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PSYCHOLOGY

Restore Your Sense of Control — Despite the Pandemic

by [Eric M. Anicich](#) , [Trevor A. Foulk](#) , [Merrick R. Osborne](#) , [Jake Gale](#) and [Michael Schaerer](#)

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Yaroslav Danylchenko/Stocksy

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The coronavirus pandemic has wrought unprecedented levels of personal and professional upheaval upon many employees. It may irrevocably transform how we work, communicate, eat, shop, date, and travel. Clearly, these are not “normal” times. And yet, society continues to move forward.

Amid this turmoil, many employees have had to abruptly accept fundamental changes to their work routines. And these changes have been stressful — nearly 7 in 10 U.S. workers say navigating the pandemic has been the most stressful time of their entire professional careers. One of the reasons the pandemic has been so stressful is because it has stripped people of their autonomy, or the extent to which they can be themselves and have discretion over their actions. Having a certain amount of autonomy has long been considered an innate psychological need, and studies have suggested that a lack of autonomy is detrimental for employee performance and well-being.

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The coronavirus pandemic presents a clear threat to employee autonomy because of its looming physical health risks, the uncontrollability of future layoffs and furloughs, constraints on physical movement, and mandatory work from home arrangements. Thus, understanding how employees recover their sense of

autonomy, and which employees may be better or worse equipped to recover promptly, is crucial for understanding the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on the workforce.

In a forthcoming paper in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, we investigated the psychological recovery experience of a sample of full-time employees from 41 different community colleges during the two-week period at the onset of the pandemic. (The Monday after Covid-19 was declared a “global pandemic” by the WHO and a “national emergency” by the U.S. Government: March 16, 2020.) We surveyed the employees 3 times each day for 10 consecutive work days. Each survey included the same questions about how employees felt *right now*. This research method — known as experience sampling — allowed us to track the trajectory of employees’ feelings and attitudes over time. We were especially interested in how employees experienced two manifestations of threatened autonomy: powerlessness and inauthenticity. In other words, we wanted to know to what extent employees felt like they had control over their own actions and could be their true selves as the Covid-19 outbreak worsened.

Although the employees we surveyed initially experienced elevated levels of powerlessness and reduced levels of authenticity (compared to a similar sample of employees we surveyed before the pandemic began), they recovered surprisingly quickly. Specifically, over the two-week survey period, employees reported decreasing feelings of powerlessness and increasing feelings of authenticity despite their reported stress levels remaining high (and in some cases increasing) over the same time period. That is, employees regained a large portion of their autonomy in a relatively short amount of time, even though the situation neither subjectively nor objectively improved. This is remarkable, as it suggests that employees adapted to a “new normal” and began to recover a sense of autonomy much more quickly than many would have expected and past research on psychological recovery has documented.

Interestingly, the employees who recovered their sense of autonomy fastest were those that scored high on neuroticism, a personality trait reflecting a tendency to experience nervousness and anxiety. Neuroticism generally has a bad reputation — in fact, some have argued that of all the personality dimensions, neuroticism “is probably the one with the least going for it.” Some of our findings align with this gloomy view of neuroticism — our results indicated that in the early stages of the pandemic, neurotic employees felt particularly powerless and inauthentic. However, our findings also suggest a silver lining for neurotic employees: while they initially felt more powerless and less authentic, these employees also recovered faster over time (i.e., their sense of powerless went down and their sense of authenticity went up more quickly than less neurotic employees). This notion of healthy neuroticism suggests there may be functional benefits associated with vigilance and worrying in dangerous environments. Indeed, in chaotic and unsafe situations, such as during a pandemic, some amount of neuroticism may cause people to feel right at home, helping them navigate and adapt to the new normal.

Our findings shed some initial light on the effects of and responses to Covid-19, but there is still much to learn about the ongoing effects of the pandemic on everyday life. For example, will the faster recovery rate we observed among neurotic employees eventually allow them to achieve a *greater* sense of autonomy than their less neurotic colleagues? Will employees experience a second dip in autonomy as the pandemic continues and certain constraints prove insurmountable?

In the meantime, we put together a few tips for how employees, managers, and organizations can accelerate the autonomy recovery process, particularly if you are struggling to feel like yourself or exercise control over your personal and/or professional life.

For Employees

Assess and modify your environment. Working from home is not synonymous with feeling autonomous. Achieving autonomy in this environment takes effort. Start by defining a clear boundary between your “work” and “home” spheres (e.g., “When I’m in this room or wearing these headphones I’m ‘at work’”). This will help you psychologically detach from work at the end of the day and re-enter your home environment (and mindset), which research has shown is beneficial for employee well-being and performance. Experiencing too much spillover from “work” to “home” or vice versa is likely to undermine feelings of authenticity and control in both spheres.

This does not mean that you need to erect a cubicle in your home, install fluorescent lights, and clock in at the same time each morning. Rather, take liberties in customizing your office space and workflow to make it as personally meaningful and comfortable as possible. Ultimately, work from home arrangements are deeply personal and will likely be part of our professional lives for years to come.

