Mental health and wellbeing - Employees

Returning to work after COVID-19 - Information for employees

The outbreak of COVID-19 has drastically changed the way that we live and work. These changes can make us feel stressed and worried, particularly as we undergo another transition phase, from remote working arrangements to returning to the workplace.

There are a number of reasons why you may be feeling unsettled about returning to work. The heightened sense of anxiety is understandable, whether due to concerns about contracting the virus in a workplace environment, necessary readjustment, caring responsibilities for children and family or just another time of uncertainty and change.

This factsheet provides details on how to access supports and offers tips for managing back-to-work anxiety.

Potential causes for concern about returning to the workplace

Commuting - If you've been working from home for the last few months, you might be nervous about using public transport again. Given the government-issued direction on physical distancing has been based around reducing the spread of the virus, this is a valid concern.

Sharing equipment - The nature of sharing a worksite or office space is such that you'll also be sharing a lot of the same equipment and spaces. In traditional offices, this ranges from communal bathrooms and kitchens (including cutlery) to meeting rooms, desks and computers. This is especially relevant for office workers of employers who use hot desks.

Changing routines - While many people will be excited to return to some form of normality, there will be others who have become accustomed to, and enjoy, their new arrangements. For those who have been working from home, you've had the opportunity to sleep in longer and wear tracksuit pants all day. Parents who have had more time with their children as a result of COVID-19 may be apprehensive about not being able to do so moving forward.

What you can do

Voice your concerns - If you're feeling uncomfortable about returning to work, don't keep it to yourself. Be honest with your employer so you can work through any issues together. This is an unprecedented situation for them as well, and they may not be aware of things that are worrying their staff unless they are informed.

See if flexibility is an option - While many businesses are reopening their doors, it doesn't mean that working remotely is off the table completely. If your employer is still allowing remote work in some form, see if you can arrange a split between time spent in the physical workspace, and days external. Even if it's just one or two days, it may help ease the transition and offset some of the anxiety you're experiencing.

Look after yourself - You might find yourself focusing a lot of energy into going back to the workplace, and some things can fall by the wayside. Make sure self-care isn't one of these. Continue to prioritise activities that keep you centred and happy, whether they be exercise, eating well, meditation or simply connecting with loved ones.

Seek help early - Everyone reacts differently to change. Feelings of anxiety, difficulty sleeping, changes to your appetite, irritability, and bouts of crying are all signs you may need some extra support. Make use of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), if provided by your employer,

speak to your GP, contact the Beyond Blue coronavirus hotline, or visit the Black Dog Institute website for mental health advice and resources.

Reflect on your experience - Rather than focusing on going 'back' to your old life, take some time to think about whether the isolation experience could help you make positive changes going forward. Make a list of new habits you'd like to embrace and start implementing them one by one.

Remember the advice

- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water
- Use alcohol-based hand sanitisers when you can't use soap and water
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- Clean and disinfect surfaces you touch often such as benchtops, desks and doorknobs
- Clean and disinfect objects you use often such as mobile phones, keys, wallets and work passes
- Use tap and go instead of cash if possible
- Increase the amount of fresh air by opening windows or changing air conditioning
- Keep 1.5 metres away from others wherever possible
- Stop shaking hands to greet others
- Avoid non-essential meetings. If needed, hold meetings via video conferencing or phone call
- Stay home if you have any cold or flu symptoms. Seek medical advice and get tested for COVID-19
- Follow the policies and procedures of your employer related to good hygiene, physical distancing, work meetings and travel
- Contact Safe Work Australia for information about workers' rights: National COVID-19 Safe Workplace Principles

Local supports

MPHN Central Access and Navigation Service: 1800 931 603 (Monday to Friday 9am-5pm). NB: This is not a crisis service.

Murrumbidgee AccessLine: 1800 800 944.

Online and phone supports

- Australian Government's Head to Health: www.headtohealth.gov.au/covid-19-support
- LifeLine: 13 11 14 (24 hours/7 days); text: 0477 13 11 14 (6pm-midnight AEDT, 7 nights); chat online: www.lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat (7pm-midnight, 7 nights); or visit: www.lifeline.org.au
- Beyond Blue COVID-19 support line: 1800 512 348; or visit www.beyondblue.org.au
- Black Dog Institute: www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

Where to get reliable information

For reliable resources and to keep up to date with what is happening with COVID-19:

- Call the National Coronavirus Helpline on 1800 020 080
- Visit the NSW Health COVID-19 website: https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/diseases/Pages/covid-19-latest.aspx

Sources of information:

BeyondBlue: www.beyondblue.org.au

Black Dog Institute: www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

Australian Government Department of Health: www.health.gov.au