

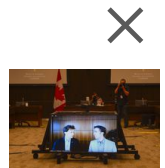


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MARCH 11



# Working from home is causing breakdowns. Ignoring the problem and blaming the pandemic is no longer an option

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Paula Allen, head of research and well-being at Morneau Shepell, outside their offices, in Toronto, on Feb., 25, 2021.

CHRISTOPHER KATSAROV/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

By conventional measures, last year was stellar for Erin Durant. The pandemic had been tough, but as a litigator in Ottawa now working from home, her practice was busier and more profitable than ever.

She planned her typical brief break over Christmas, expecting to return to work refreshed in January. But when Ms. Durant took a peek at her 2021 calendar, it felt impossibly overwhelming.

What followed was something she described as a total “collapse.” She spent days in bed, mostly hiding in the darkness of her room. Ultimately, Ms. Durant took a six-week leave from work, marking the first time in her professional career she had been off for more than two weeks at one time.

The causes of her breakdown were subtle, building over time in the fog of a pandemic that has upended so much of working life. She took on more work while steering her thriving practice through the economic turbulence, meanwhile social activities such as client networking events and after-work drinks were cancelled. Casual conversations with co-workers over coffee breaks were non-existent. Legal conferences turned into faceless Zoom meetings.

Signs that she was burning out were far too easy to overlook while working from home. “Had I been in the office, my door would have always been closed, my hair would have been a mess, the dark circles under my eyes would have been obvious,” she wrote in a LinkedIn post detailing her experience.

Such stories are becoming much more common these days. A fortysomething dad started losing his eyebrows from stress. A sales director going through a divorce found the only way to manage was to take a leave from work. An executive gave up her dream promotion because she couldn’t bear to take on any more work.

“People use the term pandemic fatigue, but that underestimates what we’re going through,” says Paula Allen, head of research and well-being at Morneau Shepell. “People are at the point of emotional exhaustion.”

Nearly a year into physical separation from colleagues, bosses and clients – sometimes coupled with kids trapped at home – white collar professionals are cracking. Often, top performers who tend to push through the pain are those who are struggling the most. A recent Morneau Shepell survey found that 40 per cent of managers in finance and professional services have considered leaving their jobs since the pandemic started.

It’s an unexpected development, given that white collar workers are precisely the people who were expected to be doing the best. For the most part, their jobs have been protected from the economic devastation of the past year. While small businesses and service sector employees have been decimated by lockdowns, workers in industries such as finance, tech, law and accounting have been able to keep their jobs – and largely have the flexibility to work from their homes or vacation properties.

This has even been a boom time for some sectors. Stock markets, for instance, are at record highs, and that has fuelled all sorts of activity, helping boost the gross domestic product from the finance and insurance sector by 3 per cent between February and December, 2020, according to Statistics Canada.

But it’s now clear that for many white collar professionals the struggle is very real. There isn’t an obvious reason why they are feeling this way now. Financial success can mask mounting psychological stresses – especially because white collar workers can easily tell themselves that they’ve come through the pandemic relatively unscathed and shouldn’t be struggling.

“There’s so much going on right now. And nobody can really point their finger at it,” says KPMG Canada’s chief mental-health officer Denis Trottier, who was semi-retired until the pandemic brought him back to work full time.

The feelings can be partly explained by the erasure of social connections at work that help people power through long, intense days. Work and home life now blend into one – with work often taking precedence. Gone are the small joys of life that once seemed like distractions, but that researchers say are important to keeping us engaged and preventing burnout: the coffees, the lunches, the gossip.

But so much of it remains nebulous – and that can make it even more maddening.

Bryn Ferris is a change management consultant who can work from home, and his company has done well enough to keep everyone employed. For many months, he felt relief that his business wasn't severely affected.

