HOW TO WORK REMOTELY WITH KIDS AND KEEP YOUR SANITY IN TACT AS A PARENT

A Guide for Working Parents

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CONTENTS

The Coronavirus outbreak has thrust many of us into remote working situations, alongside our children and teens who may also be at home (and if it's not a reality yet, it is imminent). As someone who's worked at home for the past ten years, whilst raising three kids , I've learned a thing or two about how to effectively work from home (WFH) with kids in tow. WFH? Apparently it's a new hashtag on social media... although I also think it might mean what-the $# is happening from some of the pictures I found when I searched the hashtag on Instagram. I want to share some simple strategies that may help you navigate these unchartered waters in which you may suddenly find yourself.

How can you work from home, be productive and keep your sanity intact? I want to be honest and say that it's possible, but it isn't always easy. I'm a firm believer in having realistic expectations, so I don't want to lull you into the false belief that your WFH plan will involve your kids spending hours colouring-in, doing homework and happily entertaining themselves while you sip your warm latte, plough through your To Do list and triage your inbox lying in bed in your Lululemon outfit. That's unlikely to be the case, despite the laptop lifestyle you see shared on Instagram. However, with some planning, structure and practical tips, there are some simple things you can do to work remotely with kids, teens (and let's face it their screens) in tow and not lose your shizzle.

// MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

This is not 'business as normal' but from home. Be prepared that you can't superimpose your 'normal' workday routine on your family and home life. Recalibrate your expectations from the outset otherwise you may cause yourself unnecessary stress.

Added to this frustration, is the fact that the Coronavirus threat has increased most people's anxiety levels, including kids, teens and adults. This can in part explain the disappointing behaviour we've witnessed in Australian supermarkets in recent weeks. The threat of the outbreak and self-isolation plans have abruptly disrupted families' routines so emotions could be heightened. When we find ourselves in stressful situations, the logical part of our

brain, the prefrontal cortex, that would help us make informed, logical decisions can be overrun by the limbic system (the emotional part of the brain). So you may need to adjust your expectations accordingly or you may add to the stress load and exacerbate the problem.

Determine the activities that your children/teens must really complete to stay on top of their academic work. Don't expect your children to replicate the 6-hour school day whilst learning at home. This will only add to your stress.

// PLAN YOUR WORK DAY

Do your most important tasks when your focus is high and when kids are likely to be more likely to be occupied. This isn't necessarily first thing in the morning, despite popular commentary that suggests you should start your day with the most difficult task (eat that frog kind of advice). For most of us that is usually the morning and/or middle of the day, but not necessarily for all of us because we all have unique biological rhythms.

For those of us who are owls, delaying challenging tasks until the night may be the most productive use of our time

An alternative idea is to find out when your focus is at its peak, according to your unique biological rhythm and then schedule your most important or mentally-taxing tasks during that time. In 'ordinary' circumstances I'd suggest assessing your chronotype and then align your work schedule to your biological energy peaks and troughs. You can take my free chronotype assessment here and then make a plan accordingly. If you're an owl, perhaps try to delay your most important tasks to later in the afternoon or night and deal with less challenging or easier tasks (Cal Newport refers to these tasks as 'shallow work') in the earlier parts of the day when your energy and focus isn't optimal. I understand, however, that at this point in time, especially if we're a leader in our workplace, many of us don't have the luxury of delaying critical work to more conducive times- sometimes it just has to be done now!

It's also critical to ensure that you've also planned some activities or tasks that your kids can do during these critical times so you can get some uninterrupted work time (this might be the ideal non-guilt time for some leisurely screen activities- can we all agree that we're going to have more flexible, evolving screen time boundaries for the next little while?

I'm certainly not suggesting free reign, but we don't need to obsess over the amount of time they're plugged in- instead you're better off to focus on what they're doing during this time).

Think of other ways that you can plan your day so you can build a fortress around your focus when your energy is at its optimal level. If you're an early riser, could you get up before the kids wake up and do some of your focused work then?

Could you schedule a couple of hours later in the day so you can wrap up some tasks, without distractions? Could you do 'shifts' with your partner, so during your most focused time, your partner becomes what we call the 'PCG' (primary caregiver)? All kids' complaints, whinging, food requests, sibling squabbles, tech issues are directed to that parent while the other parent works free from the chaos. I've suggested to one client that her and her partner wear a funny hat so they can overtly convey to their kids who the PCG is at any given time.

