

The Best Thing Today 1: Maija Taka I

Announcer: Aalto University podcast.

Maija: I love my work community, I love my own little of water tribe we have, but it feels really different to meet online.

Maria:

Welcome to this podcast series. The Best Thing Today, hosted by the Aalto study psychologists. The topic of this episode is remote work. And we're going to talk about that it's been one year and are we thriving or barely surviving?

And today your host is me, Maria Törnroos and I'm the psychologist for doctoral students here at Aalto. With me, I have Maija Taka, who is a post-doc and project manager in doctoral education in the Water and development research group at Aalto.

This is the first part of a two-part podcast. We decided to break it in half since we had so much to say. In this episode, we focused on defining the background and the problem. So, Maija, could you introduce yourself with a few words? And then we could both tell our audience how we are doing and why we are talking about this subject here today.

Maija:

Thank you, Maria. Great to be here. And as mentioned, working as a postdoc in Aalto in a project where we aim to develop doctoral education and of course, wellbeing of the students and the supervisors is one of our targets and passions in the project. So, really happy to be here around this topic today. I've had the privilege to work with you previously, also during the fall in the Towards Oasis symposium and where we also tried to get together and discuss belongingness of doctoral researchers with service staff and academic staff at Aalto and other universities also. And about how we are doing, so I've been doing okay. But you can totally see, or I can totally sense a clear tournament fatigue as we call it in Finnish [foreign language 00:02:22] and I try to take one day at a time, but other days, some days are worse than other days. For example, last week I had the urge to flip a table because I was so fed up with this situation. But then I just breathe calmly and try to remember that this is not forever, this too shall pass, and we will survive.

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Maria:

I'm here talking about this subject because I hear about it almost every day. When I talk to my clients, that is the doctoral students at Aalto, and they are also very tired and frustrated with the situation and find it hard to cope. So, Maija, how are you doing?

Maija:

Oh, I'm probably the classic example of a person who didn't even consider of something like this happening. So, I used to live in my hamster wheel kind of a lifestyle where I just followed the same structure from Monday to Friday, because it felt secure, and it didn't require too much resources on planning. So, I always started my mornings in the same way, and I try to keep the same structure throughout the days. Until the COVID came and it like trapped me off from the wheel in a day or something. And in the beginning, I was like really resistant to even like understand the situation. I thought that, okay, it's just like a week or two. I'm not even going to like create a desk at home. So, I'll just like cope for a few weeks. But in time I realized, okay, this is actually like going to be something huge, and I really need to somehow adapt.

And I realized that I had like zero resilience to things like these, and yeah, people around me, some people had a similar reaction, but others just coped. They didn't see much problem. They even like valued the possibility to work at home in isolation with less interruptions, and they enjoyed the time. But for others like me, it was a huge change. And at least I started looking for solutions and options and help, how to actually continue working and living and trying to enjoy things, even during these exceptional times.

Maria:

Yeah, I think that resonates with a lot of listeners. And I have to say that, at the beginning, I quite enjoyed this remote teaching and remote counselling, because I like, when I was an academic, I enjoyed the autonomy of academic work, being able to decide where and when you do your work, and somehow this, not being forced to be at a certain place at a certain time, resonates with me really hard, and it was interesting to see how well it felt and how well it went with this counselling remotely through Zoom and having these workshops through Zoom. But obviously then, it's not just about that. It's also about seeing your colleagues or not seeing them right now and feeling disconnected and feeling the need for some social interaction in another way. So, at some level it's been a good change in how I do my work, that I plan on keeping, but on the other hand, as I said, I'm getting fed up with the situation also.

Maija:

But there's also positive sides. I think that the meetings are a lot more prepared nowadays and we have more planning and more structure. And in the beginning, people were just like happy of meeting online in Zoom, but in time we actually are getting this Zoom fatigue as well. So, well, every now and then some small changes need to happen or take place, but yeah.

Maria:

Yeah. So, that's true. And let's get into our subject then. And some background before we head into solutions or the problems and the solutions. So, it's been one year. Should we be celebrating? Probably not. This hasn't been that great of a year. Some people, as we spoke just now, have been feeling like this is a good way to work and have been finding flow and engagement in their work through remote work. But I think that even they are struggling at times also. And instead of identifying only the problems and dwelling on them and dwelling on them with peers, I think that people are fed up to the point that they need solutions. So, they want to know, what could I do? What would be the easiest first action for me to take to improve the situation?

