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5 Steps to Increase Focus While Working from Home

by Emily Cerda, Certified Nutrition Specialist

Working from home sounds dreamy, but it requires a whole new skill set. I've been working remotely as a practitioner and online educator for years, so I understand the struggles that can arise with this type of work. I also homeschool my children, so balancing work, life and everyone's needs (as a Mom and teacher) is sometimes quite the juggling act!

Take heart that balance CAN be achieved, but it takes some commitment to a few simple strategies. These changes may feel odd at first, but before long you'll wonder how you made anything work without them!



#1: RETHINK YOUR BREAKFAST

Have you slipped into the habit of enjoying coffee as breakfast? Or maybe you're grabbing a quick bowl of cereal before jumping into your day? These are common missteps (because, convenience!), but they're also the top causes of brain fog and afternoon energy crashes that I see in my practice. Here's how to break this familiar cycle:

- **Eat a large breakfast.** The old adage says to "eat breakfast like a queen, lunch like a princess, and dinner like a pauper." *Okay, so I changed those to the feminine, but you get the picture.* Eating this way nourishes our body in proportion to our daily activity levels and helps to balance blood sugar, which is one of the keys to staying alert and focused.
- **Eat protein & healthy fats with breakfast.** Protein is important in creating the neurotransmitters we need for attention and mood. Healthy fats are nourishing to the brain and help us feel fuller, longer. Including quality protein and healthy fats to start the day can make a BIG difference in focus and behavior. *Consider a breakfast containing nuts, seeds, lean meat, eggs, or some protein powder and avocado mixed into yogurt or a smoothie.*



#2: PACK LUNCHES & PREP SNACKS

Working from home makes it easier to avoid processed foods, right? After all, everyone's in one place and this working-from-home gig is supposed to be flexible! Unfortunately, it can be very hard to stick to whole foods meals when schedules and needs are varying throughout the day. Convenience feels good, but that convenience food will derail your focus (and maybe your health). Preparation is your best friend here.

- **Pack lunches.** If your kids are old enough, let them pack their own lunches. Give them some guidance, such as requiring at least 1 vegetable and 1 fruit, but let them take the lead and then pop the whole thing in the fridge. If you're stuck in lunchtime meetings, they'll be able to help themselves - if not, everything is prepared for a quick family lunch together!
- **Prep some healthy snacks.** Prepare some cut vegetables, apple slices, whole grain crackers, homemade trail mix, fruit, popcorn, or yogurt (low sugar, high fat). Keep it simple, let kids help choose and prepare foods, and store within their reach.



#3: COMMUNICATE OPENLY

When we drift off to the office and send the kids off to school, we're all focused on our individual daily tasks. Working from home brings everyone's days (and experiences) together, for better or worse. Suddenly, all of the emotion from a stressful meeting or interruptions for a frustrating math problem can ripple through the home environment, leaving everyone feeling grumpy and unfocused. While we can't schedule every breakdown (I wish!), we can be open in communication with our kids to help them build resilience while still feeling supported.

- **Have a family meeting.** Start the morning together (remember that big breakfast?) and take a few moments to discuss the day. I ask my kids what they are focusing on and what their most challenging tasks will be, then I share when my live meetings are. This sharing lets them know they'll be supported, but that there are specific times when they cannot interrupt. If you have younger kids, this might be more about letting them know when they'll be expected to play quietly on their own while you attend those Zoom sessions.
- **Everyone gets a reset.** Frustrations will happen, and that's okay! Discuss acceptable ways to reset when this happens. Maybe a quick family walk, a favorite song played too loud (dance & sing, too!), a round of the worst jokes you know, or a quiet drawing or coloring session for the kids if you can't tear yourself away will work to refresh moods and get back on track.



#4: HYDRATE!

If you only implement one thing from this list of recommendations, let it be to prioritize hydration. Over half of all children and adolescents in the US are not adequately hydrated, and severe impairments to focus, cognition and problem solving skills begin with as little as a 2% change in body mass from dehydration. This is BIG, guys!

- **Choose your own water bottle or cup.** If you get sick of water, opt for a few squirts of lemon juice, some mashed berries (frozen are nice), or some herbal tea. Remember, you might want something with a lid if the kids are working around computers!
- **Don't make this a competition.** There IS such a thing as too much water, and it's quite dangerous. We want to increase fluids, but not make a game out of this. In general, if you're urinating fairly frequently and the urine is light in color, then you're adequately hydrated. Winning!



#5: CHECK YOUR BOUNDARIES

Working from home requires that you set clear boundaries. It's easy to slip into the habit of feeling like you should be available at all hours, but this is a slippery slope! Work-life balance CAN exist when you work from home, but it does take more conscious effort.

- **Set your hours.** Your job or your child's school may dictate this to some degree, but it is up to you to avoid responding to emails at 9pm. Don't set expectations that you're always available - be firm with those boundaries!
- **Sleep!** Focus problems and poor sleep commonly go hand-in-hand. Create a bedtime routine and prioritize getting 8 hours of shut-eye per night.
- **Set limits on screen time.** Screen usage can exacerbate symptoms of ADHD in children. Note how screen time affects you and your kids and limit it appropriately. *Aim for physical activity instead!*