

MANAGING ANXIETY WHEN RETURNING TO THE WORKPLACE

As State Government and health advice is updated, many organisations are planning to return to the workplace and resume business operations in reduced or full capacity.

Returning to the workplace can mean making more adjustments for employees which can lead to mixed feelings and, in turn, heightened anxiety. Returning to life after lockdown may bring a sense of relief but also a feeling of apprehension. People may worry about their risk of catching COVID-19 but also feel anxious about whether they will be able to go back to 'normal'.

Take your time readjusting to post-lockdown life and focus on rebuilding relationships. You may find it helpful to weigh up the pros and cons of re-establishing old routines such as catching public transport, eating in restaurants and returning to the workplace.

As part of adjusting to COVID-19 consider the following tips to help manage anxiety when returning to the workplace.

1 Adjusting my mindset

Start by reframing your thoughts - It is easy to focus on the negatives when change is forced upon you and many decisions are out of your control. It is important, however, that you challenge these negative thoughts and develop more helpful and constructive ways of thinking.

2 Adjusting my anticipation

When we are stressed, it is common for us to anticipate that things will be worse than they really are. Rather than imagining the worst-case scenario and worrying, ask yourself:

- Am I getting ahead of myself, assuming something bad will happen when I really don't know the outcome? Remind yourself of the facts and that the actual number of confirmed cases and deaths related to Coronavirus in Australia is extremely low.
- Am I catastrophising how bad the consequences will be? Remember, illness due to Coronavirus infection is usually mild and most people recover without needing specialised treatment.
- Am I underestimating my ability to cope? Remind yourself of what you have done to cope with stressful situations in the past.

3 Focus on what is within my control

Australians have generally shown a high degree of compliance. More than 90% of respondents to a University of NSW survey reported having actively changed their behaviour to stop the spread of the virus to others, despite only 20% perceiving a high risk to their health and 50% not being too worried about the threat of the virus to their personal health. This indicates that most people have put aside their individual rights and are being socially responsible and doing the right thing. Notice other people not doing the right social distancing? You have no direct control over other people's behaviour, but you do have control over your own behaviours and emotions. Focus on what is within your control.

- Remind yourself that people have a right to make their own decisions and choices, even when they are not in the best interests of the rest of society. If they are breaking the law it is likely that they will be caught and fined for their behaviour.
- Try not to express your frustration and anger in a non-respectful, blaming, or humiliating way. We know this can reinforce their resistance and worsen a situation – even damage relationships.
- Find ways to express your emotions in a constructive way, so that they don't build up and interfere in your everyday relationships – e.g. keep a journal, do an extra hard/fast walk or jog, listen to some calming music, try to understand what is triggering your emotions, or share your frustrations with someone who you trust and is a good listener.

4 Welcome back to my workstation

Employees are likely to have concerns about their safety and may question what steps will be taken to secure wellbeing when they return to their workplace and are back at their workstations.

To avoid employees becoming overly stressed or anxious and to help reduce resistance to the transition, employers can provide sufficient information that will help employees understand what the safety strategy of their workplace is. Staff will be counting on employers to look after their safety in the workplace. This is not just a moral consideration, but also a legal consideration in enacting your duty of care for your staff.

Consult with staff before they return to your workplace – they are likely to have great ideas about promoting health and safety, and this will give them a sense of control and involvement in decision-making, helping to reduce stress and anxiety. This includes having sanitisation and cleaning products available, and the tools and resources that will be there to assist each individual in maintaining a safe workplace.

5 Communal norms in common areas

Support teams to work effectively together because colleagues are going to need to set some new boundaries and learn how to interact with each other in the context of social distancing. COVID-19 may see people operating with a higher degree of vigilance and greater awareness of the behaviour of colleagues, with increased scrutiny on health and hygiene practices, which could result in increased tensions. This may be positive as employees learn to hold each other accountable for their safety behaviour, but they may also need a strategy to help them determine how to raise issues and concerns when they feel a colleague has breached the social norms and required expectations of the group. Support your leaders with managing their teams in this environment – ensure they have the capabilities to resolve conflict and managing team dynamics.

6 Maintain my sense of organisational justice

With new rules comes the delicate balance of making the right decisions whilst being fair and equitable. It is likely that some operational decisions you make could lead to perceptions of injustice (e.g. who can still work from home, who is allowed in the office, who gets access to what technology etc.). When determining operational factors such as rosters, work schedules or continued working from home arrangements, communicate clearly and let employees know the factors that have influenced decisions. Where possible, consult workers and ensure their feedback is considered before finalising arrangements.

In closing, there is still a considerable way to go in adjusting to the changes that COVID-19 has brought to organisations.

Organisations will need to establish stability and normality for workforces in getting on with business as usual. Now is the time to put good habits in place regarding ongoing communication, consultation and engagement with staff to ensure your organisation is truly working together to safeguard your future success.

Negative thinking – No thank you



- Wearing a face mask is uncomfortable and inconvenient: Depending on where you live, face masks may be mandatory when leaving home, including when in the workplace. Rather than focusing on the mask being a bother, try and think of it as a barrier against the virus that is helping prevent the spread and stopping you from getting sick.
- I will never be able to travel again: Due to travel restrictions, most people will be unable to travel overseas (or even interstate) for the foreseeable future. Rather than thinking about where you can't go, think about all of your local travel options and see it as a way of boosting the local economy.

Useful links