Maija:

I totally agree. There's being a lot of discussion and sharing how we're doing and how we feel about certain things and how everyone's wellbeing is currently challenged by the situation. So, there's a lot of talk about that, but for me, even understanding the way how I feel about things, like this online meeting fatigue we both mentioned here, I try to read about like the physiological reasoning behind them, for example, the Zoom and Teams meetings, like it's not normal to see your own face in a meeting, but nowadays, I constantly see my own facial expressions, which is silly, I can see myself in a meeting. Having all my colleagues at once so close to me, everyone staring at me, or staring at the screen, which feels uncomfortable. And even having this situation in my own bedroom, like all of a sudden, my boss and my colleagues and you Maria, like everyone are in my bedroom where I also have like the dog snoring in the back and having laundry drying there and everything just in this small room, which is confusing. And at the same time, the online meetings are emotionally heavy, because I need to concentrate the full time. So, having kind of a reasoning why I feel the way I feel, already helps a bit to kind of tolerate those situations.

Maria:

Yeah. And I think that one of the issues is that I don't understand why the development of this programmes is so slow, so that when people are complaining about this self-view, well, why is Microsoft not doing anything about it? Why is Teams not doing anything? Teams has better viewing choices than... No, I'm sorry, Zoom has better viewing choices than Teams. But still, though there are these studies that show what is wrong, still the tech companies

aren't doing the changes to the programmes. I'm not a tech person, so I'm probably just saying things that tech people, you know, laugh at, but still I find it funny or weird that they aren't part of the solution, even though there has been, you know, leaps in the progress of moving into remote work and this could never have been possible, like for example, 50 years ago to stay at home, if there was a Corona outbreak, we would have been forced to go to work.

Maija: Totally true.

Maria:

Here, I want to come to the point that remote work per se is not the bad guy. So, remote work has a lot of perks and advantages that we also talked about, especially for academics. So, there's no commute. You don't have to get up early in the morning, commute to work for an hour and so on. You have more time for your free time and for your family. There is more autonomy in a sense, that you get to choose do you want to work in the living room or in the kitchen, and then also there's been, they've been saying that it's also, you can really concentrate on tasks that require concentration. And of course, this is if you have the premises for that.

Maija:

Yeah. For me, the increasing independence or more time to do work actually means that there is less diversity on my workdays. Like Monday feels exactly the same as Tuesday and so forth. There's no hobbies to go to, so all the days are pretty much similar and I work until I have no more energy to work, and this is, especially last spring, this was a huge problem in my work community because people were working for too long days, because there was nothing else to do. So, self-management and understanding like what is enough is really crucial during these times.

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Maria:

Obviously, remote work or this pandemic situation that is forcing us to work from home is not ideal and all the perks that remote work have are starting to lose their glory. So, as you said, autonomy might turn into no diversity in the day, and no commute, also together with this that you soon probably can't even be outside without the police asking why you are outside, these are not like normal times. And then the Zoom fatigue that you also mentioned is a real thing and it's affecting our well-being. Our brain has been used to

communicating in a totally different way. It's not used to stare at everyone at a screen at all times. And usually, when I teach, I turn off the view of others and this is really not ideal, because if I teach in a normal situation, I see everyone, I see the audience. But it's really taxing to see empty screens or a few people that are not making any sort of, you know, nodding or giving anything back. So, I choose to turn it off. And this is, all these things that are connected to being in a virtual meeting are taxing for our brain. And as I also spoke about the concentration, well, we are probably not able to concentrate that much anymore, because we have constant interruptions. We are switching from task to task without having proper breaks, because we are sitting in Zoom meetings back-to-back. And if we were present at campus, we would be able to go and take a coffee in the coffee room, say hello to our colleagues and so on. But we are switching attention between tasks all the time without having these breaks in between. And also, for some, the home office is full of interruptions. Dogs, kids, spouses, I don't know, workers, that come and fix your kitchen or something like that.

Maija:

That's true, and maybe these current times even like help us to see the diversity among people. There's very different settings, there's people who have their kids in the background or live in shared flats, or even I had one colleague who had her office in sauna because there were some renovations going on in her house, and she couldn't do anything else but to escape to the sauna, it's really different nowadays.

Maria:

I have an acquaintance who turned his sauna into an office, because he figured that he needed the office space more than the sauna.

Maija:

But at least, he has a nice background in the Zoom meetings then. Yeah. But this brings out the question of what is private anymore. Plenty of students and colleagues do not turn their camera on because they don't want people to actually see their house, or they don't want to reveal too much of their like personal space. But on the other hand, that's pretty much the normal nowadays. And this situation also highlights that not everyone has the same possibilities to even organize work from home. As mentioned, I tried to fight against even having a desk in my house and still am working in my bedroom because when I got the flat, I didn't plan work at home. So, this is totally new situation.

Maria:

Yeah, and I read in Twitter that, a great quote, that we are no longer working from home, we are living at work. And if that's not the representation of the situation today, I don't know what is. It's really accurate. I agree with everything you said. I don't want my clients to see the mess in my living room and hear my dog bark all the time. But these are obviously because our living spaces are limited. Not everyone can have a home office, not everyone has a separate room for their office. Most of the people are working at their kitchen tables or in their bedrooms or in their sauna.