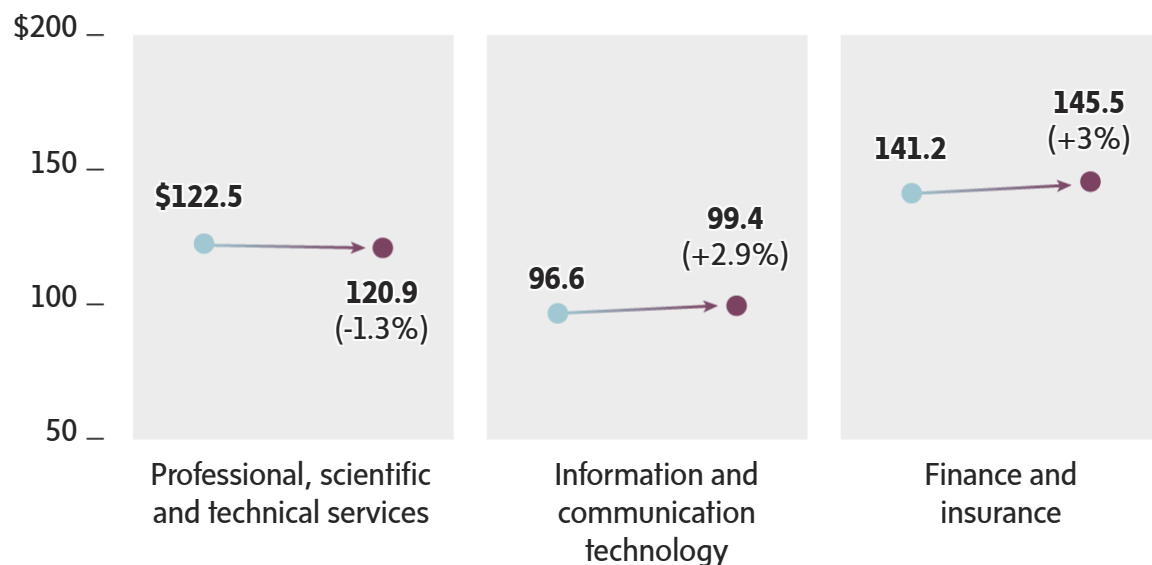
Lately, though, he feels something much more harrowing. The emotion is hard to define – it's more, as he calls it, a "steady-state numbness." There's little joy day in and day out, and it's a battle to get motivated.

"I empathize with the feeling that we have it so good," he says. But it's such an overwhelming problem lately that he's past denying it or trying to power through it. Like so many others, he's hit the wall, and doesn't see a way out. "I am stuck in purgatory," he says.

### Growth and decline in selected sectors during the pandemic

Change in GDP, from Feb. 2020 to Dec. 2020

GDP in billions: Feb. 2020 ● → ● Dec. 2020



THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: STATISTICS CANADA

Why are white collar workers hitting the wall? It's a toxic mix of more work, less fun and some organizational trauma.

To start, many people are putting in longer hours, with research showing these employees are working 2 to 2.5 hours more a day than before the pandemic. Several factors are at play, but they often boil down to no clear separation between work and home life. For some, it's because there's no commute; for others, it can be because they're bored and therefore turn to

work for stimulation. Businesses can also be busier than before, but have hiring freezes have forced existing employees to shoulder more work.

Complicating matters, working from home has made it much harder for people to tell if they're taking on too much, or not enough, compared with their coworkers. In the office, they might grab a tea with a colleague after finishing a presentation deck. But now they're sitting alone in their house, possibly feeling guilty, so they fill the time with more work.

That isolation can fuel workers' own internal pressure to succeed, since people are no longer getting the external feedback and validation they'd receive from talking to co-workers or supervisors in the office, Vancouver therapist Dominic Brennan says.

Employees, then, are left spinning on their own. "Am I taking on more because I'm anxious? Because I want to have a promotion? Do I want to demonstrate how good I really am?" he says. Mr. Brennan understands some of this first-hand. A former Hilton Hotels executive, he suffered a nervous breakdown many years ago. Now a counsellor, his therapy practice had its busiest year ever in 2020, despite shutting down for several weeks in March and April because of COVID-19.

Digital communication also has a way of shrinking conversations and making employees feel like they have too many challenges and not enough resources or support, an important predictor of burnout, he says.

"It's a lot different going and sitting down in the boss's office and hearing: 'This is a \$150-million project and I need you to take it on,' and you can talk it over and shoot [around] some ideas," Mr. Brennan says. Today, the same message is likely to come in an e-mail that says, "This is your project right now, please take it up. Let me know what you need."

