

5 Ways Freelancing Can Be Bad For Your Mental Health



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I used to work in an office with slow internet, fast deadlines, substandard coffee, tenuous office politics *and* an uncomfortable chair. I often thought freelancing would be better for me. I'm an introvert. I hate open-plan offices: they're bad for my anxiety and I find the lack of privacy unsettling. The environment is distracting and I dislike being on display while I'm tunnel-visioning and trying to work. So I quit my job to freelance. Plot twist: it turns out that freelancing was bad for my mental health.

At home with my smooth internet, my favourite twirly chair, the comfort of my chosen noise levels, free from the gaze of a hundred frenetic co-workers, this comfort proved hazardous. Here are some of the difficulties I encountered, and how they affected my [mental health](#). If you're thinking of going freelance, keep an eye out for these.

1. You are your own HR, and so you treat yourself like shit

You can be functionally self-employed and still psych yourself out. You can easily fall into the trap of treating yourself unfairly, because you now exist in a workspace full of versions of yourself taking on different roles. When you freelance, you are not only your own boss. You are also all of your colleagues. You are your own HR; you are your own work wife; you are your own cleaning staff.

In a traditional office, you can complain about your boss to your co-worker. Now, you can complain to yourself about yourself, which can quickly become a constant barrage of [negative self-talk](#). Moreover, there will be no interruption of your berating yourself. No external party will tell you that actually, you're doing okay, just like there will be no constant gaze keeping you on-track.

Keep a neat space; don't abuse yourself; learn to congratulate yourself; and be your favourite colleague.

2. The two productivity extremes that haunt you

The phrase *time is money* is never more viscerally applicable than when you freelance. From the number of projects you choose to take on simultaneously to your hourly rate, you're constantly having to navigate how far to stretch yourself. This means the stakes are high and rest entirely on you. There are two common (extreme) reactions to this pressure:

- a. Total inertia. Particularly if you suffer from depression, anxiety and debilitating self-doubt.
- b. Never switching off. Working straight through what should be down-time, and getting minimal sleep. Weekends don't exist for you.

Note: you can be both these people in the space of a single month. It's hard not to measure your worth by your output when you freelance, and even if you recognise these unhealthy patterns, curbing them may require professional help if you leave them unchecked.

3. A dangerous level of isolation

Most freelancers are not part of a community. People need community (even people who hate people). If you're already predisposed to [depression](#), long stretches of isolation can exacerbate the condition. Spirals can be harder to emerge from when you've minimised social interaction and lost the structure of a daily routine. Working from home can go from giving you immense freedom to ending up in a trap, in which you never leave your house or physically see other human beings if you can help it.

An office job forces you to leave the house for stipulated hours, while freelancing can leave you buried in work (or inertia) indefinitely. This can spill over into other aspects of your life. You may find yourself bailing on all your social engagements because you've over-committed to various jobs, time-managed badly, and started measuring your self-worth in productivity alone.

4. Routine and self-presentation go awry

Some destructive cycles and habits for freelancers can include things like: wearing the same sweatpants three days in a row, drinking excessively during the week, smoking inside the house, or haphazard showering times. Not to mention staring at a wall trying to decide whether you're making this work or just deluding yourself.

When it's already [difficult to get out of bed](#) in the morning, it can be dangerous to suddenly be presented with the option of starting at 8am or 10am or 12pm and just working in the time. Before you know it, your eating and sleeping habits are a disaster.

Fixed shower times, meal times and end-of-work times help facilitate being functional. Wear the outfits and go outside.

5. Shitty clients and heightened uncertainty

Clients not paying you on time, not paying you at all, disrespecting your time, and disrespecting your labour can have a knock-on effect on your confidence, your resolve and your financial stability. They can trigger avalanches in your mental and physical wellbeing. Freelancers are often exploited and this can affect the way you start to view yourself.

Know your recourse, whether it's getting 50% upfront or a legal two-pager you can get signed beforehand. Have something concrete and put in the effort to protect yourself. Also, learn when to say no and who not to work with. This is difficult as it's often trial and error, and sometimes you just need the money. But remember, you're always setting precedents by making clear what you allow and what you do not allow from shitty clients. If you forego something once, they'll expect it again.

In conclusion

Going to work without going to work is not as simple as it may seem. For people who are not neurotypical, it's about more than discipline. You need reliable coping methods, you need to recognise when you're slipping and you need to acknowledge when you need to lean on professional care.

Working remotely allows you to travel and to work flexible hours. It gives you increased agency over the nature of your tasks, and concurrently overall career direction – in some cases. I don't recommend it for everyone. Freelancing should be approached responsibly and deliberately as the chance of it taking a toll on your mental health is high.

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