. We all have sadness at times, and we mourn things that are that are different, and that is completely normal. But we don't necessarily talk about it. And so, people don't realize necessarily that it's normal. I look at these mental health symptoms, just like I would look at any other physical issue or medical problem. So, if I have hypertension, or diabetes, or whatever the medical problem is, I would still need to take responsibility for that, just like I would if I really did have a mental health issue that that needed attention. And it takes courage to seek help. And when you do seek help, you actually get better. And so, kind of along that line too, just making sure that you start with the basics, like eating, sleeping and moving well, recognizing that if you learn how to handle symptoms, that makes us stronger, and then we can feel like we can overcome more in our lives. And kind of the last thing here is we may be lonelier, and unfortunately, a lot of us are lonely, and that's getting exacerbated by the pandemic, and we're not talking about it as much. So, it really is important. We are social creatures, even us introverts like me, we're social creatures, we need to be around people sometimes and have some fun too, and get out and see some people.

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Dr. Halena Gazelka 11:39

Excellent advice. If our listeners are concerned about their mental health, what should they do? What kind of resources are there, and who should they asked for help?

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Dr. Greg Couser 11:49

Yeah, that's a good question too. And it's difficult to tell dependent upon audience too. So, you really should know what your local resources are. So, at Mayo Clinic, for instance, we have a homepage where people can find that, you know, talking to your care providers,

which is usually where care would start, if things are more than just a little bit of sadness, that's a good place to go. But if you're looking for some more generic sorts of resources, take a look at some of the major organizations that deal with mental health all the time, like the American Psychiatric Association, or American Psychological Association. There's the National Alliance on Mental illness. There's a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Those are just a few that all have websites. And I would certainly go by word of mouth.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 12:42
That's very helpful. Thank you. Anything else? Last Words of wisdom for our listeners today, Greg?

D Dr. Greg Couser 12:48
I think I just want to reiterate the part about practicing self-compassion. It's not easy to be a human being sometimes, especially with all the change that we have, and to have a sense of humor and go about your day to day and try to realize that we're all in this together.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 13:07
I think that's a great point. And I think we can find such joy when we find others that we can share our experiences with. So, maybe those work coffee breaks are a good place to start. Sounds good. Thanks for being here today, Greg.

D Dr. Greg Couser 13:20
Thank you. Appreciate it very much. Thanks.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 13:23
Our thanks to Mayo Clinic psychiatrist, Dr. Greg Couser, for being here today and speaking with us about mental health while working remotely. I hope that you learned something. I know that I did. We wish each of you a wonderful day.

N Narrator 13:36
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