The predicament is only amplified by the fact that it's been a long, traumatic year – and for some, it could be another six months at home, maybe even longer, depending on vaccination rates and variant growth.

Such long stretches of time away from the office make it harder for employees to stay in the loop. And being cut off from how important company decisions are made contributes to people feeling lonelier at work, says Winny Shen, a professor of organizational studies at York University's Schulich School of Business who has studied workplace loneliness.

The spontaneous, casual workplace conversations that many workers are missing serve a deeper purpose than just socializing with friends, Prof. Shen says. Informal conversations in the office kitchen with co-workers outside your regular team can help people tap into the grapevine of company news and make people feel more connected to the broader organization. Sometimes a little gossip is even good for the soul.

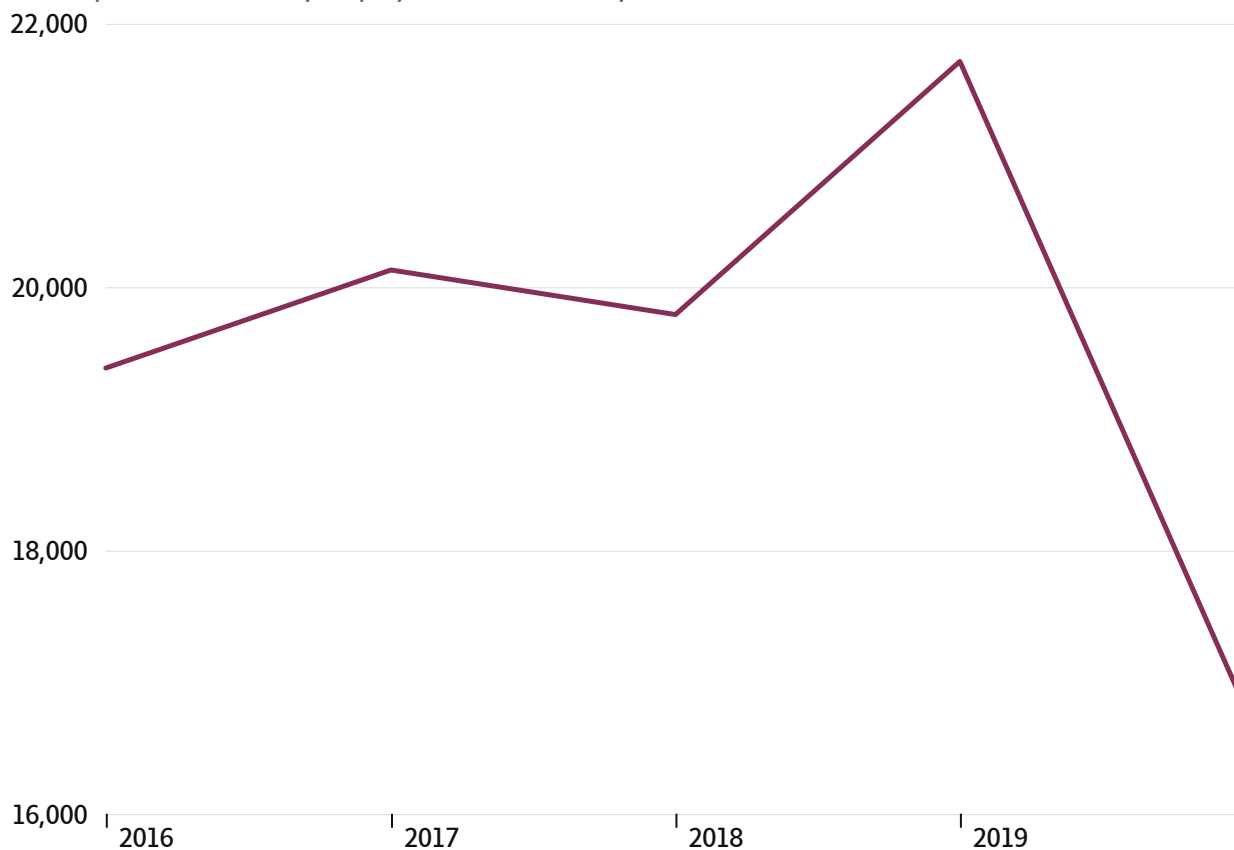
Each individual issue faced by the remote worker may not seem like an especially high hurdle to clear. Yet that, oddly enough, can make the situation tough for high performers who are used to powering through. They may not appreciate how the never-ending nature of all this is wearing them down over time – especially with so many of the normal relaxation outlets like seeing friends or shopping or going to the gym banned because of the pandemic.

