

Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic

The mental wellbeing of project-based construction employees

Construction Work Health and Safety Research @ RMIT

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"Some parts of my job are challenging from home, but the team has been effectively communicating regularly and we set goals and intentions to get things done and support each other."

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COVID-19 has created a focus to communicate better and be more organised on a day to day basis. However, the best creative work has always been working around the table.

"...in order to be more productive, it's important to still "go to work", as in, have a separate workspace that you set yourself up in and work from so that you maintain the routine."



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Overview

Construction work involves long and rigid work hours. Long and inflexible work hours are associated with stress, employee burnout, work-life conflict and mental health issues¹.

The construction industry has been classified as an essential sector under the Australian COVID-19 regime and despite the social distancing requirements, construction activities have been expected to continue to keep the economy going. To sustain the work, new flexible work arrangements, such as working from home (referred to as home-based teleworking) or weekly alterations between working on-site and working from home, have been practised in the industry.

This sudden, widespread shift to home-based teleworking was not anticipated by the industry and subsequently impacted its ability to make arrangements to ensure the health and safety of its workers. In many cases the shift to working from home has been involuntary and will likely continue for many months to come.

This guide highlights some factors associated with construction workers' mental wellbeing at work during the COVID-19 pandemic and is based on feedback received from employees experiencing the new home-based work arrangements.

The research

Research was conducted by RMIT to understand Australian construction workers' experiences of home-based teleworking – and included collecting lessons learnt from their experiences whilst working from home.

We collected information from employees who worked from home on alternate weeks (every other week) in an effort to reduce the number of people in project offices. We used a single survey multiple times and across three different project sites to collect our information, receiving a total of 548 responses. Some participants also provided comments and shared their experiences. Participants in the study included construction workers, foremen, site managers, engineers, design managers, project leaders and employees in speciality support roles. The information collected was analysed to identify connections between mental wellbeing and various aspects of work and life. In undertaking this work, we were able to understand some of the challenges experienced by workers while teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key findings

The study identified both positive and negative experiences of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some employees preferred working from home because:

- it saved time getting ready for work and commuting
- they felt safer at home and less exposed to the risk of infection from COVID-19
- they enjoyed being able to work flexibly and have more time available for family and other non-work activities, and
- they were able to eat more healthily and do more exercise than when working in the office.

Employees who indicated good sleep quality, frequent physical activity and better engagement in their work also had good mental wellbeing. In addition, employees' level of satisfaction with their work-life balance was positively associated with their mental wellbeing.

However, the study also highlighted some negative impacts on mental wellbeing including:

- feeling time pressure
- experiencing work interference with non-work activities, and
- long working hours.

These factors negatively affect employees' satisfaction with their work-life balance, therefore, indirectly negatively influencing their mental wellbeing. These relationships are shown in the inner circles in Figure 1.

The study also heard from participants who found working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic amplified the negative impacts on mental wellbeing associated with long and inflexible hours spent in site-based work, time pressure and work interference with social life. These issues can be put into three groups:

- Blurring of the work-life boundary – The overlap between work and home life can have negative consequences for work-life balance and mental wellbeing. The negative impacts can be worsened by working late and irregular hours, increased time spent on work activities or thinking about work, increased time spent on online/remote communication, and family circumstances (e.g. having caring responsibilities).
- Social disconnectedness – Social connection is directly associated with mental health. A number of employees commented that they have been negatively impacted by a reduction in social interaction and connection through work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some employees highlighted the importance of regular online team meetings and organisational communication while working remotely.
- Psychological impacts of COVID-19 – Stress factors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (such as ongoing concerns about the future, continuous exposure to negative media releases about COVID-19, fear of infection and financial concerns) are likely to intensify the effects of long working hours, time pressures and work-life interference.

These influences are shown in the outer circle in Figure 1.