Announcer: The Best Thing Today, the podcast by Aalto University psychologists. Today, Maria Törnroos and her special guest Maija Taka.

Maria:

How have you survived working from home? And what kind of issues have you faced in the home office situation? You mentioned that you are sitting in your bedroom or using your bedroom as an office now.

Maija:

Yes. It's really confusing whether to call it bedroom or office anymore. So, it's totally a different case than what it was like a year ago. Just create mindset to be able to adapt, new skills for how to manage my time. So, as you mentioned, back in the days, I used to cycle to the work, it was really obvious, like movement from home to office and vice versa. Now, I have my breakfast and then I start working immediately. So, there's like no shift from home to office. And I should like, I still need to improve my skills when to stop working in the afternoon, but there should be like quite clear distinction between those two. Or even to have a walk off to the office, office hours to get back to the home mode again.

Maria:

Yeah, that's true. And we will talk about this as also a solution, that we have to improve the work hygiene and that we have to try and separate home from office, although it's not easy. And one fear is also that, as remote work becomes the norm, if it becomes the norm, the responsibility, for example, ergonomics and work safety is on the employee all of a sudden. And obviously, it's not really on the employee's shoulders, pun intended, but it might become like that. Because there might not be the budget to buy equipment to the home office of all employees. And there might not be the possibility to take office gear home and so on. So, then obviously, the responsibility is on the employee to find a good position and so on. So, this means that mental health issues are not the only repercussion of this remote work during the pandemic, but's musculoskeletal disorders will also be prevalent probably among office workers when we go back to work. When we go back.

Maija:

Oh, I hope we will. And soon, please. One thing about the belongingness we've been talking about earlier as well, we've had new people coming to our work community since last summer. And it's been really difficult for us as a community to engage new people into our community and get to know them. You can't really get to know people in Zoom coffee breaks. It's just not the same. And for those new people coming to our community and coming into our group, it's really difficult to get to know people, like you come to a coffee break where there's like 10 or 20 people and you know nothing about them. And it's really silly to start asking like, "Hey, Maria. What's your background, or do you have any hobbies or what's your dog's name?" So, it's really confusing situation to actually be engaged or have these feeling of belongingness to your work community during these times.

Maria:

Yes, absolutely.

Maija:

But yeah, as I said before, people really need solutions. There's been a lot of ruminating about this over the past years. I've realized that I need to have a plan B as well, because this is apparently a new normal. And anything can apparently happen anytime, which I now understand a bit better. I did live my life in my hamster wheel without having too much thoughts on the alternatives. But Maria, you have a long career with work well-being and about, and with recess communities. So, based on your experience, what are the things we could change?

Maria:

So, that's a good question. And what I think that we need to understand is that this is about adapting to a new and really challenging situation. And it's completely normal to not know the answer, not be able to find the solutions right away. But now it's been one year and there has been some development in these different solutions. And there's also, I think, perhaps a bit more light at the end of the tunnel, with the vaccinations also coming, so that gives people hope.

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Maria:

The things we have to focus on is firstly finding new ways of managing one's time and one's work. And the second thing is finding new ways of managing the thoughts and emotions that arise from this situation and from the issues that we are facing. And self-leadership skills have become very pronounced during this remote work, not only time management, but also emotion regulation. And not possessing these skills or not having anyone tell you how to get these skills increases stress and anxiety, and also decreases well-being.

Maija:

For me, it was very surprising how much time and energy it actually takes to adapt to a new situation. Like managing my time and managing my work and finding good ways to plan and do my work, it requires a lot of piloting and new ideas and trying them, and unfortunately often failing as well, but just trying new loops and improving little by little. But it takes time before I can actually, again, enjoy working with this like new setting.

Maria:

That's so true. And that's a good comment about, you have had to have a lot of patience and also not be afraid to fail or when failing, then picking yourself up and trying another technique. So, that has been a really important skill also to have during this time. And the other thing that this situation is causing is a lack of comparison with others. And this comparison is really important for doctoral students. It makes it hard for the doctoral students to understand their own progress if they don't have anyone to compare with. And this might sound weird, because we often say that, don't compare yourself to others or everyone has a different situation than you. But the most common thing I hear from doctoral students is that, "Am I the only one struggling?" And this just shows that they have been disconnected from the realities of academic life, because they only hear about successes of other people. For example, in Teams coffees or through email blasts about someone's article getting accepted or someone getting a grant. Obviously, we should celebrate these things. But then, there is no space, no platform, for all the rejections that go into, that are normal in academic work. All the normal office coffee room or hallway chatter is gone, where you previously heard about these so-called failures, but the normal failures of academic life. And it's also about knowing. When you're not able to compare, how do you know if you're doing enough? How do you know if the work hours you put in are enough? Should you work more? Or why is it that everyone else is succeeding and you're the only one failing?