Embrace the perks of working from home. In 2018, Americans spent nearly two full workweeks a year commuting to and from work, with a staggering 4.3 million workers qualifying as “super-commuters,” who spend 90 minutes or longer commuting to work in each direction every day. Few experiences are more autonomy constraining than sitting in traffic. Therefore, reclaiming this time can provide a boost to your sense of autonomy. You can use this bonus time to get more sleep, spend more time with your family, connect with friends, pursue a hobby, learn a new skill, exercise, or pursue any number of other personally satisfying activities. The key is to leverage this extra time to feel more authentic and in control of your life. Try to resist the temptation to simply work more hours.

Don't forget self-care. From widespread business and school closures to restrictive public health policies, the pandemic has dictated many aspects of peoples' work and personal lives in ways that are obviously not within your control as an individual. How you treat yourself, however, is up to you. Therefore, practicing self-care — through investing time, money, or attention to improve some aspect of your well-being — is especially important in stressful times. Consider earmarking the money you save on gasoline and eating out for self-care. If money is tight, consider free forms of self-care such as exercising or practicing mindfulness, which can help you reclaim control over your body and mind. Remember that “recovery marks the onset of a broader challenge, not the end of the crisis.” Thus, self-care should be an ongoing priority instead of a one and done event. Plan accordingly.

For Managers

Replace micromanagement with regular check-ins. It can be difficult for supervisors to take a more hands-off approach when their instinct is to micromanage. Indeed some companies have invested in new employee surveillance technologies that allow managers to meticulously track how their employees spend their time when they work from home. Relying on employee surveillance is more indicative of underlying trust and culture issues than it is a sustainable and effective management response to the pandemic. Not to mention, these practices threaten employee autonomy. Managers may learn from a company like Automattic, the parent company behind WordPress and Tumblr, that has found success by empowering its employees to work whenever and wherever they want. Focusing on output over process may help in this regard.

The opposite of micromanagement, however, is not abandonment. Regular check-ins with your employees are crucial. Ask how they are doing and what they need to feel supported and be successful. You are in this together after all.

Give your neurotic employees another look. Neuroticism is often viewed as a personality flaw or weakness. Those criticisms may be warranted when everything is going smoothly. However, neuroticism confers an evolutionary advantage in that it is associated with greater sensitivity to and vigilance in the face of environmental threats.

When the environment is threatening, neurotic employees experience congruence between their personality trait and their environmental state, which can manifest in more efficient cognitions and behaviors.

In addition, neurotic employees may prove to be very reliable and effective team members during the pandemic. Research has shown that in group-task settings, neurotic workers gain status by surpassing expectations. Therefore, managers should consider revisiting and potentially updating their pre-existing beliefs about certain employees. It may be helpful to have some “Chicken Littles” in your organization when the sky is falling.

For Organizations

The pandemic is a glaring reminder that organizational culture is key. Enforcing company policies and holding people accountable can be especially challenging when employees work remotely. This can be a problem when dealing with deviant or unmotivated employees. Autonomy can also have negative effects at the other extreme — highly motivated workaholics may be at risk of experiencing burnout if they are given too much autonomy because peer performance is less easily observable. Absent social comparisons, some employees may resort to working incredibly long and stressful hours to keep pace with an imaginary performance standard. In this way, greater autonomy can be a double-edged sword.

These complexities reveal the importance of investing in a strong organizational culture. Having clear and sensible norms and expectations regarding working from home and working after hours can help mitigate these concerns. Additionally, recognizing and rewarding employees who embody your organization’s values can be a great way to promote morale and encourage others in the organization to follow suit. This is especially important in the context of remote work because organizational culture functions like an invisible hand, driving certain behaviors even when no one is watching.

Of course, some organizational cultures will be better suited to thrive in this moment than others such as those that promote (and actually live up to) adaptability as a core value and source of competitive advantage, but this reality should not discourage other

organizations from taking stock of their cultures and the effects — both intended and unintended — those cultures may have on employee behavior and morale during the pandemic.

Think beyond facilitating recovery to designing the future of work. The pandemic has accelerated trends that are already in motion by shining a light on some of the inefficiencies of traditional office work. For example, the rationale for requiring closely monitored office work between the hours of 8 and 5 is quickly losing legitimacy as evidence mounts showing that more flexible and autonomous work arrangements are associated with greater employee initiative and support for organizational change, job creativity, and performance.

Now is the time to take a step back and ask, “What would an ideal world of work look like for this organization and what steps can we take now to create this future?” In this vein, some have asked, “Do we really need the office?” Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey doesn’t think so — his company recently announced that many employees would be allowed to work from home permanently.

Overall, the pandemic has pulled the curtain back on a number of outdated business practices and revealed certain inefficiencies that will be difficult for companies to overlook moving forward. The quicker organizations internalize these lessons, the more of a competitive advantage they will have in the future.

As bleak as the future may look, the pandemic will eventually pass. Amid the chaos of today, organizations have a once in a generation opportunity to reimagine the workplaces of tomorrow and it is a safe bet that understanding and managing for employee autonomy will remain front and center in the new world of work that emerges.

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