Implications for practice

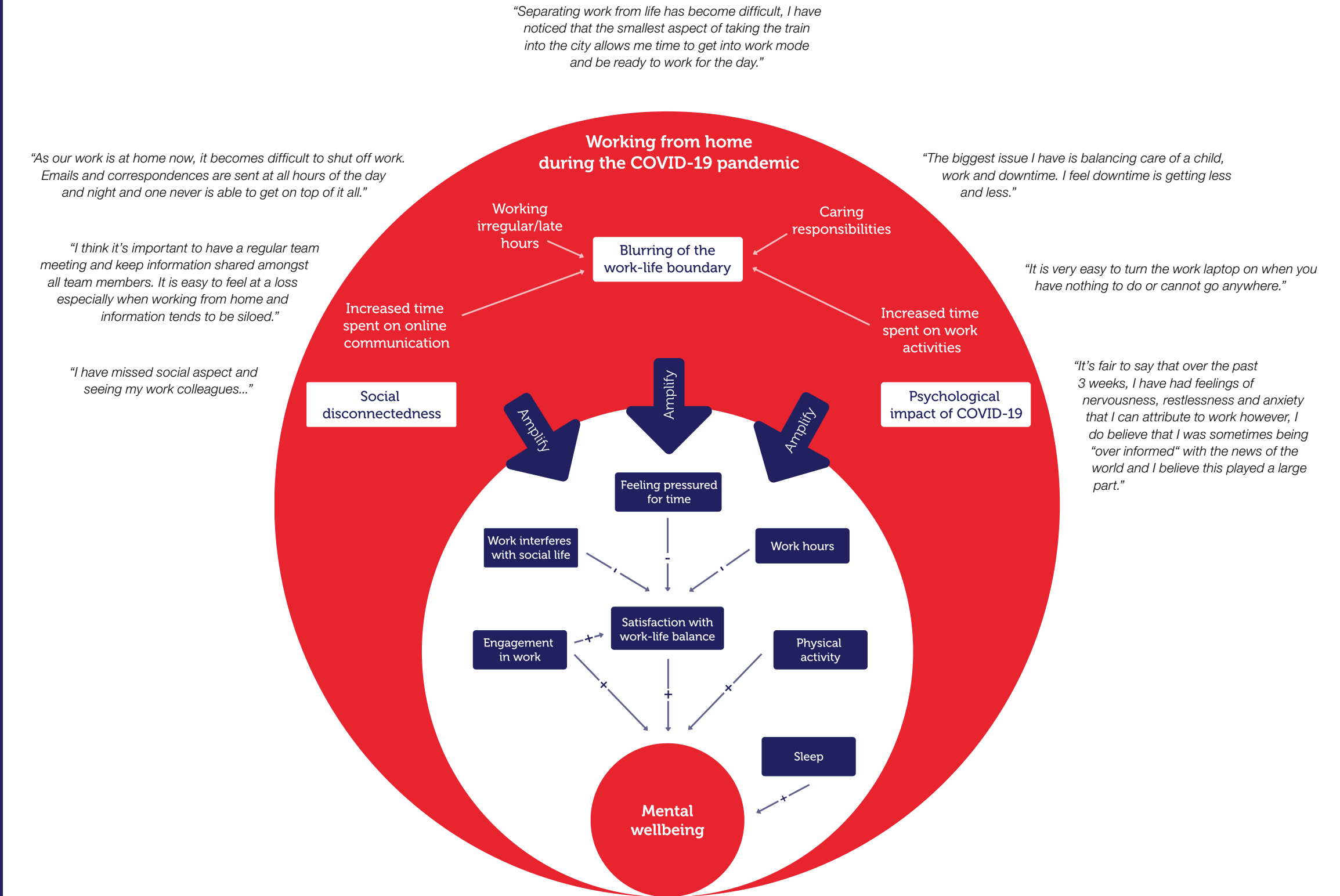
When designing teleworking arrangements, organisations need to consider employees' work-life satisfaction and create opportunities for improved work-family balance. In particular, it is important that:

- work hours, work pressure and work interference with non-work life are carefully managed among home-based teleworkers
- strategies are put in place to ensure employees who work at home remain socially connected with colleagues and team members, and
- online communication is managed so that employees do not experience frequent work interruption, communication overload or feel overly connected with the organisation, and their work and non-work life boundaries do not become overly blurred.

The findings from this study can help construction organisations make informed decisions that can maximise the mental wellbeing benefits associated with flexible ways of working, while also reducing the health risks associated with teleworking during (and potentially beyond) the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

Figure 1

Factors affecting construction employees' mental wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic



¹ Lingard, H., Brown, K., Bradley, L., Bailey, C., & Townsend, K. (2007). Improving employees' work-life balance in the construction industry: project alliance case study. *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management*, 133(10), 807–815.