Could you wear noise-cancelling headphones, pop a sign on top of your laptop or desktop to signal that you're working (you can download a free one here) to overtly signal that you're working and can't be disrupted? Perhaps it means that you go to a specific place in the house where you can work uninterrupted and your kids know that you're there to

work (and not be disrupted).

Maybe it means shutting the door to your office to signal that you're working. Kids respond well to visual cues so use them to your advantage. But remember, that's not guaranteed that you won't be interrupted, as this video shows…

// WORK IN SPRINTS, NOT MARATHONS

A well-received science-backed tip that I share in corporate workshops is to work in sprints, not marathons. Our brain gets depleted if we try to work for long periods. There are a raft of strategies you could try, such as the Pomodoro Technique where you work for 25 minutes and take a 5 minute break and repeat this cycle four times before having a longer break. You could also use ultradian rhythms where you work for a maximum of 90-minute cycles and then have a rest.

This tip applies whether you're working at home or in the office. However, when working from home, it can be easier for us to go for longer stretches without disruption in the absence of our colleagues chatty Cathy or disruptive David (but hey, you're reading this because you've got kids, so they'll probably make 'Cathy' and 'David' look lame). You may also find that your calendar is suddenly less punctuated with meetings, so you may be more inclined to

sit and be sedentary and work for longer stretches than you otherwise may have done in the office where there was more incidental movement.

// SCHEDULE AND TAKE REGULAR BREAKS

Have breaks by yourself and with your family. When kids are at school, they have lots of opportunities to play and connect with their friends during break periods. This is critical for their physical health and mental wellbeing (and yours too). So where you can, continue to factor in regular breaks.

One of the other hacks that I share in corporate workshops is to triage your To Do list the right way. Many of us have a master To Do list, with all tasks we need to accomplish written on that list. It might include tasks such as data analysis, or creating a proposal, or another type of challenging task alongside tasks like

replying to a client email, making a phone call, organising a Zoom meeting with a colleague, which are much less taxing and time-consuming tasks. The problem is when presented with a long list of tasks we don't discriminate between the types of tasks and the complexities they pose. This means it's often an onerous and overwhelming experience when we look to our To Do list.

A more effective way is to create a triaged To Do list using a special process I've developed by combining two well-known productivity approaches- Cal Newport's 'Deep' and 'Shallow' tasks with the Eisenhower framework that classifies tasks according to their urgency and importance. To use it, start by asking yourself if the tasks you're going to perform that day or week (however you're planning) are both urgent and important. The original Eisenhower framework classified tasks into four domains: urgent, not urgent, important and not important. This was a great model for the era in which it was developed, but we need to refine it for current times, given the overwhelming choice and information we now have at our fingertips (where everything feels important and urgent). I suggest that for a task to make it to your To Do list it must be both urgent and important, otherwise it shouldn't be on your To Do list. It's not to suggest that non-urgent or unimportant tasks aren't performed. That isn't shrewd advice.

However, those tasks should be delegated to someone else where possible or added to a different list called the 'Delayed List'. We definitely need to keep track of delayed or delegated tasks because our brains have finite cognitive capabilities so chances are they won't be able to recall them. However, they're not tasks we need to attend to urgently.

Once we've ascertained if a task is both urgent and important, we then need to allocate it to being a 'deep' or 'shallow' task. Once this is established, we can easily work off our To Do list by attending to the Deep, Urgent and Important tasks during our peak energy times (if possible) and then planning our Shallow, Important and Urgent tasks during our less optimal periods of energy.

// SCHEDULE YOUR DAY AND YOUR CHILDREN'S DAY

Our brains like predictability. Kids are accustomed to routines in their typical school day, so they usually respond well to predictable rhythms. Devise a flexible plan in conjunction with your kids so you all know what your day might look like in advance. Have a written plan so everyone knows what the rhythm of the day will look like and there's no ambiguity or confusion. Be prepared for this plan to evolve on a daily basis as you make tweaks and figure out what is and isn't working.

In particular, plan when you'll require your WiFi connection to be at its optimal levels for video conferencing or other digitally-demanding tasks and plan accordingly with your kids and teens. Perhaps this could be when your kids have some outdoor time, or do some analogue activities (read a book, play with Lego, draw, write).

