Hi Lindsay,

Thank you for sending this over. It sounds like you will have some great perspectives! Here are my responses:

I'm hoping you can shed light on some of the psychology around working remotely, why certain people/groups see life-changing benefits, and how these in-person-to-remote-back-to-in-person shifts are affecting mental health.

I have listed the questions below. Again, thank you for your voice. I am very grateful!

##

***What are your thoughts on remote working from a psychological and mental-health standpoint?***

Remote working has the potential to be really beneficial, but it can also be challenging. From a mental health standpoint, being at home can help us to slow down, reprioritize and create more balance in our lives. Many of us were mindlessly going through the steps of working and trying to advance in our careers, without thinking about what was being sacrificed to this end (such as time to take care of our health or build our relationships). Of course, that is not everyone’s experience and we all know people who have really suffered through feelings of isolation or strain with partners or kids due to being in such close proximity during a time that can be very stressful or concerning.

***A remote-work benefit is leveraging a person's environment in a way that works best for their brain, instead of having to conform to an office environment that isn't always conducive to a person's brain. For people with mental health challenges or neurodivergent employees, how does this situation improve their work and life quality?***

This is a really important point. I think that a lot of us realized that the traditional office environment didn’t work for us – whether we’re thinking about the 9-5 schedule, the commute, the office politics, etc. However, this is the first time that people are feeling empowered to make different decisions. Being forced into this very narrow definition of a “good employee” is exhausting and you’re really not getting the best creativity and focus from someone who is mentally exhausted as soon as they walk in the door. When you think about someone who might experience depression or anxiety, for example, you can imagine how difficult it is to put on the front of everything being ok for 8+hours a day. The health benefit of being able to pause, take a walk outside, or speak to a therapist or doctor during the day without having to explain yourself to your boss is immeasurable. And now, we have the chance to envision a different way of working and being.

***People have been re-entering the workplace after two years remote. Workers were just beginning to settle into a new routine and now have to switch it up again. How does this change affect mental health from an adaptation standpoint?***

Re-entering the workplace is a real challenge for employees right now. There is no blueprint for how to do it properly and no single method is going to work for everyone. Some employees may feel relieved that there is the opportunity to be social again and engage with work friends, or they may appreciate the structure that comes with designated work hours. At the same time, others are feeling betrayed after showing they can juggle work and home responsibilities for two years (in a global pandemic!), but being forced to pretend it is 2019 again without concern for how all of our worlds have shifted so much over this time period. I’ve spoken with people who are concerned that their lives could be upended again at any time – “What if my child’s school shuts down again?” “What if someone in my office comes down with COVID?” While working from home was challenging in different ways, it perhaps provided some flexibility for dealing with these types of situations.

So in addition to feeling betrayed, some may feel that it is unfair and that their experiences and concerns are being invalidated. It’s also important to note that because some employers are going to permanent remote workspaces while others are doing a hybrid model or requiring everyone back to work five days a week. You can imagine that people who enjoyed remote work are now looking for new opportunities with companies that will allow them to continue working this way. Unfortunately, looking for a new job is stressful but so is staying at one where you feel the management is inconsiderate of your needs.

***Recently, COVID and political tensions have introduced us to the term "collective trauma," which adds mental-health challenges onto everyone's plate, regardless of their prior relationship with mental health. How does remote/flexible work help employees cope with the world we are living in/have been living in?***

It is true, we are all dealing with the collective trauma of COVID-19 and political and racial tensions. But we do not all have the same experience of it, by any means. For some, lockdown has provided them with an opportunity to rest and slow down. For others, it has been a tragic time where lives and opportunities have been lost. Unless we recognize each other’s various situations, we cannot really heal together.

At the same time, sometimes we need a mental and emotional break from talking about the pandemic or politics. Maybe we don’t want to have to defend our beliefs or be the spokesperson for a whole community of people today. We might just want to do our job and enjoy our day. That is very difficult to do in an office where everyone wants to talk about current events all day or ask your opinion on them, especially if you are a member of the group that is being discussed. Working remotely minimizes the likelihood that you will be caught up in these draining conversations and you can instead focus on what you actually need to take care of yourself.

***What are some cons of working remotely that we should be aware of? How can workers be mindful of becoming too isolated****?*

I think lockdown really complicated social interactions. For so long, it simply wasn’t safe to see others and unless you lived with people, isolating yourself was the responsible thing to do. We know that long term isolation is damaging to our mental health, but we’re not really so good at being social anymore. People note feeling awkward or easily triggered now in ways they didn’t before. Sometimes it may feel easier to just not try, but for those who are continuing to work remotely, they can be mindful of identifying ways to be with other people that doesn’t feel overwhelming. For example, maybe plan an outdoor walk with a friend before hosting a 10 person dinner party. Find out what you’re comfortable with, but also be gentle with yourself if it feels awkward at first.

*Could you talk about the harmful effect daily, in-office microaggressions have on an employee that is already struggling with their mental health?*

I think it is important to acknowledge all of the microaggressions that are experienced in the work place that are now minimized. That feeling of walking into a room and people being surprised when they see someone who looks like you (whether we’re talking about race, gender, ability, etc) is something many of us can relate to. There are often passive-aggressive or backhanded compliments (known as microinsults) that can take place, such as when people are surprised that you did such a good job or were so “eloquent” when you gave a presentation. I’ve experienced this myself and I know many other people who have as well. That also adds to the mental exhaustion that people have come to expect from the traditional work environment. However, several studies have shown that experiencing daily microagressions can have significant mental health and medical issues, leading to anxiety, depression, isolation and even heart disease and diabetes. In some ways, calling them “microaggressions” minimizes the devastating impct they can have over time.

*Based off these questions, do you have any additional thoughts that could add perspective to the piece?*

I think this can be a real opportunity to be honest with ourselves and others about our needs, without shame and without having to minimize our pain for someone else’s comfort.