

Returning to Work During COVID-19



“Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change.”

- Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, author

“Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don’t resist them; that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.”.

- Lao Tzu, philosopher

As lockdown measures in the UK begin to ease, many of us are returning to the workplace after an extended period away. Whilst some may be eager to get back, for others, this will cause great stress. According to HSE, in 2018/19, work-related stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 44% of work-related ill health and 54% of working days lost. These numbers will likely rise as we adjust to our ‘new normal’ and re-emerge into society. Many things may cause anxiety during and in the aftermath of a pandemic and you may find yourself feeling down, anxious, panicked, tired or overwhelmed. These are all completely normal responses as we go through any transitional period in life.

However, that does not mean you must suffer. As we are able to anticipate these responses, we have the chance to put in place some measures now to combat them should they arise. In this helpsheet, we will go over how you can minimise any negative effects on your wellbeing and what employers can do to make the transition back into work as stress-free as possible for their people.

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Research into returning to work after lockdown

As increasing amounts of the global workforce return to their workspace, more research and figures are becoming available on the effects of returning to work on mental and physical health. One thing these studies are showing is that measures taken by the organisation to reduce any possible risk factor in the workplace are greatly contributing to the levels of stress, anxiety, and fear that the employees report feeling.

One study by Tan et al. looked at whether returning to the workplace during the pandemic caused stress for citizens in China. The study aimed to quantify the immediate psychological effects and prevention measures of a workforce returning to work during the COVID-19 epidemic. From 673 valid questionnaires, the respondents

reported a low prevalence of anxiety (3.8%), depression (3.7%), stress (1.5%) and insomnia (2.3%). Factors that were associated with the higher psychiatric symptoms in the workforce were marital status, presence of a physical symptom, poor physical health and viewing return to work as a health hazard. Personal prevention measures including hand hygiene and wearing face-masks. Organisational measures including significant improvement of workplace hygiene taken by the company were associated with less severe psychiatric symptoms amongst employees. The figures reported for psychiatric symptoms were lower than the researchers had anticipated they would be. The low prevalence of psychiatric symptoms could be due to confidence instilled by prevention measures taken by the organisation before the resumption of work.



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What organisations can do

As we can see from the study by Tan et al. the measures that an organisation take in regards to health and safety as their employees return to the workplace can be the deciding factor in levels of psychiatric effects on employees. There are a number of things that you can do as an organisation to help your staff feel confident that prevention measures have been installed in the workplace to protect them.

Have you ensured hygiene methods are kept to a high standard? Place antibacterial gel and wipes throughout the office and ensure there is plenty of hand soap by sinks. Make sure desks, workstations and any surfaces are regularly cleaned and sanitised. Deep cleaning will be required to an increased standard, with regular disinfecting of shared areas. High traffic contact zones - door handles, bathrooms, desks, kettles, water coolers, printers and chairs - will need wiping down with an antibacterial cleaner frequently throughout the day. Be sure to keep workstations clutter free so that cleaning is easier. Consider installing protective screens if it would be of benefit to your employees - especially in customer facing roles. Ensure your workspace is well ventilated.

Adhere to social distancing. There must be adequate room throughout your workspace for employees to remain at least 2 metres away from each other. This may mean having to re-arrange your workspace before employees return and establishing a new floorplan. Avoid hot-desking wherever possible, desks should be adequately spaced and divided.

Desks should be placed to create back-to-back or side-by-side working arrangements. Look at how your employees move around your office space; it may be useful to implement a one way walking system in walkways or stairwells. Make sure regularly shared places - kitchens and bathrooms for example - permit social distancing measures.

Allow for flexibility. If it is possible, you should give your employees the opportunity of changing their work patterns. This allows them to avoid rush hour during their commute and to minimise the number of staff in your workplace at one time. You should also allow those who can work at home to continue to do so.

Be open and communicate with your team. Make sure they know the things you are putting in place to ensure their safety. This will give them confidence in returning to work. Make sure you encourage your team to communicate any concerns with you. It is important that they feel their concerns are heard and action is taken. If time permits, consider putting a poll or survey out to your team to ascertain widespread concerns, you can then address these directly before returning to the workplace. Consider having a floorplan of your workspace drawn up and indicate any changes you have made on this plan and highlight 'hot spots' such as kitchens. This allows your team to view their office in a new way - one in which they have to be consciously aware of health and safety.

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Keep mental health at the front of your concerns along with physical health. This re-emerging period is going to be one of great uncertainty and this can cause a lot of stress and unrest in people. Make sure you are implementing procedures and policies which protect the mental health and wellbeing as well as physical health of your staff in your plans to re-emerge your team into the workspace. Be sure to circulate your promotional material for CiC so that your team know they have this support service available.