Part of your daily schedule should also include time in nature, if possible, so long as your self-isolation restrictions do not prohibit this. Being suddenly restricted to confined spaces can impact our mood and sleep. Time in natural sunlight can boost our mood and regulate our circadian rhythms (which impacts our sleep). Our circadian rhythms can become negatively impacted if we're spending more time indoors because of imposed lockdowns and exposure to blue light from increased screen use. Getting sufficient sleep is vital for our mental wellbeing and immunity during stressful times.

// BANISH AS MANY DIGITAL DISTRACTIONS AS YOU CAN

You're likely to see a significant increase in digital communication during the period of self-isolation, especially in the early days and weeks. As teams and workplaces become accustomed to remote working arrangements be prepared to receive more emails, Slack messages and/or have your communication tools pinging throughout the day.

Be prepared for an initial transition period, while you set up communication plans with your colleagues and/or clients. Clearly articulate when you and how you'll communicate.

After this transition period, try to minimise digital distractions. Check in with email at set intervals. Disable non-essential alerts and notifications. Not only will these divert your attention and distract you, but they may also elevate your stress response, which in turn, impairs your ability to think logically. Maximise the screen you're using to minimise the chances that your attention will be diverted to other applications or windows. Try using the Forest app to reduce your temptation of picking up your phone for some diversional therapy when you hit a 'stuck point' in your work.

I've created a mini-masterclass called Taming Email on research-based strategies to manage email. This may be a great opportunity for you to develop practical strategies that help you efficiently manage your inbox so it doesn't dent your productivity. You can find out more here.

This is also a great opportunity to talk to your kids and teens about how to manage their attention on digital devices (what I believe to be the most critical skill to cultivate in today's students). I recommend using Internet-filtering tools to help not only manage what kids and teens can access online, but also impose limits on when they can use devices. I personally use and recommend the [Family Zone](). This tool will give you the peace of mind that you're restricting the content that they can access during 'study' and 'leisure' periods and imposing limits in terms of the amount of time they're spending on devices and times of the day when they're able to use them. You'll be able to focus on your work without having to constantly think about your child being on TikTok, or watching inappropriate YouTube clips.
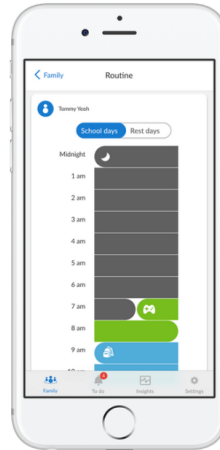
// FACTOR IN TIME FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION

As humans we're biologically wired for relational connection. As humans we want to be part of a tribe (this explains, in part, why we've gravitated towards social media in these times of crisis and why our kids and teens love social media and multi-player gaming as it taps into their psychological need for connection). Being suddenly thrust into isolation can be socially-jarring and harmful for many of us- parents and kids alike.

So make time in your day for real connection with your kids. Have uninterrupted, device-free time where you connect. Allow them to talk to you about the situation unfolding and answer their questions factually and dispel any myths or misinformation they have. For parents, make time in your day for phone calls,

FaceTime, Zoom meetings where you can connect and collaborate with your peers. This is an unusual time as we have physical disconnection but we're craving social interaction more than ever.

// CREATE START-UP AND WIND-DOWN RITUALS

When we work from home it's easy for our work to bleed into our daily lives. This can have negative impacts on both our productivity and mental wellbeing because we struggle to psychologically-disconnect from our work. To help temper these behaviours, create start-up and wind-down rituals. These can help create lines of demarcation between your work and personal lives.

Consider starting or wrapping up your day with a gratitude practice. During these challenging times, we need positive neurotransmitters to help lift our mood. Gratitude releases serotonin and dopamine that will help improve your mood.

Avoid reaching for your phone or laptop first thing in the morning, or last thing before you go to bed. If you use devices in the morning immediately upon waking (as 90% of us do), it can instantly and dramatically alter your mood. It only takes one abrupt or abrasive email, or one provocative or upsetting social media post to activate the limbic system in your brain.

When you start your day scrolling or swiping you can activate your amygdala (one of the emotional hubs of your brain) and this can override your logical, prefrontal cortex of your brain that would help you make sensible and informed decisions. When you start your day like this, you've hijacked your mood before you've even climbed out of bed and had to deal with kids complaining about the breakfast options.

Similarly, where it's feasible, restrict your phone, tablet and/or laptop use at night before you go to sleep. Ideally, having a digital curfew, 60-90 minutes before you go to sleep will have a positive impact on both the quality and quantity of your sleep. Blue light exposure (not just from screens but also from fluorescent lights) can delay the onset of sleep and hamper the deep REM sleep that you need for memory consolidation.

