Mental health and wellbeing - Employers

Returning to work after COVID-19 - Information for employers

The outbreak of COVID-19 has drastically changed the way that we live and work. As the restrictions ease, many businesses are resuming usual practices and have begun the process of preparing for staff to return to work. For those who have been working remotely for the past few months, returning to regular work can be stressful.

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

This factsheet provides some ideas on how employers can support staff to manage stress and anxiety when transitioning back to the workplace.

Potential areas of concern about returning to the workplace

Commuting – If employees have been working from home for the last few months, they 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 employees will 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, they'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.

How you can help

Acknowledge that anxiety is expected – It is important for employers to acknowledge that employee anxiety about returning to work is reasonable. Management should lead with empathy and encourage employees to voice their concerns. Demonstrating an understanding of those concerns and a willingness to address them is important in making workers feel supported and valued.

Stay nimble - With restrictions easing, many workplaces have a unique opportunity to assess their ways of working. They can not only reintroduce practices that were beneficial pre-COVID-19, but retain some of the new approaches that have been successful over the last few months. For example, if people have been performing their roles well while working from home, you could consider keeping, or at least having a discussion around, retaining some form of flexible working arrangements moving forward.

Create a healthy work environment – Employers have obligations to ensure they provide and maintain a healthy and safe working environment, which includes consideration for mental health and wellbeing.

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Maintain a healthy and safe workplace – This means being as informed as possible about government requirements and complying with the COVID-19 safe workplace principles which will provide reassurance to employees. All businesses should have a COVID-19 safety plan. Advice and rules from NSW Government need to be followed and can be found at https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19

Promote positive mental health and wellbeing
The principles required to create and maintain a mentally healthy workplace during the transition back to a physical workplace remain the same as pre-COVID-19. Strategies such as ensuring good work design, including providing role clarity, feedback, co-worker support and recognition haven't changed, nor have the benefits to employers (lower presenteeism and absenteeism).
Specific actions employers can take:
- Access best practice advice about workplace mental health
- Reassess and understand how managers can lead the way to healthy work environments
- Provide support, both in and beyond the workplace:
  - ➢ If one of your employees is struggling, be responsive. Where possible, approve requests for leave or consider arranging modified duties that will reduce the immediate pressure while enabling the staff member to stay connected to work.
  - ➢ Ensure staff are aware of supports available through your Employee Assistance Program (if you have one) and/or other mental health resources and services external to your organisation.
  - ➢ Schedule a regular meeting to bring employees together using group-chat tools.
  - ➢ Invite people to share useful resources and tips they have found while isolated.

- ➢ Provide updates on business planning that is underway.
- ➢ Arrange to maintain regular (or additional) social events that would normally occur in the workplace, such as daily coffee catch-ups or birthday celebrations.
- ➢ Encourage people to stay in touch away from workplace forums.

Keep an eye on your own mental health – As a manager, it's easy to get distracted by meeting the needs of those around you while forgetting about your own, but it's important to take the time to check in with your own feelings and make sure you're still on track. Maintain regular catch-ups with your own manager or a trusted colleague who has some insights into your professional situation, and be frank about the challenges you're experiencing both at and beyond work.

Sharing your experiences with your team can also be beneficial – acknowledging the difficulties you are experiencing with this new arrangement can help staff feel more comfortable speaking to you about their difficulties early on and can also help you clarify your own feelings. If you need extra support, use the channels available to you both in and beyond your workplace.

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
Safe Work Australia-
www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au