What individuals can do

If you are anxious about returning to work and adapting to this new way of life, rest assured that this anxiety is entirely normal. It is so commonplace in fact, that there is a term for it: re-entry anxiety. Dominique Antigilio, a sophrologist and author of *The Life-Changing Power of Sophrology*, explains: "Re-entry anxiety is a form of stress associated with the fear of being unable, or not wanting to re-adapt to previously established routines and environments i.e. going back to 'normal' - this can be in relation to a return to work or a return to a way of living."

Although these feelings may be normal, that does not mean they should be downplayed or are any less significant. The good news is that there are some measures you can take as an individual to lessen any stress or worry you may be feeling in regards to returning to the workplace.

Consider your commute. Can you alter your commute to minimise your time on public transport? Many of us are feeling anxious about returning to public transport - a busy, closed place. If you are able to walk or cycle to your workplace this may be a better alternative. If you must use public transport, try altering your route to minimise the number of changes you need to make, also consider getting on or off a stop or a few early to lessen your time on the service. It may be useful to see if you can change your work pattern to avoid rush hour.

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Take hygiene measures. Ensure you keep up good levels of personal hygiene, especially after having been on public transport or having been in public spaces. Regularly wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with warm water and make sure your hands are properly dry afterwards. You should always carry some antibacterial gel for when you cannot get to a sink. Keep a packet of antibacterial wipes at your desk so that you can regularly wipe down your work area. Keeping up these kind of measures is one of the most effective things you can do to keep yourself and others safe.

Learn some calming techniques. Unfortunately, it is very likely many of us will undergo periods of anxiety once we return to work. You may feel overwhelmed, tired or even a little frightened as we re-adjust to life after lockdown. An excellent calming technique that you can do anywhere is simply to breathe. A simple breathing method to use when you are feeling overwhelmed is box breathing. Make sure you are sitting comfortably and upright. Breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds, exhale for 4 seconds, and hold for 4 seconds. Repeat this until you feel calmed. Visit our online wellbeing platform, Well-Online, for more resources on relaxation techniques.

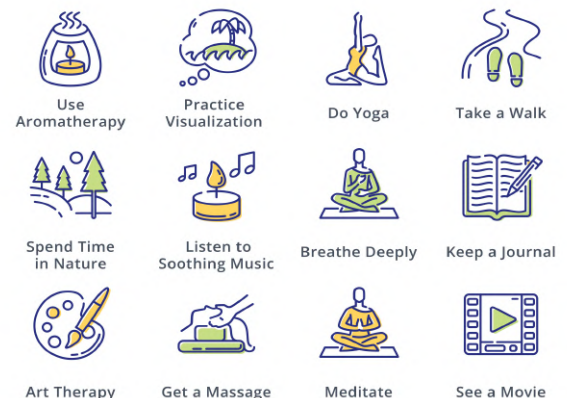
Acknowledge how you are

feeling. It is important that you acknowledge what in particular is causing you discomfort so that you can begin to address these issues. Whenever you are feeling anxious, it may be useful to jot down how you are feeling and what sparked this response, this can be down in a journal or a note-taking app on your phone. For example, maybe it is noisy crowds or high levels of social interaction that is making you anxious.

This focus allow you to seek advice on dealing with specific aspects of your anxiety, making them easier to address. Learning your particular anxieties and expressing them can also be a great tool on its own in helping you manage them.

Talk with your employer. Your employer should be transparent with you regarding the transition back to 'normal' and you should express any concerns you have. Let them know if you are anxious about your commute, or not sure how you will distance in your usually crowded workplace, ask them if it possible for you to change your shift times or perhaps continue working at home. It is always important to air any concerns or questions you have. Your employer cannot make the changes needed to support you if they are not aware of them.

Get support. If the re-entry anxiety you are feeling is beginning to significantly affect your life and wellbeing, seek help. You can visit your GP and explain to them the difficulties you are having, they will then be able to source the relevant help for you. Alternatively, the CiC AdviceLine team are here for you 24/7 and will be able to support you through this difficult time.



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Additional Resources

NHS Relaxation Techniques: <[https://](https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/preventing-falls/fear-and-anxiety-about-falling/relaxation-techniques)

[www.nhsinform.scot/ healthy-living/preventing-falls/fear-and-anxiety-about-falling/relaxation-techniques](https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/preventing-falls/fear-and-anxiety-about-falling/relaxation-techniques)>

Mind on Anxiety & Panic Attacks: <[https://](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/self-care-for-anxiety/)

[www.mind.org.uk/ information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/ anxiety-and-panic-attacks/self-care-for-anxiety/](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/self-care-for-anxiety/)>

Books:

Be Calm by Jill Weber

How to Be Yourself: Quiet Your Inner Critic and Rise

Above Social Anxiety by Ellen Hendriksen

Retrain Your Brain: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in 7

Weeks by Seth Gillihan

Podcasts:

The Calmer You

The Anxiety Guy

The Overwhelmed Brain

Oprah's Supersoul Conversations

Apps:

Headspace

Rootd

Sleep Time

Calm

Colorfy