Using your devices late at night can cause embarrassing or detrimental mistakes. Why? At night, the prefrontal cortex fatigues so our attention to detail is diminished- our error rates increase, so we are more likely to make errors in our work at this time. The other thing that happens at night is that our limbic system fires up. This means we're in a heightened emotional state so we can send more terse emails to clients or colleagues, or deal with work issues in a heightened emotional state.

Another simple but profound strategy is to get dressed for the work day. I know that your first couple of days of working from home it may be tempting to stay in your activewear, or do your Zoom calls in your tracky-dacks. However, wearing work clothes communicates to your colleagues, clients and yourself that you're working.

// ESTABLISH TECH BOUNDARIES

Plan where and when you'll all work to stop technology from seeping into your entire day and to stop kids from using devices in places they shouldn't. Establish nominated work zones for everyone. For your kids and teens, keep tech out of their bedrooms. Invest in headphones for everyone, so you can be in close physical proximity, without having your attention disrupted by your kids' or partner's devices.

Have firm rules about what and when they can use devices. Be kind to yourself, and consider adjusting your screen time rules during these periods of lockdown. Install Internet-filtering tools like the Family Zone to moderate what and when they can use devices (without having to constantly monitor and moderate their tech use). Remember, you may need to recalibrate your 'normal' tech rules, as it's likely that they'll need to spend time online doing assigned school work or projects. They're also more likely to want to spend some of

their downtime on devices. Watching silly YouTube clips, or a funny movie can be a great way for them (and us, let's be honest) to emotionally decompress and enjoy some diversional therapy. Nothing wrong with some trashy TV or a good movie to divert our attention.

// DECLUTTER AND ORGANISE YOUR PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL SPACES

Optimise your physical environment so your workspace is conducive to working and not full of temptations that may distract you. Stanford psychologist BJ Fogg describes this as "designing for laziness". Basically, you're less likely to do things you don't want to if you make them less convenient. Try and create friction for your bad habits. For example, if you find yourself constantly reaching for your phone and scrolling social media, leave it in another room, or pop it in a drawer. If you keep checking emails when you should be doing focused work, pause your inbox, disable the alerts or shut it down. Equally, if you want to drink more water during the day, keep your full water bottle nearby.

We also know that physical clutter can place unnecessary demands on our brain and cause feelings of overwhelm. When your desk is piled with paperwork, your diary (if you still have one) and a myriad of

PostIt notes and digital devices it's really challenging to stay focused. I can hear my Mum's voice saying, "A tidy desk, is a tidy mind." Research confirms there's some truth to my Mum's statement. A study by Princeton University found that people performed poorly on cognitive tasks when objects were in their field of vision were in disarray, as opposed to organised[i].

Visual clutter (such as a messy desktop on your computer, or an overflowing and disorganised inbox) can have a cumulative effect on our brains[ii]. Remember, our brains like to conserve energy, so they crave order. Constant visual reminders of disorganisation therefore deplete our cognitive resources and impair our ability to focus. Clutter can cause cognitive overload which in turn, can reduce our working memory[iii]. Researchers have also used fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) and found that removing clutter from our home and work environments resulted in increased ability to focus and process information and bolstered productivity[iv]. So consider allocating some of your isolation time to Kondo-ing your house, or at least your workspace.

Finally, try not to place unnecessary pressure on yourself or your kids to undertake enormous projects during this time, if at all possible. These are unusual, stressful, extenuating circumstances.