On top of that, vacations have plummeted, with many people delaying taking time off in hope of using it when some semblance of normal life returns. The number of hours employees spent away from work on vacation fell more than 20 per cent last year, to a nearly 40-year low, according to Statistics Canada.

As Mr. Ferris, the consultant, puts it: “All of our regular coping mechanisms are gone.”

### Decrease in vacations

Hours spent on vacation by employees who were away for a full week



THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: STATISTICS CANADA

The hardest part can be knowing what to do about any of it.

Typically workers suffering burnout would be able to ask their human resources department about mental-health benefits, which are usually part of disability packages. Yet, during the pandemic, the scale of the problem is so unprecedented that it can overload the system.

Sun Life Financial, one of the country's largest disability insurers, said the number of searches for local psychologists on Lumino, a health app it offers free to all Canadians, recently hit 2,000 a day – double the number from February, 2020.

Ample workplace benefits are also a fantasy for many. Roughly 70 per cent of Canadians in the private labour force work for companies with fewer than 500 employees. For many at small and medium-sized firms, it's possible that HR might be little more than a payroll department.

Despite these constraints, one of the dominant pieces of advice from experts is that incremental changes can truly make a difference: No meetings longer than 45 minutes; no meetings during lunch on Fridays; and encouraging employees to go on walks during meetings and listen by audio only. (That these all centre around meetings is rather telling.)

“We're not talking about big fancy approaches,” says Ms. Allen from Morneau Shepell, which is one of the country's top consulting firms for human resources. “We're talking about being real, and being human.”

Late last year, Sun Life hosted one of its regular town halls to discuss the insurer's quarterly results. To change things up, the company asked two senior leaders, to talk about personal struggles they've endured in the past. One spoke about losing a child to suicide, another about dealing with depression.

Many bosses, however, aren't accustomed to showing such vulnerability. “In general, leaders are supposed to be tough, they're supposed to have all the answers, they're supposed to suck it up,” says Zabeen Hirji, executive adviser on the future of work at Deloitte. Yet in this environment, skills like empathy and compassion are what really matter. And they have to come from senior leadership. “It's a bit like diversity and inclusion,” Ms. Hirji says. “If it's not at the top, people won't believe it.”

That can be a challenge these days when some leaders are sometimes suffering as much, if not more, than their employees. Morneau Shepell compiles a monthly mental-health index, and at the moment the scores of managers are worse than those of non-managers, which is rare given that leaders tend to be older and have developed more robust coping mechanisms.

Managers are often many employees' only point of contact with their company and provide impromptu counselling, despite have little expertise in that area. Yet over the past year this same group has had to make decision after decision without much information – and all the while managing their direct reports. “They’ve had a double whammy, and it’s showing,” Ms. Allen says.

In just one example, a banking executive recently lost a family member in another province, but was unable to travel to spend time with relatives. Yet even as they grieved, they were managing the complaints of employees upset that the company was not covering the cost of their home-office chair.

For those struggling to conjure up the energy to be there at every moment for their staff, there are some structural changes that can make a world of difference.