Maija:

When actually you're doing great work, but you're inside your own bubble where you have these like even unhealthy expectations of what you should have done by this far, or you kind of have become blind to your own work or, well, people usually don't celebrate their

success by themselves, so it's really difficult to actually see your own progress when you're working by yourself.

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Maija:

One article I read last year was an interview of a professor of psychology, Katariina Salmela-Aro, who works in the University of Helsinki. And she stated that this chronic uncertainty where we're living at the moment, it kind of challenges our ability to work. And of course, we then feel insufficient, which you also mentioned. But her quote saying that nowadays a basic performance is excellence is something that I try to remember that, I remember when COVID started, I thought that, okay, I have like all the time in the world, I can now truly focus on my work with no interruptions and I will like publish everything I've been planning for the past years. And all of a sudden, I realized that, okay, I'm not doing that much that I was expecting to do, but I didn't see how much I actually managed to do, taking into account the situation around me.

Maria:

I think that is really common. And what I've been seeing in academic Twitter throughout the year is that a lot of people were in the beginning, "Oh, I'm going to be so productive when I get to work at my own terms." And then, at the end of the year, they are just like sad at how much they didn't achieve. I think a lot of people have had a similar experience as you.

Maija:

And then, it's really easy to blame yourself that, "Oh, I didn't like complete my to-do list", even though I actually learned a lot about how I manage my own work or who am I as a worker and all of that, a lot of like other things I've managed to progress. So, reflection skills, please. One tip is to set boundaries for yourself, create routines, I love routines, but I also need to have routines that help me to actually recover from work and that helps me to be forgiving to myself. Those are the things I try to focus on, but as mentioned, they take a lot of energy and time before I can succeed.

Maria:

And also, being kind and compassionate towards oneself, when one realizes that, "Oh, I thought I was able, I was going to be able to do all these things", but then remember also that this has been a really tough year for everyone. And it's not a surprise that you haven't

been as productive as before or not, you know, more productive as you thought. So, it's totally okay and you don't have to be ashamed of having had those thoughts a year ago, but you can instead think of what you, how you could change the situation now that you have been living in it for a year. And on this topic also of how much work is enough, is that how can we measure progress? Because research is not a linear process. And of course, doing a PhD has a clear goal, the PhD. And in some research fields and departments, it's about publishing for example, three or four articles. So, that's quite concrete. But at what stage, in what year should you publish article number one or two or four? There's no clear-cut rule or way of doing it, and it's not a linear process, it's based on leaps. So, also remembering that, if you feel like you're stuck right now, there might be a perfectly logical reason for that, and that you don't have to think that you should do more, work more, but that at some point it will take a leap instead, and you will all of a sudden notice that, "Oh, in a year, I did all of this."

Maija:

And even setting ourselves like small milestones or super small tasks, they will anyway progress at work and publishing a paper is a huge amount of work, it's one research that you actually need to do, and you need to do the writing and you need to be able to like defend the work. But on the other hand, the current community or the current culture where there's plenty of publications coming all the time challenges this view of how much work is actually behind each publication. Related to the current times, it's also challenging to ask for help from colleagues. Back in the days in the office, it was really easy to just knock on the door or ask a question during the coffee break. And also, having the feeling of belongingness or a belonging to my research group or the community. Like I love my work community. I love my own little water tribe we have, but it feels really different to meet online.

Maria:

It's normal that it feels different to meet online, because it is a totally different form of social interaction. And the problem is that, when at the beginning, people were saying that organize virtual coffees and so on, to help with the situation, it's a good idea, but it's not the only solution and they might not always do the trick. One of my students explained it also that, as when you're at the office, you get a break from the computer when you go for coffee, but when you're at home, if you go for a virtual coffee, you're still staring at the same screen. So, your brain doesn't even get the breaks it needs. And then, for some people, it might be that they don't want to mix, for example, chit-chat with actual work stuff. So, it's also a fine balance between when to have feelings around and went to discuss the agenda at hand. And communication has totally changed. There is no more extempore meetings or very few, and there is no more chit-chat talks with a colleague that has just walked past you in the hallway. And these kinds of chit-chats and talks are really important

for creative work. So, not having them is a huge deal for the doctoral students and for their progress.

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Maria:

Dear listeners, thank you for listening to this first part of a two-part podcast on remote work in academia. In the next episode, Maija and I will continue our discussions, with suggestions and ideas that might increase the chances of thriving, rather than barely surviving remote work in academia. So, stay tuned. Bye.