This doesn't have to be the time you write your book, or launch a big project with your team. We need to acknowledge the mental toll this pandemic may be placing on all of us. I understand that some of us aren't able to take this as an opportunity to pause and reflect- some of us are trying to salvage businesses and resurrect projects. Where you can, be gentle on yourself and your loved ones. This too shall pass.
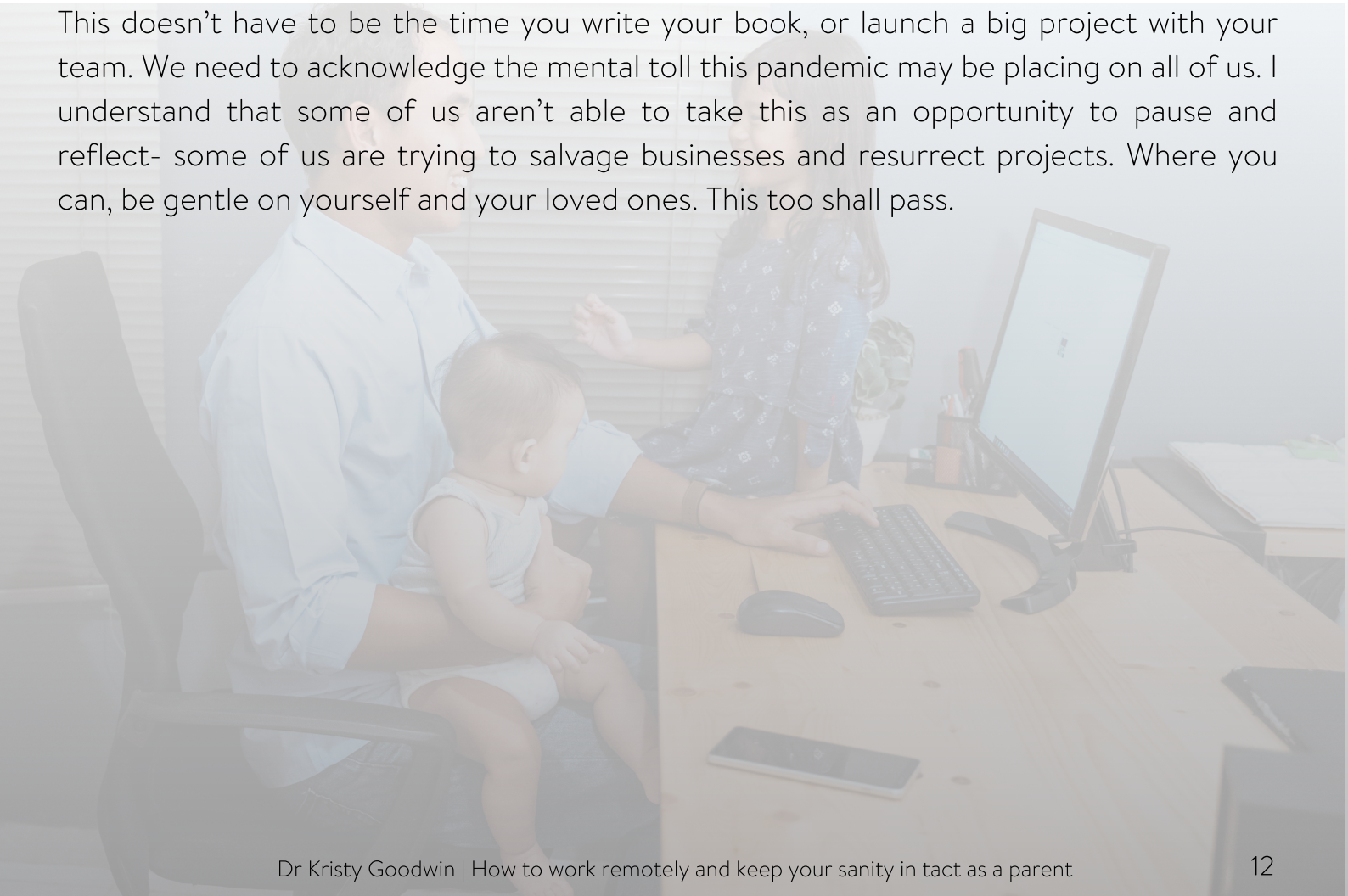
FIND OUT MORE ABOUT DR KRISTY'S VIRTUAL MASTERCLASSES
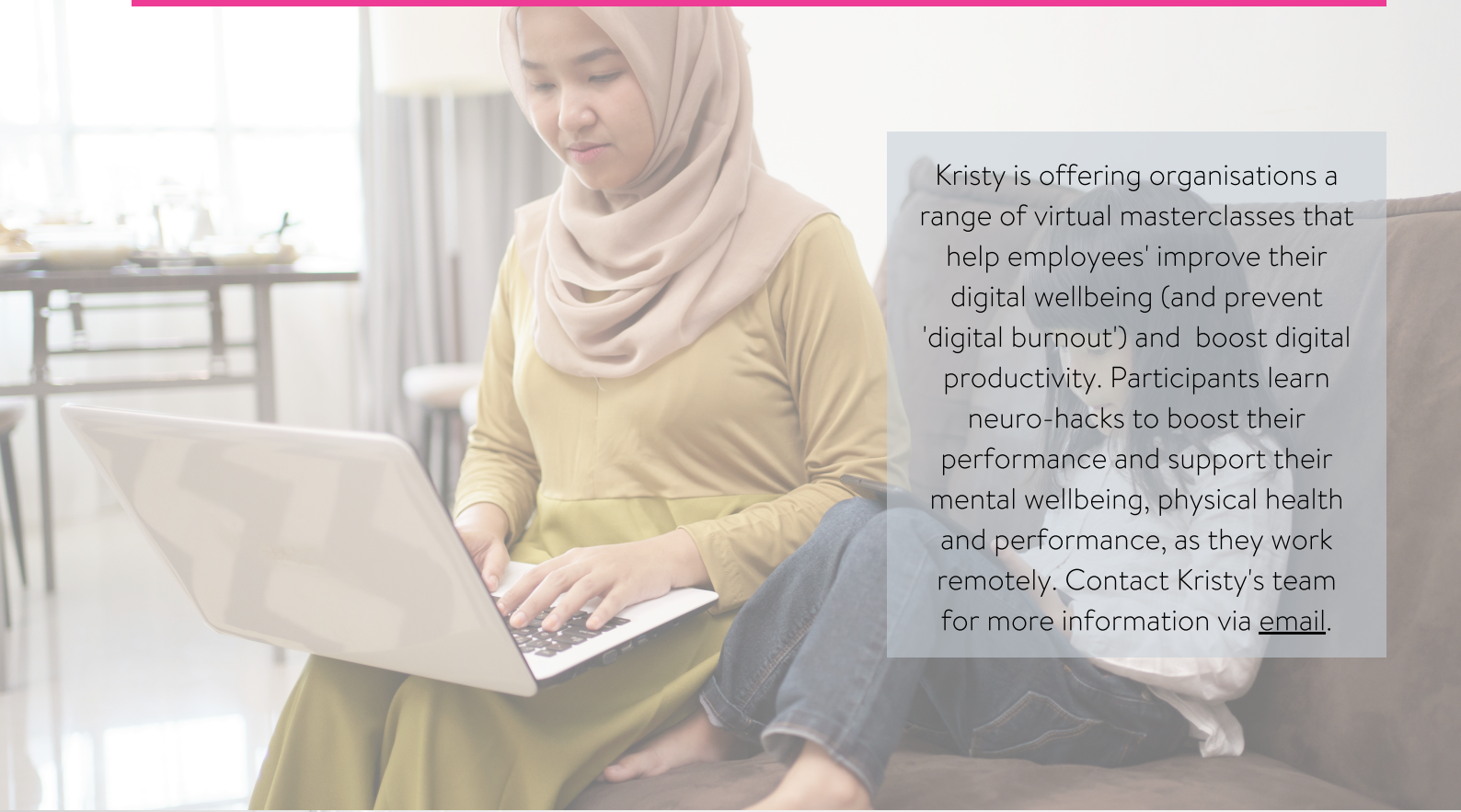
Kristy is offering organisations a range of virtual masterclasses that help employees' improve their digital wellbeing (and prevent 'digital burnout') and boost digital productivity. Participants learn neuro-hacks to boost their performance and support their mental wellbeing, physical health and performance, as they work remotely. Contact Kristy's team for more information via email.

Having personally experienced how our always-on digital culture is compromising people's wellbeing and is counter to optimal and sustainable performance, award-winning researcher and speaker Dr Kristy Goodwin is on a mission to promote employee wellbeing and bolster workplace productivity in an always-on digital world.

As one of Australia's digital wellbeing and productivity experts, she shares practical brain-based hacks to tame tech habits and the latest evidence-based strategies to decode the neurobiology of peak performance in the technological era. Senior business leaders and HR executives from the country's top organisations engage Dr Kristy to help them promote employee digital wellbeing and performance.

Her roster of clients includes Apple, Macquarie Bank, Deutsche Bank, Bank of Queensland, DLA Piper, Westfield, Randstad, the Reserve Bank of Australia, Cuscal, State Street, National Broadband Network and Foxtel.

DR KRISTY'S PREVIOUS CLIENTS

Apple · Westfield · OPTUS · nbn · STATE STREET · BOQ · QANTAS
DLA PIPER · randstad · Cuscal · McDonald's · mirvac · Leo Burnett
Westpac · optiver · GWF George Weston Foods Limited · Deutsche Bank · challenger · CSL Behring Biotherapies for Life

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