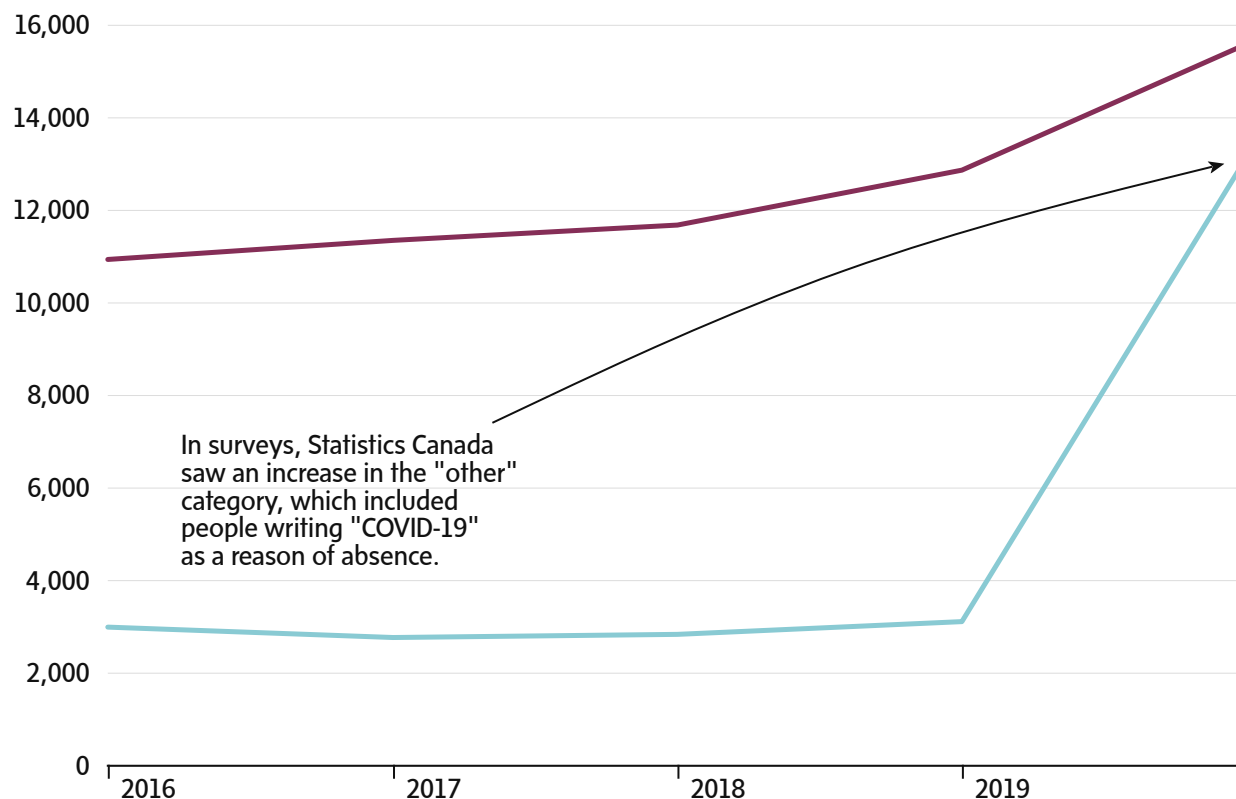
HR departments, where possible, should tackle the continuing stigma around mental health. Campaigns such as Bell Let’s Talk have existed for years now, so there is a much broader appreciation for the problem, but there’s still a mental block when it comes to realizing it could happen to you.

### **Increase in stress leaves, by reason of absence**

Number of hours lost by employees who were away a full week

Own illness or disability      Other reasons





THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: STATISTICS CANADA

DATA SHARE

To this end, Royal Bank of Canada is working on an internal campaign to rebrand mental-health awareness among employees, including new messaging that we're all human, and that it can happen to anyone. The bank is now also emphasizing to managers that they can show vulnerability and still succeed in their career, hoping that attitude will then permeate through the organization, chief human resources officer Helena Gottschling says.

Companies may also want to use the aftermath of the pandemic to reassess their employee assistance programs, which are often outsourced to third party agencies. Workplace mental-health experts cite benefits to bringing such programs in-house, staffed by people who understand the organization and its unique pressures while also guaranteeing confidentiality.

None of this will be easy, and organizations can only do so much – because, after all, the pandemic is the root problem. But there just might be some good that comes out of this.

After nearly a year locked up at home and working remotely, some professionals are starting to question their intense drive to climb the corporate ladder and rethink what it means to be successful – a sign that the pandemic may bring about a shift in the culture of white collar work.

“A lot of parents are saying: when this reopens my kids will not be in three competitive sports any more,” says Denis Trottier, KPMG’s chief mental-health officer. Others no longer aspire to buy a bigger home, he says. “They’re resetting their priorities around financial goals in life and what’s important: family time versus working all the time to build wealth – for what?”

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